

Gangster Rap and Nihilism in Black America: Some Questions of Life and Death



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Gangster Rap and Nihilism in Black America

SOME QUESTIONS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Always our deepest love is toward those children of ours who turn their backs upon our way of life, for our instincts tell us that those brave ones who struggle against death are the ones who bring new life into the world, even though they die to do so . . .

—Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*¹

**Nick
De Genova**

For Richard Wright, the urgent questions of life and death were often mediated by a kind of nihilism. This nihilism typically staked the possibilities for freedom—and for life itself—upon a remorseless rejection and subversion of moral conventions and upon an impulse for destruction, which frequently could be resolved only in self-destruction. In this essay, I want to excavate some of Richard Wright’s insights into this nihilism as a framework through which to understand the hip-hop genre that has come to be called “gangster rap.” In so doing, I hope to critically engage with some of Cornel West’s recent pronouncements on “nihilism in Black America.” Cornel West is commonly celebrated as Black America’s foremost public intellectual. Likewise, hip hop is widely recognized to be a preeminent form of African American public culture. In some broad sense, this essay attempts to bring these disparate public discourses into more direct confrontation. In a stricter sense, I am interested in the ways that Richard Wright’s exploration of the themes of nihilism enables an appreciation of the complexities of gangster rap as a creative form of African American cultural production and cultural politics. I would contend that, given careful examination, gangster rap provides the basis for a serious challenge to Cornel West’s facile sermonizing on the subject of “nihilism.”

My hope is certainly that this consideration of the politics of “culture” could begin to evoke more fundamental questions about the politics of race in the United States. Cornel West is engaged as an intellectual in the elaboration of a total political vision and in the defense of a systematic social-democratic program. The lyricists and performers of gangster rap are also intellectuals; indeed, as nonacademic but highly articulate cultural practitioners, they are extraordinarily *public* intellectuals. And they, too, elaborate a kind of radical politics. In its various forms, hip hop has sustained a prominent and lively arena of ideological articulation. Still, it is obvious that gangster rap as such in no way defends any rigorous political system. Nevertheless, I hope to demonstrate that West’s evangelical pos-

ture toward the “nihilism in Black America” will have to confront some defiant interlocutors in gangster rap. West has himself stated that “the repoliticizing of the black working poor and underclass should focus primarily on the black cultural apparatus, especially the ideological form and content of black popular music.” But it becomes immediately apparent that West guards some preconceived notion of what that would need to look like: “Since black musicians play such an important role in African American life, they have a special mission and responsibility: to present beautiful music which both sustains and motivates black people and provides visions of what black people should aspire to.”² The problems of knowing what might be “beautiful music” and understanding “what black people should aspire to” remain implicit, at best.

There is little merit in criticizing a complex and heterogeneous cultural field for its political inconsistencies in light of some ideal political agenda to which it has absolutely no conscious relationship. Instead, the challenge, as I see it, is to explore the radical political apertures which emerge from the creative work itself. In this essay, I hope to engage that challenge. I do not believe that there is any uncomplicated isomorphism between gangster rappers and those whom their music is understood to represent; but there is indeed a significant analogy between the mass-mediated criminalization both of gangster rap as well as of the oppressed and exploited majority of African Americans. In this sense, the discourses of and about gangster rap are inextricable from the much wider ideological terrain where racist hegemony in the United States is continuously reelaborated and sometimes contested. Thus, for those of us committed to the overthrow of that hegemony, I understand this to be an urgent challenge.³ Cornel West himself has enunciated a broad framework for this kind of politically engaged cultural critique:

The most significant theme of the new cultural politics of difference is the agency, capacity, and ability of human beings who have been culturally degraded, politically oppressed, and economically exploited by bourgeois liberal . . . status quos. This theme neither romanticizes nor idealizes marginalized peoples. Rather it accentuates their humanity and tries to attenuate the institutional constraints on their life-chances for surviving and thriving.⁴

I will seek to both explore some of the meaningful human complexities as well as emphasize the radical politics to be found in the so-called nihilism of gangster rap, precisely to challenge Cornel West’s perspective on nihilism. I will borrow selectively from Richard Wright’s work to do so.⁵

Some Questions of Life and Death

As I have suggested already, Richard Wright was most invested in the entanglements of life and death, of self-preservation and self-destruction, both of which he saw as inextricably implicated in any struggle for human emancipation. Indeed, for Wright, there was no way to disentangle life from the constitutive violence of a social order founded upon racial subordination and effected in outright terror. Where terror is a way of life, “life” itself entails a complicity with that terror; the challenge of self-preservation is itself inseparable from the conservative impulse to cut a pact with the devil, a series of compromises which reduce life in some sense to a protracted way of death. This did not mean for Wright that all of life in Black America could somehow be reduced to an assortment of reactions and replies to white supremacy, nor that African American cultural production could be contained within a mere account of the struggle against racism. Indeed, as Paul Gilroy notes in his insightful discussion of Wright’s work, “[e]ven when exploring the depths of that spontaneous ‘nihilism’ which he felt to be modern American racism’s most significant contribution to black culture, his focus remained on the scope for agency which blacks enjoyed even in the most restricted conditions.”⁶ In every respect that Wright truly appreciated the resilient resourcefulness and creativity of Black life, however, he nonetheless refused to romanticize an idyllic space of African American racial community. Violence is implicated in even the most intimate and nurturing relationships within the wider context of communal self-preservation and collective reproduction. The implications of Wright’s position are quite radical. The mere possibility of community presupposes a certain conservatism inevitable in the kind of armed truce with racist terror which makes it possible to sustain life against its onslaught. But under these conditions, life becomes a greater or lesser compromise with the status quo of violence and death. It is in this sense that the brave young ones who struggle against death must thereby reject our way of life. Ralph Ellison recognizes this about Wright’s work: “Wright saw his destiny . . . in terms of a quick and casual violence inflicted upon him by both family and community. His response was likewise violent, and it has been his need to give that violence significance which has shaped his writings.”⁷ Gilroy has argued persuasively that Richard Wright’s work has been only partially incorporated into the canon of African American literature, precisely because “Wright’s sense of the significance of violence in black social life was a site of his irreducible ambivalence towards the idea of a closed racial community and the ideology of family which helped to reproduce it.”⁸

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The dialectic of life and death animating Richard Wright's work is as double-edged as the terror that frames its field of vision. Like the violence which confines us to our death while it defines our way of life, this dialectic is ruthless . . . and relentless. It drives us forward recklessly into the furious nihilism that would sooner destroy everything than reconcile us to the cunning violence which engulfs us. But this dialectic seems to elude Cornel West completely. In his essay "Nihilism in Black America," West declares unequivocally that "the most basic issue now facing black America [is] *the nihilistic threat to its very existence.*"⁹ By "nihilism," of course, West does not have in mind any nineteenth-century philosophical doctrines about the rational impermissibility of authority; "nihilism . . . is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness" (RM 14). In light of this definition, West's position becomes even more explicit: "the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning" (RM 15).¹⁰ These formulations of nihilism can be augmented with an array of West's more expressive rhetoric in "Nihilism": "the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America" (12), or "the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America" (12–13), resulting in "a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world" (14), or "a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others" (15), an "angst [resembling] a kind of collective clinical depression in significant pockets of black America" (17). This clinical turn is taken still further; West explains: "Like alcoholism or drug addiction, nihilism is a disease of the soul. It can never be completely cured, and there is always the possibility of relapse" (18). At this point, it becomes exceedingly difficult to accept West's claims that he is not reinventing the familiar pathology inherent in the notion of a "culture of poverty." Although he plainly identifies U.S. capitalism and white supremacy as the ultimate causes of this nihilism in Black America, West reduces the majority of African Americans to a subhuman condition in which their own "disease of the soul" is a greater threat to their well-being and survival than any objective structures of exploitation or oppression.¹¹

Cornel West shares none of Richard Wright's ambivalences about the conservatism of the institutions that have traditionally sustained African American communities. For West, nihilism is not about a struggle with death; *it is death*. There is nothing creative or meaningful about it. And that death is most clearly manifested for West in the apparent demise of communal institutions:

And the pervasive spiritual impoverishment grows. The collapse of meaning in life—the eclipse of hope and absence of love of self and others, the breakdown of family and neighborhood bonds—leads to the social deracination and cultural denudement of urban dwellers, especially children. We have created rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks—family, friends, school—that sustain some sense of purpose in life. We have witnessed the collapse of the spiritual communities that help us face despair, disease, and death and that transmit through the generations dignity and decency, excellence, and elegance.

The result is lives of what we might call “random nows,” of fortuitous and fleeting moments preoccupied with “getting over”—with acquiring pleasure, property, and power by any means necessary. . . . Postmodern culture is more and more a market culture dominated by gangster mentalities and self-destructive wantonness. This culture engulfs all of us—yet its impact on the disadvantaged is devastating, resulting in extreme violence in everyday life. (*RM 5*)

The violence of everyday life, for West, looms as a “result.” Although he refers in passing to “a market culture” (somehow understood to be “*post-modern*”), and otherwise frames his discussion with references to “the flaws of American society,” “historic inequalities,” “economic decline,” “political lethargy,” etc., these things are understood to have merely eroded a way of life and its institutions, generating a kind of collective moral infirmity. Nihilism is variously depicted along a continuum spanning from mental illness to moral depravity . . . to outright “wantonness.” The violence of everyday life assumes the status of a “result”—the purported result of a pathological condition.

Above all, Cornel West sees this pathology as one which is devouring our children—the children, as he seems to think, who ought otherwise reproduce our way of life. He implores us: “with most of our children ill-equipped to live lives of spiritual and cultural quality, neglected by overburdened parents, and bombarded by the market values of profit-hungry corporations—how do we expect to constitute a vibrant society?” (*RM 7*) It is striking to appreciate the disparity between the respective positions of Cornel West and Richard Wright on this question of the future which resides in our children. West has depicted the children as socially deracinated, culturally denuded, and simply ill-equipped to live lives of quality or to constitute a vibrant society; Wright almost seems to anticipate West’s lament, compassionately but unapologetically:

Many of our children scorn us. . . . We lean upon our God and scold our children and try to drag them to church with us, but just as we once, years ago, left the plantation to roam the South, so now they leave us for the city pavements.

We watch strange moods fill our children, and our hearts swell with pain. The streets, with their noise and flaring lights, the taverns, the automobiles, and the poolrooms claim them, and no voice of ours can call them back. They spend their nights away from home; they forget our ways of life, our language, our God. Their swift speech and impatient eyes make us feel weak and foolish. . . . The city has beaten us, evaded us; but they, with young bodies filled with warm blood, feel bitter and frustrated at the sight of the alluring prizes and hopes denied them. (*MBV* 135, 136)

For Richard Wright, the children abandon their parents' church, God, language, and a whole way of life, just as inevitably and irreversibly as the parents, in their time, had abandoned the plantation. The juxtaposition is remarkable. The plantation is a site of irreducible terror. That Wright would even dare to suggest an analogy between slavery or the peonage of sharecropping with "our ways of life" reveals his deep perception of an unforgivable complicity of our way of life with terror. The children's "strange moods" and "impatient eyes" expose the warm blood which courses restlessly in their young bodies, and denounce all of the ways that we are already beaten—and proclaim that our way of life is a way of death.

The force of my argument should not be misunderstood to trivialize Cornel West's sincere expressions of his own despair in the face of a self-destructive violence ravaging the poor communities of Black America. Rather, I would like to interrogate the complacencies and complicities of his point of view toward this daunting reality. The complacency resides in the conservative moralism and self-righteousness of his reformist politics, a politics which never questions the "legitimate" monopoly on violence (indeed, terror) which is a structural feature of the bourgeois-democratic state apparatus. The complicity inheres in the ways that his sermonizing recapitulates the articles of faith of racist "common sense". These tendencies are most evident in West's remarks on the Los Angeles uprising of 1992:

The Rodney King verdict was merely the occasion for deep-seated rage to come to the surface. This rage is fed by the "silent" depression ravaging the country. . . .

