BRECHTIAN HIP-HOP
Didactics and Self-Production in Post-Gangsta Political Mixtapes

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Focusing on the shortcomings of existing aesthetic approaches to rap music, this article seeks to understand current developments within political rap through a heuristic and fundamentally nonappropriative application of the aesthetic theories of Brecht. Highlighting the latter's emphasis on self-production and didactics, the article discusses the intersection of the two in the recent mixtapes by militant rap duo dead prez. Given the often unrecognized importance of mixtapes within rap, as well as their capacity to escape the constraint of the music industry, the "organic intellectuals" of rap would benefit from an increased emphasis on self-production. Finally, the author brings dead prez's didactics into dialogue with both early political rap and later gangsta rap to see that dead prez is indeed "somewhere in between NWA and P.E. [Public Enemy], and that this represents a positive historical development for rap and a fusion of the ghettocentric and the Afrocentric elements of broader Black culture.

Keywords: *hip-hop; rap music; aesthetics; mixtapes*

In an article on the groundbreaking militant rap group Public Enemy, Michael Eric Dyson (1996) attributes to the group a "postmodern aesthetic and radical politics" (p. 166). Consciously or not, Dyson's binary is revealing, both for its assertion of the former—that the rap of Public Enemy is somehow postmodern—and by its dichotomous relation to the latter, which suggests that radical politics are necessarily *external to* aesthetic notions of the postmodern. This reference highlights a potential discomfort both *within* the

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notion of a postmodern aesthetics and its applicability to actually existing artistic forms, and a potentially more important discomfort *between* such a notion and the didactic aims of some artistic production. Dyson indicates the direction of our escape from such a quandary in his invocation of another term to describe the group, that of the "avant-garde" (p. 165), which he likely means in its popular sense but whose technical aesthetic connotation has something of an uneasy relationship with the postmodern.

One philosopher who attempts to navigate this uncomfortable space in the context of a discussion of rap is the self-styled philosopher of rap and pragmatist aesthetician, Richard Shusterman (2000). In an attempt to claim hip-hop culture and the subset of rap music for his aesthetic approach, however, Shusterman overlooks some more obvious and useful aesthetic reference points for the genre. As will be seen, many of the characteristics that Shusterman addresses as evidence of postmodernism in hip-hop are visible in an earlier avant-garde, to which the latter term can be more unambiguously applied in its full technical sense: the modernist avant-garde of interwar Europe. As will be seen, many elements of the aesthetic milieu of that period, and specifically those defended by playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht, are evident to some degree in hip-hop music and culture. During the course of this discussion, we will trace the misleading strands of Shusterman's approach, diagnose the probable causes of the latter's difficulties and the dangers it represents to hip-hop, and lay the ground for a fundamentally nonappropriative analysis of hip-hop. The second part of this article will address concretely the confluence of some elements of Brecht's thought in both the mixtape phenomenon and the didacticism of some post-gangsta political hip-hop.

POSTMODERN OR MODERNIST AVANT-GARDE?

At the outset of his chapter on the subject, Shusterman (2000) argues that "rap . . . is a postmodern popular art which challenges some of our most deeply entrenched aesthetic conventions, con-

ventions which are common not only to modernism as an artistic style and ideology but to the philosophical doctrine of modernity" (p. 201). This passage both delineates his central aim and indicates what will be a source of considerable difficulty and confusion for his argument: Shusterman's periodization overlooks significant differences *within* those periods. His desire to squeeze hip-hop into his aesthetic framework is seemingly facilitated, but ultimately frustrated, by the conflation of style with period, modernism with modernity. Shusterman summarizes those aesthetic elements which he perceives to be "widely recognized as characteristically postmodern:"

1. "recycling appropriation rather than unique originative creation";
2. "the eclectic mixing of styles";
3. "the enthusiastic embracing of the new technology and mass culture";
4. "an emphasis on the localized and temporal";
5. "the challenging of modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy" (p. 202).

The degree to which the author hedges his bets is revealing: arguing that it "is not to say that they [these characteristics] cannot also be found in varying degrees in some modernist art" and, somewhat shockingly, that "even if we reject the whole category of postmodernism, these features are essential for understanding rap" (p. 202). We will see that these "varying degrees," in fact, converge quite consistently in much avant-garde modernism such that the philosophical sleight-of-hand of this second passage (in which he *seems* to protect himself from the negation of the postmodern category) dissipates, rendering his analysis redundant. I will suggest throughout that Shusterman's central problem is a top-down approach—in which he wrongly allows genus to define species—and is thereby both demonstrably wrong (when we start from the ground level of hip-hop) and, moreover, aesthetically inconsistent.

In the interest of brevity, I will set off each of Shusterman's five categories in a point-counterpoint fashion, with the counterpoints supplied mostly from Eugene Lunn's (1982) analysis of the avant-

garde modernism defended by the likes of Brecht, which I will supplement with observations about hip-hop. First, Shusterman (2000) approaches the notion of recycling through the hip-hop practice of sampling, in which "music is composed by selecting and combining parts of prerecorded songs" (p. 202) and that he sees as undercutting the artistic ideal of originality. Here, his ahistorical view of rap leads him to neglect the role that sampling often plays in "fill[ing] a transitional void of cross-generational cultural transmission" (Henderson, 1996, p. 311). Aesthetically, Shusterman pins the importance of uniqueness, quite rightly, onto "Romanticism and its cult of genius" (p. 205) but is on considerably shakier ground when he attempts to broaden the claim to include all of modernism, which he accuses of a sort of cult of "radical novelty." In doing so, he overlooks the similarity of these characteristics of hip-hop to the notion of modernist collage, specifically as pioneered by cubists, an error most strikingly evident in Shusterman's assertion that a "collage effect" is fundamental to postmodernism itself (p. 206). Lunn (1982) counters that the general approach of cubists such as Braque and Picasso was "not merely a case of aesthetic self-consciousness" and that they actively attacked "the artist as an isolated genius, a hero figure" (pp. 48-51). In a step toward Brecht—whose flattened class roles in the *Lehrstücke* (didactic plays) could be seen as the height of this trend—avant-garde constructivism represented a further subsumption of the individual artist, epitomized in the "open-ended creation of actors and audience alike" that was Meyerhold's theater (pp. 53-54).

Shusterman's (2000) attribution to hip-hop of a stylistic melange is intimately linked to the notion of appropriation, and it is through sampling and mixing that styles are blended: Hip-hop "feeds eclectically" on "a wide range of popular songs . . . classical music, TV theme songs, advertising jingles, and the electronic music of arcade games . . . [as well as] media news reports and fragments of speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King" (p. 205). Nothing in this passage is untrue *per se*, but by beginning from the category of the postmodern and then retroactively fishing for elements of hip-hop to justify this categorization, Shusterman overlooks the context of such appropriation. Much of the above is

better characterized in other ways, and indeed the inclusion of the nonmusical content he highlights is often (but not always) political. Theme songs and advertising jingles can also have a political effect, with or without the intention of the artist, as they are often counterposed to descriptions of ghetto life and echo Brecht's goal of revealing "a knowable, but . . . contradictory outer reality" that estranges and activates the