Driving that rage is a culture of hedonistic self-indulgence and narcissistic self-regard. This culture of consumption yields coldhearted and mean-spirited attitudes and actions that turn poor urban neighborhoods into military combat zones and existential wastelands. (*RM* 4–5)

Again, West has elided the violence of everyday life, the violence that causes poor urban neighborhoods to resemble military combat zones, with his familiar insinuations of moral failing and spiritual poverty. The rage that set Los Angeles on fire is alleged to be driven by hedonism, selfish-

ness, and narcissism; it purportedly reveals what were fundamentally bad attitudes and bad behavior (“coldhearted and meanspirited attitudes and actions”). Moreover, West goes on to malign these neighborhoods as “existential wastelands” which have suffered “the collapse of the spiritual communities . . . that transmit through the generations dignity and decency, excellence, and elegance.” In this idiom, West begins to sound like the classic example of a colonized elite, trapped in an existential condition of self-hatred and shame because he has come to view his own people as undignified, indecent, backward, and uncouth. On this point, too, Richard Wright seems to have anticipated West:

As our jobs begin to fail in another depression, our lives and the lives of our children grow so frightful that even some of our educated black leaders are afraid to make known to the nation how we exist. They become afraid of us and tell us to hide our wounds. (*MBV* 136)

It is noteworthy that Cornel West introduces his own position on nihilism by means of both recognizing and displacing its thematic affinity with Wright’s exploration of these questions of the life and death of Black America. West opens his essay, “Nihilism in Black America,” with a quote from Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices*. In that epigraph, Richard Wright reflects upon the fundamentally “American” character of the history and social predicament of Black people in the United States. Poignantly, Wright declares: “If we black folk perish, America will perish.” What Cornel West has elected to exclude from the quotation, however, is revealing. Within a half page of the cited passage, Wright continues: “We are crossing the line you dared us to cross, though we pay in the coin of death!” (*MBV* 147; quoted in *RM* 11) Richard Wright is not ashamed of what may appear to be a lack of (or disregard for) “dignity and decency, excellence, and elegance.” Rather, he indignantly and nihilistically embraces death itself.

Richard Wright appreciated nihilism as a tremendous resource for African American cultural production. Contrary to Cornel West’s narrow notion that nihilism somehow reflects a collapse of meaning, Wright derives ultimate meaning from a certain nihilistic impulse which is irreconcilable with racist terror. His hermeneutic explorations of the theme of nihilism, moreover, are clearly inseparable from the conscientious role which he reserves for nihilism in his own creative work. Wright made an explicit case for the nihilistic trajectory of his own writing, which was intended to go as far as possible beyond the “safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears.”¹² His position is perhaps best illustrated by his reflections on the reception of his book, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, in his foreword to *Native Son*, entitled “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born”:

When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naive mistake. I realized that I had written a book that even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.¹³

Wright explains to us that he wanted to write in a way that left his readers without the consolation of tears, about subjects which likewise offered no such solace. It is this impulse that I believe is compelling and commands our rigorous attention in considerations of "nihilism in Black America."

Wright's own conceptualization of nihilism is neither simple nor unproblematic. It is revealing that Wright chooses to focus his regrets, not only upon readers who are identifiably privileged (e.g. bankers), but specifically "bankers' daughters." We know that the corpus that he ultimately produced is overwhelmingly about men and, to some ambiguous degree, conscientiously about masculinity. In this respect, Wright's explorations of nihilism must be located—more explicitly than he ever chose to do for his own work—at a point of convergence between his own male and sometimes masculinist standpoint with a decidedly masculine subject matter.¹⁴ In these ways, there is a certain affinity between Wright's themes and the male-dominated and typically masculinist genre of gangster rap. But finally, both the implications of Wright's insights into nihilism and the pertinence of gangster rap's expressions of nihilism are in no simple sense confined to the experiences or perspectives of men.

The kind of nihilistic impulse which is at the heart of the life and death of the men in Wright's fiction can be quite as central to the predicament of an African American woman. There is no more remarkable example of this than Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Although Sethe's story in *Beloved*, based upon the historical case of Margaret Garner, is set in the nineteenth century, Morrison has explained that "from a woman's point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with 'post-modern' problems in the nineteenth century and earlier."¹⁵ In her own discussion of *Beloved*, then, Morrison is oriented to "problems of where the world is now" and emphasizes "a woman's point of view." In the story, rather than surrender her children to the plantation's regime of terror which she has managed to escape, Sethe destroys "every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful."¹⁶ Against the onslaught of the brutality which has defined her world, she kills her own children in order to rescue them from the life that she had known. Later, she is chastized that her love is "too thick," to which she replies: "Love is or it ain't. Thin

love ain't love at all" (164). When it is suggested to Sethe that there is possibly something worse than the plantation from which she has rescued her children, she answers: "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible" (165). Finally, her too-thick love is condemned as morally wrong, indeed, as bestial. Here, we learn something of the intimacy of a nihilistic (indeed, self-destructive) violence and the kind of love which is thick enough to nurture and sustain the preciousness and beauty of life against terror, although it pays in the coin of death. Against the so-called nihilistic threat, Cornel West calls for a "politics of conversion" based on the kind of "love ethic" that he discerns in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, but he seems to have missed entirely the bitterly nihilistic lesson which is at the heart of the story (*RM* 18–19). The violent truth of *Beloved*'s love ethic should leave us without the consolation of tears.

Without the consolation of tears. So it is that we must try to comprehend what Richard Wright sought to reveal to us when he became "aware of Bigger as a meaningful and prophetic symbol" (*NS* xiv), and synthesized in the figure of Bigger Thomas all of the complexities and contradictions of the nihilism he had so often encountered:

I felt that if I drew the picture of Bigger truthfully, there would be many reactionary whites who would try to make of him something that I did not intend. And yet . . . I knew that I could not write of Bigger convincingly if I did not depict him as he *was*: that is, resentful toward whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed and unaccountably elated at times, and unable even, because of his own lack of inner organization which American oppression had fostered in him, to unite with the members of his own race. (*NS* xxi)

The nihilism of Bigger Thomas not only severed his ties to his own community, but it also made him an affront to the conventions and norms of respectability of the African American middle class.

I knew from long and painful experience that the Negro middle and professional classes were the people of my own race who were more than others ashamed of Bigger and what he meant. Having narrowly escaped the Bigger Thomas reaction pattern themselves—indeed, still retaining traces of it within the confines of their own timid personalities—they would not relish being publicly reminded of the lowly, shameful depths of life above which they enjoyed their bourgeois lives. Never did they want people, especially *white* people, to think that their lives were so much touched by anything so dark and brutal as Bigger. (*NS* xxii–xxiii)

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The brutality and hatred in the nihilistic figure conjured by Wright suggest something of the “shameful depths of life” which haunt Cornel West’s discourse on nihilism. When West speaks of “random ‘nows,’” he conveys the sheer dread of recognizing the precariousness of his own future, a future which he shares with his middle-class liberal audiences, Black or white.¹⁷

Richard Wright, however, found something irresistibly compelling in Bigger’s nihilism: “I longed secretly to be like him and was afraid” (*NS* ix). It is necessary to emphasize that Wright was not naive about the painful contradictions of that nihilism, and neither am I interested in romanticizing or idealizing a way of being in the world which has enormous human costs. Nihilism is, however, something far more complex than its flatly antiromantic portrayal in West’s redemptive and evangelical political posturing. To explore that complexity—in this framework of criticizing West’s antiromanticism—inevitably risks the appearance of romanticization. Still, it is imperative to consider that what made Bigger Thomas incorrigibly inclined to estrangement, violence, and even self-destruction was, under the dehumanizing conditions of racist oppression, what was finally irreducible about his humanity. We need only to confront Bigger on the final page of *Native Son*, condemned to death and awaiting execution: “I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ’em” (392).

Wright’s unapologetic appreciation for the meaningful possibilities of nihilism is evident in his discussion of the different configurations of the Bigger Thomas complex which he had encountered in the course of his life. The most basic example of this personality is that of the alienated individual who maintains a sense of his own dignity through a ruthless nihilism:

That was the way Bigger No. 1 lived. His life was a continuous challenge to others. At all times he *took* his way, right or wrong, and those who contradicted him had him to fight. And never was he happier than when he had someone cornered and at his mercy. . . . I suspect that his end was violent. Anyway, he had a marked impression upon me; maybe it was because I longed secretly to be like him and was afraid. (*NS* 392)

Violence as a way of life was the price of the dignity which Bigger No. 1 managed to garner for himself. This elemental quest for dignity, which is here expressed as a crude masculinist will to dominate others, should not be too quickly disregarded. It would be simplistic in the extreme to reduce this impulse to mere status-seeking, however, because Wright will show us that this kind of fearlessness can also be focused upon a regime of oppression. Bigger No. 2 translated these reflexes into a race-conscious lawlessness:

[T]he hardness of this Bigger No. 2 was not directed toward me or the other Negroes, but toward the whites who ruled the South. He bought clothes and food on credit and would not pay for them. He lived in the dingy shacks of the white landlords and refused to pay rent. Of course, he had no money, but neither did we. We did without the necessities of life and starved ourselves, but he never would. When we asked him why he acted as he did, he would tell us (as though we were little children in a kindergarten) that the white folks had everything and he had nothing. Further, he would tell us that we were fools not to get what we wanted while we were alive in this world. We would listen and silently agree. We longed to believe and act as he did, but we were afraid. . . . Bigger No. 2 wanted to live and he did; he was in prison the last time I heard from him. (*NS ix*)

In this configuration of the Bigger Thomas complex, prison is the price finally exacted for the will to live. As Wright explains, “We did without the necessities of life and starved ourselves,” but Bigger No. 2 rejected such dehumanizing conditions, not because he sought respect or admiration from others, but rather, because he demanded more of life—“he wanted to live and he did.” The next configuration of Bigger combines the previous two, inspiring the fear and loathing in whites which proves so often deadly.

There was Bigger No. 3, whom the white folks called a ‘bad nigger.’ He carried his life in his hands in a literal fashion. . . . [H]e was shot through the back by a white cop. (*NS ix-x*)

Here, Bigger does not fall to the random street violence that accompanies a predatory masculinity, but rather is the victim of the state’s monopoly on supposedly “legitimate” violence. Furthermore, the police vanquish him only through treachery: he is shot in the back, apparently defenseless. The tragic complexity of Bigger Thomas is most evident in the next example that Wright offers us. It involves the inextricable tangle of rebellion and madness:

And then there was Bigger No. 4, whose only law was death. The Jim Crow laws of the South were not for him. But as he laughed and cursed and broke them, he knew that someday he’d have to pay for his freedom. His rebellious spirit made him violate all the taboos and consequently he always oscillated between moods of intense elation and depression. He was never happier than when he had outwitted some foolish custom, and he was never more melancholy than when brooding over the impossibility of his ever being free. He had no job, and he regarded digging ditches for fifty cents a day as slavery. . . . Bigger No. 4 was sent to the asylum for the insane. (*NS x*)

In this passage, Richard Wright enables a very different understanding of “mental illness” than that offered by Cornel West’s invocation of a “col-

lective clinical depression.” West’s remarks uncritically recapitulate one type of racist common sense about Black psychological and emotional deficiency. Wright, however, makes plain that “the asylum for the insane” is an institution of constraint and repression, part of a continuum inextricably linked to Jim Crow segregation and severe exploitation; thus, he exposes the institution of psychology itself as one of the many implements used in the service of racist subordination.¹⁸ Finally, the fifth example of the Bigger Thomas complex reveals something of the nihilism which must inevitably accompany any uncompromised opposition to racist hegemony and the terror which animates it:

Then there was Bigger No. 5, who always rode the Jim Crow streetcars without paying and sat wherever he pleased. . . . The conductor went to him and said: “Come on, nigger. Move on where you belong. Can’t you read?” Bigger answered: “Naw, I can’t read.” The conductor flared up: “Get out of that seat!” Bigger took out his knife, opened it, held it nonchalantly in his hand, and replied: “Make me.” . . . The Negroes experienced an intense flash of pride and the streetcar moved on its journey without incident. I don’t know what happened to Bigger No. 5. But I can guess. (NS x–xi)

The predictability of death in this heroic nihilism can only be confronted “without the consolation of tears.” Although he acts very much alone and tests fate as an individual, his nihilistic posture is a source of deep pride for the other Black people who bear witness. In these five depictions of “the Bigger Thomas reaction,” Wright traces the outlines of a whole way of life and death, institutionalized in segregation, exploitation, prisons, insane asylums, police brutality, lynch mobs, and execution—and relentlessly resisted through a blunt and individualistic politics of refusal and negation. Although each of these nihilistic figures comes to a violent and seemingly tragic end, Wright reminds us that Bigger “wanted to live and he did”—in the only way readily available to him, against all the oppressions, small and large, which were his inheritance as America’s native son.

Richard Wright went still further, however, in his ambitious exploration of nihilism. In *The Outsider* (1953), Wright’s protagonist Cross Damon leaves us without even the consolation of any cultural locatedness or any belonging to a racial community. Cross Damon “had no party, no myths, no tradition, no race, no soil, no culture, and no ideas—except perhaps the idea that ideas in themselves were, at best, dubious.”¹⁹ Here we confront the most bleak and individualistic configurations of a nihilism which stands *outside* of any possibility of community or commitment. But there is a dialectical double-edgedness to this antagonism, which is well illustrated in “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1941). In this story, Wright’s protagonist Fred Daniels is driven to survive in Chicago’s sewers

by the threat of torture at the hands of racist police who have accused him of a crime that he did not commit. In the shadow of racist terror, Fred Daniels literally severs his connections to all other human beings. One of the most significant forms of his total estrangement is his disdain for the worshipping congregation of a Black church, whom he is able to view from his place of isolation:

His first impulse was to laugh. . . . He felt that he was gazing upon something abysmally obscene. . . . a deeper pain, induced by the sight of those black people grovelling and begging for something they could never get, churned in him. A vague conviction made him feel that those people should stand unrepentant and yield no quarter in singing and praying . . .

Soon the entire congregation was singing: *Glad, glad, glad, oh, so glad / I got Jesus in my soul*. . . . They're wrong, he whispered in the lyric darkness.²⁰

Later, when Fred has emerged from the sewer and tries to initiate contact with the church, members of the congregation denounce him as “filthy” and “crazy,” forcibly remove him, and threaten to call the police—while others go on singing: “*Oh, wondrous sight upon the cross / Vision sweet and divine / Oh, wondrous sight upon the cross / Full of such love sublime*” (*EM* 75–76). Here we recognize the man who has been driven into the most literally nihilistic of existences by the injustice and sheer brutality of the racist status quo—now rejected, denigrated, threatened, and assaulted by what can be understood to be his “community.” And still more significantly, the community will summon the police against him, in the paradigmatic enactment of their self-serving complicity with terror. Still, they go on singing their hymns of “love sublime.”

While the pulse of nihilism fragments and disrupts the enclosures of racial community in Richard Wright’s work, this same nihilism is nonetheless a structure of thought, sentiment, and action which stands against the onslaught of racist terror and is thus profoundly (and inevitably) located within both African American cultural life and Black experience, more broadly construed.

On the plantations our songs carried a strain of other-worldly yearning which people called “spiritual”; but now our blues, jazz, swing, and boogie-woogie [and we may add to this list, hip hop] are our “spirituals” of the city pavements, our longing for freedom and opportunity, an expression of our bewilderment and despair in a world whose meaning eludes us. (*MBV* 128)

Nihilism is not about “the monumental eclipse of hope” and “the unprecedented collapse of meaning,” as Cornel West’s alleges. As Wright explains in *White Man, Listen!*, “our hope is steeped in a sense of sober tragedy.”²¹ Nihilism is about the expression of an undaunted yearning,

desperate (violently so, perhaps even to the extreme of self-destruction), but not hopeless, meaningful in its furious revolt against a world of bewildering violence and meaningless death. For Richard Wright, this is manifest precisely in African American musical forms and lyrical genres. “Our hunger for expression finds its form in our wild, raw music, in our invention of slang that winds its way all over America” (*MBV* 129). Not only is this a vibrant source of creative expression and cultural production in Black America, it plays a constitutive role in the shaping of “America” in general. “Why is our music so contagious?” Wright asks, “Why is it that those who deny us are willing to sing our songs?” (*MBV* 128). Here, Wright reflects upon an irony which masks a more fundamental incommensurability:

We live on, and our music makes the feet of the whole world dance. . . . they do not know that our songs and dances are our banner of hope flung desperately up in the face of a world that has pushed us to the wall. (*MBV* 130)

Here we begin to understand the peculiarly intimate relationship of Black music and questions concerning the life and death of Black America. Here we may begin to listen to the pulse of nihilism.

There is perhaps no more laconic convergence of the structure and event of racist terror in our time than the brutalization of Rodney King, which has likewise become inseparable from the subsequent Los Angeles uprising of 1992. In his essay on the Rodney King incident, entitled “Scene . . . Not Heard,” Houston Baker likewise instructs us to listen:

Suddenly—in the crashing, burning, looting, riotous middle of Los Angeles’ urban disaster—the national ear perked up.

. . . Rap has informed America for years that if—as Angela Davis stated it many years ago—they come now to ‘get us’ in the morning, they must expect the apocalypse.

. . . A *hearing* of Rodney G. King can commence with a hearing of rap.²²

Houston Baker cites Angela Davis in order to underscore the portentous significance of rap music. It is noteworthy that Angela Davis herself has explicitly questioned Cornel West’s notion of nihilism, counterpoising it with gangster rap.

I can relate to the young people who passionately want to do something today, but are misdirected in a way that leads Cornel to describe their political impulses as nihilistic. I think that it is something more than a spiritual deficiency that leads to what he calls nihilism. This is why I decided to attempt some form of communication with Ice Cube.²³

Houston Baker and Angela Davis both recognize the meaningful political underpinnings of rap music and the portentous significance of its messages. This is likewise made clear by the apocalyptic implications of Chuck D's comments on the Public Enemy song "Welcome to the Terrordome"; there is no choice but to listen to his predictions without the consolation of tears:

I wrote that record at the end of '89, to signify the Terrordome is the 1990's. It's a make-it-or-break-it period for us. We do the right thing, we'll be able to pull into the twenty-first century with some kind of program. We do the wrong thing . . . there'll be no coming back. . . .

I'm a realist. I'm saying, we don't get our act together this decade, it's over. . . . I'm not going to wait for race relations. What's going to happen, it's going to be utter chaos twenty-five years from now. White people are going to be killed just like Black people are getting killed. Senseless. Without mercy. . . . it's going to run rampant.²⁴

The Terrordome is the 1990s. As one of hip hop's most articulate visionaries, Chuck D reinscribes our present with an urgency which is reminiscent of Richard Wright's bold predictions in *12 Million Black Voices*: "We hear the tumult of battle. . . . We stand at the crossroads" (136, 147).

Indeed, Wright was able to anticipate the rising tide of Black rage. Twenty-five years after he wrote those words, Black people had confronted every imaginable form of repression in order to begin to roll back Jim Crow segregation and rampant racist terrorism in the South; rebellions had erupted in Harlem and Watts; tanks and paratroopers would soon be necessary to quell virtual insurrections in Detroit and Newark, and later, with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., there would be literally hundreds of uprisings in almost every place with any substantial population of African Americans. Despite the programmatic limitations of petty bourgeois leaderships, the African American rebellion was a mass struggle based in the ranks of the Black working class and poor people. Although these struggles never escalated to the level of sustained combativity, organization, and strategic vision which would have been necessary to revolutionize American capitalist society and permanently dismantle the systemic violence which undergirds racist oppression, wide-ranging social upheaval and militant political struggle paid in the coin of death so that we could inherit a society significantly different from the one which fueled Richard Wright's urgency. Nonetheless, a crisis of political direction, the full-frontal repression of the most radical among the existing leaderships, and the rapid cooptation of reformists (of both the sincere as well as opportunist varieties)—all combined to disorient, demobilize, and derail the movement, while racist hegemony was reconfigured.

This rough sketch of the succession of events is a necessary bridge between the social order which shaped Richard Wright's vision and our own predicament, but more importantly, it suggests a political framework through which to understand the social contexts that engendered the emergence of hip hop in the early- to mid-1970s. The "deindustrialization" of big cities which began to be manifest at this time cannot be treated as a simply economic transformation;²⁵ rather, it must be situated in the context of the tumultuous political battles that preceded it, so that "deindustrialization" can be recognized as an active policy of aggressive disinvestment expressing a dramatically shifting relationship of the contending forces of social struggle (both within the U.S. nation-state, and also globally in the form of anticolonial revolutions, such as the national liberation struggle in Vietnam). The point is precisely that the struggle continued, but that now the momentum was disproportionately on one side, as urban Black working class and poor people were penalized with the liquidation of their cities' industrial bases, "white flight" accelerated furiously, and urban landscapes became thoroughly militarized—in short, as racial segregation and racist terror were being reconfigured. We are still reeling from the consequences of the demobilization of the African American rebellion; the Terrordome is the 1990s.

Gangsters and Ghettos

A Reconstruction of the Production, Consumption, and Destruction of "Niggers"

If Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him.

—Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born"²⁶

Richard Wright identified Black music as "our banner of hope flung desperately up in the face of a world that has pushed us to the wall," and he recorded the pulse of his times through the literary nihilism that he articulated in his writing. Many of hip hop's lyricists do the same today, but within a very different, highly public, commodified regime of representation. Just as the Black rebellion of the 1960s secured for African American career-politicians an unprecedented high profile in the political machinery of the Democratic Party—especially in the administration of America's major urban centers (which has been part of a more general expansion of

opportunities for African American business, professional, and intellectual elites)—so also have African Americans achieved a remarkable unprecedented publicity in the culture industry. But it is worth emphasizing that rap music has never had anything other than a decidedly instrumental relationship to the universe of commodities.

Hip-hop music originated as the improvisational craft of disc jockeys in the poorest sectors of New York City, who by orchestrating and manipulating turntable records in innovative and original ways, and enlisting the commodities of the music industry to serve literally as their creative musical “instruments,” succeeded in elaborating their own unique aesthetic ends (a deliberate revision and creative transformation of the prevailing disco music). The production of recorded rap music through the “sampling” (i.e., pirating) and repetitive remixing of chord series and rhythms from other recorded music, was facilitated by the appearance of relatively inexpensive technological innovations. And of course, once recorded, hip hop itself was infinitely commodifiable. Yet it would be both simplistic in the extreme and politically naive to conclude prematurely that the commodified character of hip hop could suffice to foreclose its transgressive potential. George Lipsitz states the problem eloquently:

The powerful apparatuses of contemporary commercial electronic mass communications dominate discourse in the modern world. They supply us with endless diversion and distraction mobilized to direct our minds toward advertising messages. They colonize the most intimate and personal aspects of our lives, seizing upon every possible flaw in our bodies, minds, and psyches to increase our anxieties and augment our appetites for consumer goods. Culture itself comes to us as a commodity.²⁷

For all their triviality and frivolity, the messages of popular culture circulate in a network of production and consumption which is quite serious. At their worst, they perform the dirty work of the economy and the state. At their best, they retain memories of the past and contain hopes for the future that rebuke the injustices and inequities of the present. . . . By examining the relationship between collective popular memory and commercial culture, we may be on the threshold of a new kind of knowledge, one sensitive to contestations over meaning and capable of teaching us that a sideshow can sometimes be the main event.²⁸

A necessary starting point for a constructive analysis, which nevertheless can only mark its beginning, is the understanding that rap music flourishes in the contradictory interstices of hegemonic appropriation and a fairly self-conscious and articulate politics of oppositional maneuvering. Commodified rap music was able to proliferate through the virtual pillage of an ever-expanding universe of already-existing commodified music— instantiating the semblance of something like a parodic auto-cannibaliza-

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tion of the commodity form. The very essence of hip-hop music, as a musical genre which begins with the unabashed appropriation of prerecorded, mass-produced, commodified music, demonstrates that “public culture” is inevitably and unassailably “public-access culture”—a free-for-all. Gangster rap, even more than other types of hip hop, raises the free-for-all aesthetic far above and beyond the music’s formal level: gangster rap celebrates a free-for-all in the streets. Here it becomes possible to imagine the transcendence of a merely aesthetic nihilism which can be contained by commodification . . . to imagine an articulation of this highly public nihilist aesthetic with the street, the place where the sideshow can become the main event.

The contest over commodified rap music, a contest between hegemonic appropriation and oppositional imagination, is exhibited in a powerful way by the conflict of equivocal meanings in gangster rap. While themes related to street hustlers and gangsters had already been developed in earlier expressions of hip hop, these were but anticipations of the genre which emerged in a more definitive style with Boogie Down Productions’ *Criminal Minded*, Schooly D’s *Smoke Some Kill*, and Ice-T’s *Rhyme Pays*—all released in 1987. By 1988, “gangster rap” had become a distinct genre with the release of *Straight Outta Compton* by Niggers With Attitude (NWA). Assuming the personae of ruthless and lawless urban paragons of death and destruction, these rap gangsters conjure vivid sonic tapestries of “ghetto” life, distinguished by brutal realism and a carnivalesque nihilism.

As a self-styled product of “the ghetto,” gangster rap musically and lyrically reproduces the hyperboles of the ghetto and thus stands as the fantastical reproduction of destruction, a production of irrepressible and bombastic “Blackness,” the self-styled product of, and symbolic reproduction of, “niggers” and their destruction. Gangster rap is the expression of an urban American “culture of terror” and “space of death.” I borrow these concepts directly from their formulation in Michael Taussig’s *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Taussig details an historical situation in which the colonizers conjure for themselves a vivid mythology about the “savagery” of the colonized, a mythology which they come to believe and which justifies for them the real savagery that they perpetrate against the colonized population. These same vicious fantasies of the racist imaginary, however, ultimately enable a politics whereby the colonized people avail themselves of the “savage” powers ascribed to them, and manipulate the delusions of their enemies.²⁹ In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison has suggested a very closely related thematic expressly for African American oppression, with the analogous metaphor of the “jungle”:

White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming babboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, . . . they were right. . . . It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through, and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming babboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (198–99)

Thus, in *Beloved*, “the jungle” which animates white supremacy is located as a central and defining dynamic of American life (and death). The “culture of terror” and “space of death” in the United States gets evoked by gangster rap’s rather self-conscious creation of a shared realm where equivocal meanings and values collide and collude in the production and destruction of “niggers.” In gangster rap and its heart of darkness, unflinching Black realism and vicarious white (consumer) enchantment converge.

Gangster rap exposes the multivalence and equivocation of racial essentialism; it evokes all of the conflicted meanings and opposed values which congeal simultaneously around a shared set of socially charged signifiers that comprise a single racial nomenclature. What rap pioneer and mainstay Kool Moe Dee has called “street music,” and rapper KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions has designated “Ghetto Music,” rap producer Afrika Islam has depicted as “nigger music.”³⁰ Although the meanings are profoundly different, what is referenced by Afrika Islam’s phrase “nigger music” is the same music referenced by a racist white supervisor (satirized in the song “Cotex” by the rap team Bytches With Problems) when she declares: “You’re not gonna listen to that *nigger* . . . I mean, *rap* . . . music in this establishment!”³¹ Gangster rap in particular marshals this unity of opposites with cunning, evoking a bilateral “culture of terror” in a dislocated “space of death”: hegemonic (racist) fantasies about stereotypical “Blackness” and the self-destructive (“savage”) violence of the urban ghetto-space, are conjoined with the nihilistic, lawless (oppositional) terror-heroism of proud, unapologetic self-styled “niggers”—Niggers With Attitude, Geto Boys, Compton’s Most Wanted, et al.—who fulfill the prophesy and the promise of systemic violence and orchestrated destruction. Thus, gangster rap serves up white America’s most cherished gun-slinging mythologies (heroic American dreams) in the form of its worst and blackest nightmares, while it empowers Black imaginations to negate the existential terror of ghetto life (and death) by sheer force of the will.

Interrogation

A one-sided, self-referential interrogation of gangster rap and its “excesses” by liberal commentators has been preoccupied with the white reception of the commodified “Blackness” of hip hop. David Samuels’s cover article for the *New Republic*, entitled “The Rap on Rap: The ‘Black Music’ That Isn’t Either,” is a premier expression of a kind of liberal rejection of gangster rap in particular and hip hop in general. Citing the large-scale white, middle-class, suburban consumption of gangster rap recordings like NWA’s *Niggaz4Life*, Samuels argues that “although rap is still proportionately more popular among Blacks, its primary audience is white and lives in the suburbs . . . [and] the more rappers were packaged as violent criminals, the bigger their white audiences became.”³² One could not easily challenge the proposition that the greatest extent of white reception rests on the enticing recapitulation of time-worn racist stereotypes of a sexually deviant, criminal, and pathological Black “other.” Here we must remind ourselves of Richard Wright’s reflections on *Native Son*: “I felt that if I drew the picture of Bigger truthfully, there would be many reactionary whites who would try to make of him something that I did not intend” (*NS* xxi). So it is also with gangster rap. The existence of a white, middle-class (largely adolescent male) listenership with questionable motivations, certainly does supply a vast market for gangster rap. (It should be noted, however, that the available statistics are unable to account for the thriving bootleg industry which reproduces cassettes of hip-hop recordings and markets them at a considerable discount, largely in urban areas, to predominantly Black audiences). Samuels is nevertheless wholly unjustified in his sweeping conclusions, starting as he does from an outright but unstated disavowal of rap music (apparently for no other reason than that it is offensive to his own refined self-referential sensibilities). By assuming the color-blind liberal posture, Samuels rejects the “Blackness” of rap music, only in order to exculpate his denigration of it. At least implicitly, then, he denies that rap music could even possibly be meaningful to its proportionately much more substantial Black listenership. Samuels’s approach to gangster rap finally exhibits a flagrant disregard for the creative African American subjectivities which both make the music and respond to it. And neither does this approach offer adequate consideration of white reception itself.

Without neglecting the insidious (racist) underpinnings of the ways that the “thrill” of commodified “Blackness” may be received by relatively privileged white consumers,³³ the nature of this thrill itself deserves some attention. The thrill of gangster rap for middle-class white youth (especially adolescent males) may very well be situated in the kinds of

intra-class resistance which Sherry Ortner discerns in her research on white middle-class teens.³⁴ Ortner observes a range of patterned behaviors whereby middle-class parents and their children negotiate the process of the teens' incorporation into their parents' class values and encompassment by the institutional frameworks of middle-class aspirations. The subcognitive attraction (and repulsion) of the racialized symbols of gangsters, ghettos, profanity, and sexual violence may conceivably manifest that perfectly concocted offensiveness to suburban middle-class respectability, for which these rebellious boys have been yearning.

If, indeed, the commodified "Blackness" of rap music's gangsters and ghettos is easily mobilized to shock suburban parents, this is possible largely because hegemonic (racist) premises about "niggers" and their music are shared by both white parents and their recalcitrant children. Gangster rap becomes an emblem of Black insurrection in the fantastical form which is most terrifying for white racists—a rampage of "illegitimate" sexuality. Gangster rap provokes the time-worn racist paranoia about the prospect of the gang rape of white women by Black men, the ultimate transgression of white men's proprietorial obsession with controlling the bodies of "their" women.³⁵ These gendered dimensions of white supremacy—a generic adversity toward Black self-determination coupled with a deadly fear of Black masculinity—were playfully signified during the Black Power movement, as in the title of Julius Lester's *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama*. Of course, the masculinist discourses of white supremacy and Black nationalism collude inasmuch as they are played out as an argument between men and enacted forcefully on women's bodies. Hence, it should come as no surprise that the gendered (frequently masculinist) underpinnings of racial politics, in general, prefigure gangster rap as a genre of cultural politics, as well as in its frequent criminalization in the mass media.

The politics of gangster rap comprises an immensely contradictory terrain. Here, it is necessary to denounce the misogyny which is amply expressed and the sexual violence which is often celebrated in much of gangster rap. The readiness in many rap lyrics to conflate women with the degradation of Black manhood—which, as Tricia Rose points out, reveals something of the vulnerability of male heterosexual desire³⁶—too commonly aspires to the total domination and brutalization of women, especially in gangster rap. And sadly, this may help to explain some of gangster rap's appeal, especially for adolescent boys whose aspirations to manhood are so frequently realized through enactments of violence (often mimicking the violence of men against women, as well as the more generic violence of adults against children). Still, an almost exclusive focus on this aspect of gangster rap (in scholarly writing as well as the mass media) has

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effectively precluded any careful attention to other dimensions of the complicated politics of the genre. As Rose argues: “It is critical to understand that male rappers did not invent sexism. Black practices have been openly sexist for a long time, and in this regard they keep solid company with many other highly revered dominant Western practices.”³⁷ The sexism of gangster rap must be located along a continuum which includes many of the patriarchal ideologies and male-dominated structures of African American community, as well as racist terror itself (which is never gender neutral) and, finally, the oppression and exploitation of women, which is a constitutive feature of capitalism more generally. Although gangster rap is predominantly male, it is not exclusively so; moreover, within hip hop, it cohabitates with many women whose perspectives are quite boldly and forcefully articulated. In this regard, it is also instructive to note that, as Brian Cross points out: “Hip hop is a forum born out of call-and-response, and more than any other popular cultural form has the ability to self-correct.”³⁸ Hip hop is a living and lively cultural form, inextricable from wider social contexts of meaning and political conflict, while also intrinsically entangled—discursively, ideologically, politically—with its own diverse and contradictory configurations.

To the extent that gangster rap has a marketable appeal for white (predominantly male adolescent) audiences, it is also possible to detect the seduction of the dangerous. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallybrass and White have depicted how the socially marginalized and dangerous becomes symbolically central in its appropriation:

Disgust always bears the imprint of desire. These low domains, apparently expelled as “Other,” return as the object of nostalgia, longing, and fascination . . . the slum . . . the “savage”: all these, placed at the outer limit of civil life, become symbolic contents of bourgeois desire.³⁹

It is possible to understand the vicarious thrill for white adolescent males—not only through the visceral fear and repulsion evoked for their parents by the chaotic sounds of the urban ghetto swamping their suburban, middle-class somnolence—but also in the pleasures excited by the mere disruption of their own somnolence. Still, the safe distance secured through this kind of commodified danger is often (and conveniently) further removed—displaced onto women’s bodies. Rap team Compton’s Most Wanted orchestrate precisely this sort of transgression in their “Intro”: amidst a woman’s muffled screams, a white man’s articulate voice demands—“Who the hell are you?!?”—as his suburban home is invaded by the rap gangsters, Compton’s Most Wanted.⁴⁰ Women are reduced to the property of men, the control of which will apparently be sorted out in the contest. Ice Cube also fantasizes about the violation of white suburban privilege in his anthem “AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted”:

It's time . . . to take a trip to the suburbs
Let 'em see a nigger invasion
Point blank . . . on a Caucasian
Cock the hammer, then crack a smile
Take me to your house, pal
Got to the house, my pockets got fat, ya see
Cracked the safe . . . got the money and the jewelry⁴¹

Brian Cross has remarked insightfully upon Ice Cube's appropriation of the mass-mediated image of Black criminality: "In naming his album after the influential crime show, Cube signalled the arrival of a new kind of visibility for black inner-city youth on tabloid news shows that conjured visions of an endemically criminal population in every major city."⁴² For its white listeners, gangster rap truly reconstitutes "the tyranny of the real"—both by musically and lyrically reconfiguring the real tyranny of the ghetto-space of death and destruction, and by reconfirming, *through* these phantasms of the "other," the sanitized comfort (and privilege) that comes with the tyrannical tedium of suburban, middle-class reality. It is here that we can discern a shared "culture of terror," a musical conjunction of the terror lived in Black ghettos, and the enchanting terror *dreamed* in white suburbia.

Empowering Nihilism

Bigger, as I saw and felt him, was a snarl of many realities . . .
—Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born"⁴³

Any interrogation of the white, middle-class reception of gangster rap must be counterbalanced by an attentiveness to the conflicting meanings and opposed values to be found in this genre as it is addressed to Black listeners, and as it is likewise situated in longstanding African American oral traditions. Gangster rap is not at all anomalous to the consideration of hip-hop music as a creative form of Black expression. Nor is gangster rap any less a potential vehicle for the articulation of a Black-identified oppositional politics. Dick Hebdige has offered suggestive insights into the resourcefulness of the market in generating innovation by cannibalizing its own margins.⁴⁴ While the music industry has profitably packaged the appeal of gangster rap for white middle-class consumption, however, this act of appropriation in and of itself does not necessarily accomplish the recuperation of a fractured hegemony in the ways that Hebdige assumes as a general model. A cultural form like hip hop has a sociohistorical locatedness which is not eradicated by the simple fact that it becomes

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dence available.

commodified and exceedingly accessible; finally, it cannot possibly be engaged by everyone in exactly the same way. If rap's subversions are inevitably subject to hegemonic appropriation through commodification, bringing the socially marginal to symbolic centrality, the socially marginalized (around whom the images of hip hop coalesce) inevitably receive rap's subversiveness in a different way than middle-class whites do.

For its African American audiences (not at all exclusively male or adolescent), but particularly for poor and working-class Black male youth, there is a form of transcendence made possible by gangster rap, in particular, as well as by much of hip hop in general. Cornel West has explicitly related this potential in rap music to the nihilism about which he has so much to say, but his conclusions are predictably dismal. In *Prophetic Fragments*, a collection of much earlier essays, it is noteworthy that Cornel West seems less inhibited about deploying his discussion of nihilism principally to describe the so-called "underclass." Rap music emerges in West's bleak scenario as "the last form of transcendence available to young Black ghetto dwellers."⁴⁵ It is imperative to recognize how West's seeming location "above" the "underclass" he describes enables the formulation of his apocalyptic (and certainly despondent) perspective. His intellectual standpoint is ultimately defined by his own privileged detachment from these "ghetto dwellers," and confined by his nostalgia for a time when there were purportedly other (and implicitly, better) forms of transcendence available. Despite his often incisive remarks on "The Paradox of the African American Rebellion" (1993), West again reveals a deeply limited perception and thoroughly pessimistic appreciation of the majority of African Americans—namely, the impoverished working class and the permanently unemployed. West rightly recognizes that the drug industry has served as an instrumental mechanism for the pacification of the mass revolt of the late 1960s. But what is relevant here is his notion of the final outcome: "The drug industry . . . transformed black poor neighborhoods into terrains of human bondage to the commodity form, enslavement to the buying and selling of drugs."⁴⁶ Further, he declares: "The black working poor and underclass often either became dependent on growing welfare support or seduced by the drug culture."⁴⁷ In an otherwise insightful critique of the African American petty bourgeoisie (i.e., his own class), these are the most substantive remarks West can muster about poor people. He seems to believe that their lives are principally comprehensible in terms of "bondage" and "enslavement," that their general condition is best described as "dependent," and that—in some profound sense—they have basically been "seduced." It appears that their history is far more defined by welfare and drugs than by themselves; indeed, theirs appears to be a "culture of poverty."

Rather than as an expression of social pathology, gangster rap's imaginative empowerment of a nihilistic and ruthless way of life can be better understood as a potentially oppositional consciousness—albeit born of desperation, or even despair. While the stark visions of gangster rap cannot be removed from a contemporary social context of profound and deepening misery and racist terror, it is likewise important to begin by situating this genre in a rich legacy of postbellum Black folklore. We can say of gangster rap exactly what Richard Wright said in *White Man, Listen!* when he spoke of one of rap's lyrical antecedents, the "Dozens": "They jeer at life; they leer at what is decent, holy, just, wise, straight, right, and uplifting. I think that it is because, from the Negro's point of view, it is the right, the holy, the just, that crush him in America."⁴⁸ Lawrence Levine has provided an excellent account of the long tradition of tales recounting the ferocity of Black "bad men" and bandits:

From the late nineteenth century Black lore was filled with tales, toasts, and songs of hard, merciless toughs and killers confronting and generally vanquishing their adversaries without hesitation and without remorse . . .

Whatever needs bad men filled, Black folk refused to romantically embellish or sentimentalize them . . .

The outlaw was in constant conflict with and continually asserted his freedom from organized society . . .

The brutality of Negro bad men was allowed to speak for itself and without extenuation. Their badness was described without the excuse of socially redeeming qualities. They preyed upon the weak as well as the strong, women as well as men. They killed not merely in self-defense but from sadistic need and sheer joy. . . . Coming from the depths of the society, representing the most oppressed and deprived strata, these bandits are manifestations of the feeling that, within the circumstances in which they operate, to assert any power at all is a triumph . . .

They are manifestations of more than this, of course. They express the profound anger festering and smoldering among the oppressed . . .

The situation of Negroes in the United States was too complex for nostalgia. . . . Society had to be unhinged, undone, made over. That certainly is a clue to the total anarchy and lawlessness of Black bandits, and their total hopelessness as well. . . . They were pure force, pure vengeance; explosions of fury and futility.⁴⁹

A merely formal analogy between Black folktales and mass-mediated, commodified rap music can appear to invoke a transhistorical identity of the two. But the historicity of this continuity of African American oral and performative traditions resides precisely in their transformations across different regimes of representation. Mass-mediated hip hop is saturated in commodification, and it is articulated by the historic dislocations and dis-

junctures which shape its multiple social contexts in the present. But it is no less an expression of a “profound anger festering and smoldering among the oppressed,” and no less an anarchic reply to a society which has to be unhinged, undone, and made over. The situation is indeed too complex for nostalgia. Levine’s account of Black folktales about bad men and bandits could quite as easily describe the visionless, antisocial heroism of rap’s gangsters, a product of destruction wreaking havoc upon the listener’s every sensibility.

The nihilism of gangster rap resounds with the embodied “walking nihilism” which Cornel West perceives among the growing ranks of impoverished African Americans. Clearly, when West cites pervasive drug addiction, pervasive alcoholism, pervasive homicide, and an exponential rise in suicide, there is nothing to romanticize. Still, gangster rap can be found to transcend the mere reflection of urban mayhem and enter into musical debate with these realities, without sinking into didacticism or flattening their complexity. It is revealing that gangster rappers—for example, the Geto Boys renowned for such songs as “Trigger Happy Nigger”—can construe their musical personages around celebrations of orgiastic violence, and then return with songs like “Mind’s Playin’ Tricks on Me”:

At night I can’t sleep, I toss and turn
Candlesticks in the dark, pictures of bodies bein’ burned
Four walls just starin’ at a nigger
I’m paranoid, sleepin’ with my finger on the trigger
My mother’s always dissin’ I ain’t livin’ right
But I ain’t goin’ out without a fight
See, every time my eyes close
I start sweatin’, and blood starts comin’ out my nose
It’s somebody watchin’ my ass
But I don’t know who it is, so I’m watchin’ my back
I can see him when I’m deep in the covers
When I’m awake, I don’t see the motherfucker . . .

I make big money, I drive a big car
Everybody knows me; it’s like I’m a movie star
But late at night, somethin’ ain’t right
I feel I’m bein’ tailed by the same sucker’s headlights
Is it that fool that I ran out the block
Or is it that nigger last week that I shot . . .

He was goin’ down, we figured
But this was no ordinary nigger
He stood about six or seven feet

Now that's the nigger I be seein' in my sleep
So we triple teamed on him
Droppin' those motherfuckin' b's on him
The more I swung, the more blood flew
Then he disappeared and my boys disappeared too
. . . It was dark as fuck on the street
My hands were all bloody, from punchin' on the concrete
Goddamn, homey! My mind's playin' tricks on me.⁵⁰

The pertinence and profound vision of this song—its embeddedness in actual experience—can be corroborated with the testimony of ethnographic realism. In *People and Folks*, John Hagedorn's ethnography of street gangs in Milwaukee, the sociologist asks, "Is there anything else you want to add—maybe something I didn't ask you that maybe I should?" Chuck, an informant from the Vice Lords, replies:

Just tell these young people to stay out of the gangs. It's just a bad way to go. Cause there's always two enemies, really three: the other gang member, the police, and yourself." [*What do you mean by 'yourself'?*] "Because say like you in a gang, and you had a gang fight that night, and you cut somebody. He be in the hospital seriously bleeding, in intensive care, they don't know if he's goin' to die or live. That can screw a brother up seriously. Have him walking around, every time he see a knife, go into shock, you know. . . . I put a dude in the hospital for four months with a nightstick. I still have a hard time when I see the police slap up their nightstick. Because when I hit him, blood was squirting all over my shirt, and *oooh!* four months, he was in the hospital.⁵¹

Likewise, it is possible to corroborate the Geto Boys' powerful depiction of the corrosive truth of gangster rap with the autobiographical testimony of former gang member Sanyika Shakur (aka "Monster" Kody Scott):

Combat was starting to take its toll on me. It seemed as though I was viewing a body every other month, or having brains and blood splattered all over me. Death, or the fear of death, became my constant companion.

Life meant very little to me. . . . Certainly I had little respect for life when practically all my life I had seen people assaulted, maimed, and blown away at very young ages, and no one seemed to care. I recognized early that where I lived, we grew and died in dog years. Actually, some dogs outlived us.

I had no idea of peace or tranquility. From my earliest recollections there has been struggle, strife, and the ubiquity of violence. This ranged from the economic destitution of my family to the domestic violence between my parents, from the raging gang wars to the omnipresent occupational police force in hot pursuit.

. . . Motion has been my closest companion, from room to room, house to house, street to street, neighborhood to neighborhood, school to school, jail to jail, cell to cell—from one man-made hell to another. So I didn't care

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one way or another about living or dying—and I cared less than that about killing someone.

. . . The ultimate stability, however, was death—the final rest, the only lasting peace. Though never stated, death was looked upon as a sort of reward . . .⁵²

Likewise, in the memoir of his youth in a Chicano gang, Luis Rodriguez reflects upon the self-destructive impulse: “There is an aspect of suicide in young people whose options have been cut off. They stand on street corners, flashing hand signs, inviting the bullets.”⁵³ Furthermore, Rodriguez cites a young Latino participant in the L.A. uprising of 1992, who challenges: “Go ahead and kill us, we’re already dead.”⁵⁴ At one point in the narrative of Shakur’s memoir, he boastfully makes the same claim: “They can’t kill me, fool, I’m already dead, muthafucka!”⁵⁵ These examples, if nothing else, demonstrate in various ways that what emerges in gangster rap, like the figure of Bigger Thomas, is “a snarl of many realities.” Gangster rap would seem to provide a very different kind of “therapy” for those who live its nihilism, than the shock treatment it provides for those who live in mortal terror of it.

Ghetto Truth: The Insurrection of Subjugated Nationalisms

So back off genius / I don't need you / to correct my broken English.
—Ice Cube (1991)⁵⁶

The potency of gangster rap for poor and working-class Black listeners may well be partly attributed to its capacity to inspire white fear and repulsion, especially through the depiction of the gangster’s unrepentant opposition to all social order and control. Gangster rap is the product of (and a *production* of) self-styled “niggers” who confront their systemic subjugation and destruction with the incipient insurrections of lawlessness and an unbridled destruction. In his militant autobiographical manifesto *Die Nigger Die!*, H. Rap Brown declares: “To be Black in this country is to be a nigger. To be a nigger is to resist both white and negro death. It is to be free in spirit, if not body. It is the spirit of resistance which has prepared Blacks for the ultimate struggle.”⁵⁷ On the cover of *Niggaz4Life*, gangster rappers Niggers with Attitude (NWA) appear as the souls of slain Black youth, behind police barriers, free spirits rising up from freshly bullet-riddled corpses strewn across the Los Angeles pavement. In the rap “Niggaz4Life,” NWA convey some of the same “spirit of resistance” that Rap Brown celebrates:

Why do I call myself a “nigger”?—ya ask me
I guess it’s just the way shit has to be
Back when I was young, gettin’ a job was like murder
Fuck flippin’ burgers! because I deserve a
Nine-to-five
That I can be proud of, that I can speak loud of
And then I could get out of
Yo! The concrete playground
But most motherfuckers only want you to stay down
But I’m a smart motherfucker, ya see . . .

* * *

Why do I call myself a “nigger”?—ya ask me
Because police always want to harass me
Every time that I’m rollin’
They swear up and down that the car was stolen
Make me get face down in the street
And throw shit outta my car, on the concrete
And run up my residence
All you white motherfuckers on my back
It’s like I shot the president

* * *

. . . Nigger this! Nigger that! The actual fact
Is that I am Black, and bound to attract
The attention of another (I mean the Other)
But I’m a motherfucker that’ll have ‘em runnin’ for cover
Ya see, I don’t give a fuck about nothin’

* * *

. . . It’s plain to see, you can’t change me
'Cause I’m gon’ be a nigger for life!⁵⁸

This willingness to adopt the racist epithet as a proud label of “Blackness,” intractable rebelliousness, and irrepressible ghetto survivalism begins to reveal the “nigger music” that is gangster rap to be the expression of a self-empowering oppositional nihilism.

There is no dearth of encoded messages in gangster rap. In an interview, rapper Ice-T explains this self-conscious approach in his music: “I was always one of the best at hiding messages . . . keeping it real flip . . . you won’t know it, and it’s gonna hit you in your fuckin’ face.”⁵⁹ The flip-pant, highly equivocal artistry of gangster rap is well illustrated, again, by the Geto Boys in their recurring irony. Throughout their music, there are samples of a drug dealer hawking his commodity as if in a marketplace; he beckons: “Today’s special—ghetto dope!” Not only is this recurring theme

ironic because it caricatures the brazen openness of the ghetto drug trade; it is particularly ironic because it is equivocal. “Ghetto dope” can be understood literally—as drugs. But it can also be understood as an ironic assertion of the hip-hop neologism “dope,” an adjective which refers to that which is extraordinarily good or powerful. Hence, the special of the day is “ghetto dope,” i.e., the Geto Boys’ music, which is “dope.” “Ghetto dope” becomes meaningful at still another level, however, in the song “City Under Siege,” where “ghetto dope” is “the straight dope” from the ghetto—ghetto truth—in a song which assumes a more overtly political character as the gun-slashing rap gangsters satirize the “War on Drugs” and indict the instrumentality of the heads of state and the CIA in the international drug trade.

Born in the ghetto, I’s a street thug
At age 16, I started sellin’ cheap drugs . . .
Bag it up and make my profit
But some pussy motherfucker in office is tryin’ to stop it
And the bastard that’s stoppin’ the bus
Is the same motherfucker that delivers to us . . .

* * *

The politicians are players
Reagan and Bush were cut-in tough with Noriega . . .
Now let’s go back to the past
The motherfucker who needs to be tried
is Ronald Reagan’s ass
Appointed Bush to the CIA; that shit was cold
Put Noriega on the payroll
All of a sudden, shit changed right after ’88
Ay-Ay-Ay! Ain’t that strange?
Some think I’m goin’ too far
But if ya want to go to war, I’ll take ya to war
They don’t care about niggers on welfare
As long as their kind ain’t there
You got my keys under freeze
(Motherfucker!) My city’s under siege

* * *

(Today’s special—ghetto dope!)⁶⁰

The “ghetto dope,” which reverberates ambiguously throughout the album, reappears in the last track to “hit you in your fuckin’ face,” with a scathing national and international political critique expressed in a brutal idiom of ghetto realism.

The symbol of “the ghetto” in gangster rap becomes its firebrand of “authenticity.” The ghetto comes to be valorized not only as a “space of death” (and destruction) but also as a space of survival and transcendence; not merely a “heart of darkness,” it is also the heart of “Blackness.” The alternate map of the nation becomes an unmistakable geography of *Black America*. Gangster rap in particular resounds with an evocation of the geographical, referencing many of the more prominent ghetto crucibles of the country—Compton, South Central L.A., the Bronx, Harlem—or more ubiquitous localities like “the hood,” “the projects,” “the streets.” The affirmation of gangster rappers’ origins in these ghetto locales is a premium on “authenticity” only superceded by prior gang membership or criminal records (actual or otherwise). Erik Wright (a.k.a. Eazy E, of Niggers With Attitude) is said to have created his rap record label (Priority Records) with money successfully hustled in his previous career as a drug dealer in Compton, realizing the traditional American ideal of gangster capitalism, achieving a legitimate place in the market by any means necessary.⁶¹ Celebrating the lessons of their experience, NWA open their debut release *Straight Outta Compton* with the momentous pronouncement: “You are about to witness the strength of street knowledge.” By implication, “street knowledge” is that ghetto-hardened realism which lends gangster rap its aesthetic of ruthlessness, but also its “Blackness.”

The initial release of the amateur video tape of Rodney King’s brutalization by Los Angeles police created dramatic possibilities for an enactment of the American “culture of terror” in the mass media. Rappers seized upon the opportunity, long before the L.A. uprising of 1992. Niggers with Attitude (NWA), for example, invited Rodney King to appear on a video remake of their explosive rap song “Fuck tha Police.”⁶² This incendiary reveille resounds with the assertion that African Americans constitute the majority on the streets of urban centers throughout the United States, and celebrates retaliation by Black people against police brutality:

Police think they have the authority
 To kill a minority
 Well fuck that shit ‘cause I ain’t the one
 For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun
 To be beaten on and thrown in jail
 We can go toe-to-toe in the middle of the cell . . .
 Beat a police out of shape
 And when I’m done, bring the yellow tape
 To tape off the scene of the slaughter
 Still in a swamp of blood and water
 Ice Cube will swarm
 On any motherfucker in a blue uniform.⁶³

Ice Cube returns to the underlying theme of “Blackness” which gives the gangster aesthetic its force and meaning, when he insists: “Every motherfucker with a color is ‘Most Wanted.’” Nevertheless, as is manifest throughout most of “Fuck tha Police,” the most poignant expressions of this righteous anger in gangster rap are typically limited to heroic individualism. Likewise, when gangster rappers most directly address themselves to the armed force of the state apparatus, hip hop’s frequently masculinist idioms easily dominate the lyrical foreground. An exception which would seem to prove the rule is the female rap team Bytches With Problems (BWP). They included some of the actual footage of the King beating in the music video for “Wanted,” a rap which rages against the racist police harassment that is an everyday reality for African Americans:

I can’t help to agree with Eazy-E
Why the police always fuckin’ with me
and my man?
When we out drivin’
First thing I hear is a fuckin’ siren
“Pull the shit over to the fuckin’ curb”
Goddamn, I’m sick of those words!
Lookin’ for the dope that I’m holdin’
Or even checkin’ for the shit that’s stolen
‘Cause I’m Black as fuck when I’m rollin’
That don’t mean my shit is stolen
Searchin’ my car illegally
Fuckin’ that’s right it belongs to me
What?! A nigger can’t have nice shit?
Man, suck my fuckin’ dick.⁶⁴

BWP’s raps often provide a female reply to the commonplace misogyny in gangster rap, expressed in an idiom of violence which is no less ruthless than that of hip hop’s male gangsters. But it is significant that BWP’s song “Wanted”—one of relatively few female raps about police brutality—resorts to a distinctly masculinist rhetoric in reply to the racist violence of the state apparatus.

Nothing to Lose: From Gangsters to Urban Guerrillas

I tried to approach Bigger’s *sarled* and *confused* nationalist feelings with *conscious* and *informed* ones of my own. Yet Bigger was not nationalist enough to feel the need of religion or the folk culture of his own people. What made Bigger’s social consciousness most complex was the fact that he

was hovering unwanted between two worlds—between powerful America and his own stunted place in life . . .
—Richard Wright, “How Bigger Was Born”⁶⁵

Gangster rap’s implicit appeal to a fundamental commonality of “Blackness” among its African American listeners, its subterranean nationalism, can be understood as an argument intended to undermine street-gang allegiances and divisions. Such was explicitly the aim of ex-gang member Michael Concepcion in 1990, when he pulled together the West Coast All Stars for the collaborative hip-hop effort, “We’re All in the Same Gang,” proposing a permanent cease-fire among the street gangs of urban America. In this rap, the “gang” provides the crude metaphor which is taken to more closely approximate the actual conceptions of identity and loyalty which drive many Black youth along a course of self-destruction. A more encompassing (racial/national) identity of “Blackness” is articulated by means of revising the content but retaining the form of the street-gang trope. It appeals for a sense of racial unity and seeks to open up the national(ist) potentialities of racial claims.

It is possible to discern multiple linkages between gangster rap and the political vision that aspires for a radical transformation of the street gangs, a project which inspired earlier generations of Black nationalists and continues to do so. In his *Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member*, Sanyika Shakur (aka “Monster” Kody Scott) portrays his personal odyssey from gang member to revolutionary Black nationalist and political prisoner in the New Afrikan Independence Movement. It is important that, in his Acknowledgments, Shakur extends “bullet-proof unity” to Ice Cube and Ice-T (among other rappers). These hip-hop visionaries are among those whom Shakur describes as having “stood up against the tumultuous blaring of the pied pipers’ propaganda” and “taught [him] the right way to resist.”⁶⁶ At this point, it is useful to be reminded of the lawless and insurgent psychology of gangster rap, as revealed here by Ice-T in the title rap for the soundtrack of the 1988 film *Colors*:

I am a nightmare walkin’
Psychopath talkin’
King of my jungle
Just a gangster stalkin’ . . .

* * *

What have you left me?
What have I got?
Last night in cold blood a young brother got shot
My homeboy got jacked
My mother’s on crack

My sister can't work 'cause her arms show tracks
Madness, insanity
Live in profanity
Then some young punk claimin' they're understandin' me
Give me a break!
What world do you live in?
Death is my set
Guess my religion.⁶⁷

Ice-T's rap-gangster mentality (reminiscent of Richard Wright's depictions of Bigger Thomas and especially Cross Damon in *The Outsider*) reaffirms an insight once advanced by Malcolm X:

The most dangerous Black man is the ghetto hustler. . . . He has no religion, no concept of morality, no civic responsibility, no fear—nothing . . . forever frustrated, restless, and anxious for some 'action.' Whatever he undertakes, he commits himself to it fully, absolutely.⁶⁸

In his essay "Malcolm X and Black Rage," Cornel West notes this affinity between Malcolm X and the nihilistic figures created by Richard Wright, although for West, the affinity stands as a criticism: "To put it bluntly, Malcolm X identified much more with the mind-set of Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas" (*RM* 102). It is not surprising in the least that the first political pamphlet to which Sanyika Shakur is introduced in prison (contributing to his eventual departure from an exceedingly brutal and desperately nihilistic existence as a street-gang combat soldier) opens and closes with quotations from Malcolm X.⁶⁹

The image of the nihilistic street hustler with nothing to lose, conjured not only by Malcolm X's words but also by his example, became a guiding inspiration for many of the Black nationalists of the late 1960s. Many rediscovered the timeless "bad men" and bandits of Black folklore, heroic figures like the notorious Stagolee, as preeminent paradigms of Black revolutionary potential.⁷⁰ Hence, Julius Lester compiled a small handbook of Black folktales to inform and give meaning to the emergent Black Power movement in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in 1967.⁷¹ Bobby Seale, Chairman of the Black Panther Party, reaffirmed the meaning to be derived from the timeless figure of the Black "bad man" when he named his son: "The nigger's name is Malik Nkrumah Stagolee Seale. . . . Because Stagolee was a bad nigger off the block and didn't take shit from nobody. All you had to do was organize him, like Malcolm X, make him politically conscious. All we have to do is organize a state, like Nkrumah attempted to do."⁷² Seale's ideal of politically educating and organizing the nihilistic gangsters and hustlers of the Black ghettos—indeed, transforming the extant armed-and-dangerous street-gang appa-

ratus into the backbone of urban guerilla warfare and Black insurrection—was a fundamental premise of the Black Panthers in general. Drawing upon the heroic model of Malcolm X as well as upon Frantz Fanon’s propositions concerning the revolutionary possibilities of the *lumpenproletariat*, Black Panther founder and Minister of Defense Huey P. Newton “tried to transform many of the so-called criminal activities going on in the street into something political.”⁷³ Writing from prison, where his own life had been an extraordinary enactment of this goal, George Jackson expresses a similar perspective:

We attempted to transform the black criminal mentality into a black revolutionary mentality.

There are those who resist and rebel but do not know what, who, why or how exactly they should go about this. They are aware but confused. They are the least fortunate, for they end where I have ended.⁷⁴

Rejecting some basic liberal illusions about the bourgeois-democratic state apparatus, Jackson plainly recognized that the law is a means of repression, “criminality” is its invention, and “crime” is its inevitable product. To varying degrees, all oppressed people are prefigured as “criminals,” and hence, criminals should be at least potentially revolutionary. On the model of anticolonial national liberation struggles around the world, the Black nationalists of the 1960s understood the American ghettos to be exploited colonies which would have to be liberated by armed struggle. These same aspirations were popularized by Sam Greenlee’s classic Black nationalist novel of the era, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*. In Greenlee’s fiction, an African American becomes the first token hire at the CIA, only to smuggle his training in the intricacies of guerilla warfare back to the street gangs of Chicago (from which he had originated), and eventually to all of the urban centers of the United States.⁷⁵

There are unmistakable conceptual affinities as well as historical relationships between gangster rap and the ghetto community organizing of certain Black nationalist traditions. Hip-hop originator DJ Kool Herc had associated with members of the “Five-Percenter” Muslim youth group.⁷⁶ Kool Herc’s original rap style, furthermore, was at least partly derived from the prison “toasting” popularized by *Hustler’s Convention*, a group of Black nationalist lyricists otherwise known as the Last Poets, whose political “message poetry” can now be found sampled in the gangster rap of NWA, among others. Another hip-hop pioneer, Afrika Bambaataa, had grown up around the Black Panther Information Center in the South Bronx. Bambaataa himself was a leader of the infamous South Bronx street gang called the Black Spades until 10 January 1975, when his closest friend was apparently executed by police in a crackdown against gang activity. Bambaataa then went on to found the hip-hop team that he

named the Zulu Nation, which evolved increasingly into a community organization committed to redirecting the energies of the gangs.⁷⁷ The members of the rap team Public Enemy also participated in nationalist summer programs in the early 1970s. Moreover, a wide cross-section of the more overtly political rappers have adopted more-or-less public affiliations with contemporary Black nationalist organizations, the most organizationally well-situated of which is clearly the Nation of Islam.⁷⁸

It is of exceptional interest to consider the weekly music column of the Nation of Islam newspaper, *The Final Call*. This column, entitled “Muhammad Inside Music,” almost invariably covers rap music releases. In the 2 December 1991 issue, for example, one encounters the familiar nationalist appeal for a transformation of ghetto violence:

Black youth today are special. . . . They are bold, energetic, and unwavering. Their boldness has been channeled into the unbridled passion that has spawned some of the most violent Black-on-Black homicide the race has ever seen.

The fact of the matter is that this generation of Black youth is . . . the most heavily armed and most intellectually advanced the race has ever seen. Unfortunately, their zeal and energy have been diffused primarily toward Black-on-Black violence, but if that energy could be redirected toward the upliftment of the race, the whole planet would hereafter be changed for the good of humanity.⁷⁹

It is no accident that the Nation of Islam commits a regular column to the celebration of rap music. The Nation of Islam works assiduously to absorb the ramifications of rap music’s oppositional politics. Akeem Muhammad, the youth minister of the Nation of Islam’s largest mosque (Chicago), has actually himself made a debut as a rap performer and publicist under the name of Prince Akeem. It is possible, moreover, to read in the “Muhammad Inside Music” column, for example, that “in effect, the rebirth of the Nation of Islam under the guidance of Minister Louis Farrakhan heralded the resurgence by musical artists to incorporate the Black liberation motif in their music.”⁸⁰ At the 1991 Savior’s Day celebration, Farrakhan declared that he himself was “the original rapper,” describing how he had recorded a song entitled “A White Man’s Heaven Is a Black Man’s Hell” upon reading a column by Malcolm X in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.⁸¹ Today, it is possible to find recordings of Farrakhan’s speeches dubbed over hip-hop backbeats and rhythm loops, for sale on street corners in poor African American neighborhoods.

Ice Cube (formerly of NWA) can serve as the paragon of a gangster rapper who has become ever more consciously nationalist and overtly political. Cube was in attendance when Farrakhan declared his patrimonial relationship to rap music; Cube later decided to join the Nation of

Islam.⁸² In tandem with this political evolution, Ice Cube released his third solo effort, entitled *Death Certificate*. On the album cover, Ice Cube is seen in a morgue, looming over the flag-draped corpse of his victim, Uncle Sam. The album also features a photograph of Ice Cube perusing a copy of the Nation of Islam newspaper, its prominent headline broadcasting the message “Unite or Perish,” as well as an explicit appeal which advises: “We have limited knowledge of self, so it leads to a nigga mentality. The best place for a young black male or female is the Nation Of Islam.”⁸³ By combining a gangster-style lyrical ferocity with his newfound ideological fervor, Ice Cube achieved a uniquely self-conscious synthesis of hip-hop idioms—a kind of gangster nationalism. But this synthesis necessarily entails a move away from some of the nihilism which distinguished Cube’s earlier work. Whether this particularly religious brand of Black nationalism can sustain a meaningful relevance for those listeners who live the gangster’s nihilism will probably remain a perplexing problem for the Nation of Islam. As Sanyika Shakur explains about his own transformation from gang member to revolutionary nationalist:

My thing was this: I didn’t believe there was a God. I just had no faith in what I couldn’t see, feel, taste, hear, or smell. All my life I had seen the power of life and death in the hands of men and boys. If I shot at someone and I hit him and he died, who took his life? Me or God? Was it predestined that on this day at this time I would specifically push this guy out of existence? I never believed that. I believed that I hunted him, caught him, and killed him. I had lived in too much disorder to believe that there was an actual design to this world. So I had a problem with believing in anything other than myself.⁸⁴

Shakur’s transformation from gang member to revolutionary literally begins with a confrontation with the dialectical intimacy of life and death. Indeed, Shakur’s introduction to revolutionary nationalism came when he read a pamphlet which closed with a poignant quotation from Malcolm X: “From here on in, if we must die anyway, we will die fighting back, and we will not die alone. We intend to see that our racist oppressors also get a taste of death.”⁸⁵

Here we must recall the complex “snarl of many realities” which Richard Wright sought to portray in his careful investigations into the nihilistic impulse. “Bigger was not nationalist enough,” or perhaps was too nihilistic, “to feel the need of religion or the folk culture of his own people. What made Bigger’s social consciousness most complex was the fact that he was hovering unwanted between two worlds” (*NS* xxiv). The social consciousness of gangster rap similarly lurks in this nebulous space, too complex in its blunt brutality for a liberalism complicit with a system of terror, while also too intrinsically contradictory to satisfy any quaint

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“resistance” narratives. Richard Wright harbored no illusions about the nihilistic impulses which he explored in the most desperate expressions of rebellion that animated his work:

I had also to show what oppression had done to Bigger’s relationships with his own people, how it had split him off from them, how it had baffled him; how oppression seems to hinder and stifle in the victim those very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor. (NS xxvi)

Nihilism is not a romantic revolutionary ideal. It is blunt and brutal. As the prison-born revolutionary George Jackson wrote of his survival against the terroristic forces of his own destruction, “I’ve . . . armed myself with a monumental hatred.”⁸⁶ Richard Wright understood that this kind of nihilism could not be rejected; rather, it had to be approached with utter seriousness and urgency, and thoroughly inhabited. It is only possible to appreciate this necessity to the extent that nihilism can be situated within the more encompassing dialectic of life and death, which was (and continues to be) dictated by the conditions of terror which hold our world together.

The Dialectic of Life and Death

Bigger Thomas’s nihilism remains the portentous symbol that Wright so perceptively identified and appreciated:

[H]e is the product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man . . . he lives among the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out. . . . [G]ranting the emotional state, the tenacity, the fear, the hate, the impatience, the sense of exclusion, the ache for violent action, the emotional and cultural hunger, Bigger Thomas . . . will not become an ardent, or even lukewarm, supporter of the status quo. (NS xx)

The nihilistic figure who stands in irreconcilable antagonism to the status quo inevitably also stands in stark contrast to Cornel West. We need only consider West’s reply to bell hooks’s critical remarks about Black capitalism:

Given present international political reality, in which it is so very difficult to envision credible, non-capitalist alternatives, simply critiquing capitalism will not bring us to a higher ground. The question then becomes how do we promote non-market values such as equality, justice, love, care, and sacrifice in a society, culture, and world in which it is almost impossible to conceive of a non-capitalist alternative?

Here we learn from Elijah Muhammad; we have to acknowledge and support the expansion of the entrepreneurial class. . . . They have to be able to use their profits and constitute their businesses in such a way that they are influenced and moved to communal accountability by non-market values. What do I mean by this? I mean they can still make profits, but they then could channel an appropriate portion of those profits into Black community development. They still have businesses, but investment decisions are more cooperative than hierarchical.⁸⁷

In effect, West provides a definitive apology for the status quo “in which it is almost impossible to conceive of a non-capitalist alternative.” Here, Cornel West’s purported “neo-Gramscian Marxism” amounts to a declaration of the inevitability of capitalism and the defence of a rather familiar brand of economic (petty bourgeois) nationalism. Bowing to Elijah Muhammad, West aligns himself with some of what is most conservative in the Nation of Islam’s program, while conveniently passing over the fierce opposition to racist terror which is the truest source of their political strength. Whatever the pretenses of his social-democratic politics, West is resolutely encamped on the side of a status quo to which gangster rap’s nihilism is a forceful, if inadvertent, reply.

Gangster rap has created a complex lyrical space where all the contradictions of this nihilism can compete. Nihilism can be antisocial, anti-intellectual, and apolitical. We encounter paranoid self-hatred and futile self-destruction, virulent misogyny and the demobilizing chaos of visionless warfare and brutality. However, we also confront the social realities in which the most tenuous modicum of human dignity is possible only through pure negation. And instead of a politics which begs for more police to kick in our doors and murder our children, we can discern the beginnings of a new cultural politics of uncompromising and indefatigable resistance. In short, gangster rap comes far closer than Cornel West’s “socialism” to an appreciation of what Marx understood long ago: the *lumpenproletariat* is as “capable of the most heroic deeds and the most exalted sacrifices, as of the basest banditry and the dirtiest corruption.”⁸⁸ Such heroism is possible because of the nihilism that follows from the lived experience of those who have literally nothing left to lose—not even their own lives. This was the nihilism which erupted in the L.A. uprising of 1992, with the challenge: “Go ahead and kill us, we’re already dead.”

In his time, Richard Wright succeeded in reckoning with nihilism in a manner both urgent and prophetic:

Always our deepest love is toward those children of ours who turn their backs upon our way of life, for our instincts tell us that those brave ones who struggle against death are the ones who bring new life into the world, even though they die to do so . . . (*MBV* 136)

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Wright predicted a precarious “new life,” which loomed as both the promise and the threat inherent in his urgent contemporaneity.⁸⁹ That “new life” was as bitterly contradictory in its inevitability as in the desperation of its realization. For that “new life” is the one that we have inherited, the one that we live, the culture of terror in which every one of us is somehow implicated. For Wright’s contemporaries, the “struggle against death” meant the extinction of a whole way of life. What was prophetic for them resounds for us as the urgency of our own time—the un-random “now” that spells doom for our own way of death, the impulse for destruction which is our only hope of new life.

Notes

1. Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1941), 136. Hereafter cited as *MBV*.

2. Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 289.

3. Here and elsewhere, I follow both Richard Wright and Cornel West in invoking the ambiguous pronoun “we,” quite simply because racist oppression implicates us all. In this sense, I understand the use of “we” to enable engagement.

4. Cornel West, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 34.

5. While I hope to begin to excavate the theme of nihilism in Wright’s work, there is not sufficient space here to develop a more thorough critique of the relationship between this theme and other dimensions of Wright’s work.

6. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1993), 154.

7. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Signet Books, 1953), 94.

8. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 175.

9. Cornel West, “Nihilism in Black America,” in *Race Matters* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 1993), 12. Hereafter cited in the text as *RM*.

10. This hegemonic “common sense” is echoed in Elijah Anderson’s cover article for the *Atlantic Monthly*: “Of all the problems besetting the poor inner-city black community, none is more pressing than that of inter-personal violence and aggression. It wreaks havoc daily with the lives of community residents and increasingly spills over into downtown and residential middle-class areas.” See Elijah Anderson, “The Code of the Streets,” *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1994, 81.

11. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., resonates with West’s lament, but adopts a position much more explicit in defense of his own middle-class values: “First of all, it’s time for the black middle class to stop feeling guilty about its own success while fellow blacks languish in the inner city of despair. . . . Those who succeed are those whose community, whose families, *prepared* them to be successful.” Citing Cornel West (as well as William Julius Wilson), Gates declares: “it’s time to concede that, yes, there *is* a culture of poverty. . . . In general, a household made up of a 16-year-old mother, a 32-year-old grandmother, and a 48-year-old

great-grandmother is not a site for hope and optimism. It's also true that not everyone in any society wants to work, that not all people are equally motivated." See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Two Nations . . . Both Black," in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 252–53.

The conservatism of this argument is as preposterous as it is revealing in its recapitulation of the hegemonic "common sense" which informs many of the articles of faith of racism in the United States, including the misogynist caricature of poverty as a household run by women. What is perhaps most tragic here is the jaundiced vision which fails to see the *extraordinary* hopefulness of any household in the United States that could be found to sustain four generations under one roof, especially among people who are compelled by poverty to struggle daily to acquire their most basic necessities.

12. Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," in *New Masses*, 5 October 1937, 25.

13. Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Foreword to *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1940), xxvii. Hereafter cited as *NS*.

14. Paul Gilroy has argued persuasively against simplistic connotations of Wright's own complex and contradictory standpoint with the masculine violence and misogyny in his fiction. See Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 146–86.

15. Toni Morrison is interviewed by Paul Gilroy in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1993), 178.

16. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 163.

17. This understanding is inspired by Dipesh Chakrabarty's suggestive discussion of temporality and, specifically, of "contemporaneity." See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Marx After Marxism: History, Subalternity, and Difference," *MEANING* 52 (1993): 421–34.

18. Wright memorably exposes the complicity of science with racism in *American Hunger*, where he describes his experience working in a medical research institute. See Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 46–59. The same story is excerpted as "The Man Who Went to Chicago," in *Eight Men* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1987). Paul Gilroy's discussion of this short story is noteworthy. See Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 181–82.

19. Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), 377.

20. Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," in *Eight Men*, 32–33, 67–68. Hereafter cited as *EM*.

21. Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1957), 102.

22. Houston Baker, "Scene . . . Not Heard," in *Reading Rodney King*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams, 45–48. Indeed, I would venture to suggest that, in the aftermath of the Los Angeles uprising of 1992, there has been a distinct decrease in the radical political content of new hip hop releases in general. I am inclined to believe that this reflects executive prerogatives within the music industry.

23. Angela Davis, *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (New York: Signet, 1992), 327. She refers to "Nappy Happy: A Conversation with Ice Cube and Angela Y. Davis," in *Transition* 58 (1992): 174–92.

24. Robert Christgau and Greg Tate, "Chuck D: All Over the Map," in the *Village Voice*, 22 October 1991, 14–15, 18.

25. This is the principal weakness in Tricia Rose's account. See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), especially 21–34.

26. Wright, *Native Son*, xxxiv.
27. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 4.
28. *Ibid.*, 20.
29. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
30. Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady, eds., *Nation Conscious Rap* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 227, xxvii.
31. Bytches With Problems, "Cotex," on *The Bytches* (No Face Records, 1991).
32. David Samuels, "The Rap on Rap: The 'Black Music' That Isn't Either," *New Republic*, 11 November 1991, 25.
33. bell hooks raises poignant questions about the prevalence of this "commodification of Blackness" in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, Mass.: South End, 1990) as well as in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, Mass.: South End, 1992).
34. Sherry B. Ortner, "Resistance and Class Reproduction among Middle-Class Youth," presented on 22 November 1991, at the Ninetieth Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago.
35. Jon Michael Spencer has commented upon the frequent conflation of rap and rape in the mass media. See Jon Michael Spencer, ed., "The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap," special issue of *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 5 (1991): 1-2.
36. Rose, *Black Noise*, 151, 172.
37. Rose, "Black Texts/Black Contexts," *Black Popular Culture* 8 (1992): 226.
38. Brian Cross, *It's Not about a Salary . . . Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1993), 63.
39. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 191.
40. Compton's Most Wanted, "Intro," on *Straight Checkin' 'Em* (Orpheus Records, 1991).
41. Ice Cube, "AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted," on *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted* (Priority Records, 1990).
42. Cross, *It's Not About a Salary*, 56.
43. Wright, *Native Son*, xxiii.
44. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen and Co., 1979), 92-94.
45. Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 1988), 187.
46. Cornel West, *Keeping Faith*, 282.
47. *Ibid.*, 283.
48. Wright, *White Man*, 89.
49. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 407-8, 415, 417-18, 420-21.
50. Geto Boys, "Mind's Playin' Tricks on Me," *Straight from the Hood* (Priority Records, 1991).
51. John M. Hagedorn, *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime, and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City* (Chicago: Lake View, 1988), opening vignette.

52. Sanyika Shakur, *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1993), 60, 102, 103.
53. Luis Rodriguez, *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* (Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone, 1993), 9.
54. Quoted in *USA Today*, 1 May 1992; cf. Rodriguez, *Always Running*, 247.
55. Shakur, *Monster*, 272.
56. Ice Cube, "True to the Game," on *Death Certificate* (Priority Records, 1991).
57. H. Rap Brown, Introduction, *Die Nigger Die!* (New York: Dial, 1969). In his autobiographical account of gang-banging with the Crips, Sanyika Shakur echoes Brown: "Little did I know that I had been resisting all my life. By not being a good black American I was resisting. But my resistance was retarded because it had no political objective" (Shakur, *Monster*, 330).
58. Niggers With Attitude, "Niggaz4Life," on *Niggaz4Life* (Priority Records, 1991).
59. Reginald Dennis, "Rhyme Pays," *The Source* 20 (May 1991): 52.
60. Geto Boys, "City Under Siege," on *The Geto Boys* (Def American Records, 1989).
61. Havelock Nelson and Michael A. Gonzales, *Bring the Noise: A Guide to Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture* (New York: Crown Publishing, 1991), 80.
62. See James Bernard, "Partyman," *The Source* 21 (June 1991): 38, 49.
63. NWA, "Fuck tha Police," on *Straight Outta Compton* (Priority Records, 1988). Because of this controversial rap, the FBI sent the rappers an intimidation letter. This is arguably the only historical example of FBI intervention of this kind. When NWA tried to perform the song in Detroit, a plain-clothes detective began shooting; despite the rap's antiauthoritarian *braggadocio*, however, they were forced off the stage. See Dave Marsh and Phyllis Pollack, "Wanted for Attitude," *Village Voice*, 10 October 1989, 33–37; and Rose, *Black Noise*, 128–29.
64. BWP, "Wanted," on *The Bytches* (No Face Records, 1991).
65. Wright, *Native Son*, xxiv.
66. Shakur, *Monster*, vii.
67. Ice-T, "Colors," *Colors: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (Warner Brothers Records, 1988).
68. Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 311.
69. Shakur, *Monster*, 214.
70. "Stagolee" is the more common name; other variations include "Stacker Lee," "Stakolee," "Staggerlee," etc.
71. Julius Lester, *Black Folktales* (New York: Grove, 1969), ix.
72. Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1968), 4. "Malik" is the Muslim name adopted by Malcolm X after his pilgrimage to Mecca.
73. Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 141.
74. George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 21, 51.
75. Sam Greenlee, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969).
76. See Steven Hagar, *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti* (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), 31.

77. See Hagar, *Hip Hop*, 46–47, 6–11, 33.
78. Angela Davis has made a similar observation: “The only existing mass Black organization that can claim the so-called authority of having been there during the formative period of contemporary Black nationalism . . . is the Nation of Islam.” See Davis, “Black Nationalism: The Sixties and the Nineties,” *Black Popular Culture* 8 (1992): 323.
79. *The Final Call*, 2 December 1991, 38.
80. *Ibid.*, 38.
81. *The Final Call*, 21 December 1991, 28.
82. “Ice Cube: Building a Nation,” interview by James Bernard in *The Source* 27 (December 1991): 34.
83. Ice Cube, *Death Certificate* (Priority Records, 1991).
84. Shakur, *Monster*, 227.
85. Quoted in *ibid.*, 215.
86. Jackson, *Soledad*, 173.
87. bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston, Mass.: South End, 1991), 101.
88. Karl Marx, *Class Struggles in France, 1948–50* (New York: International Publishers, 1964[1850], 50.
89. Here again, my usage of “contemporaneity” is inspired by the discussion of temporality in Chakrabarty, “Marx after Marxism.”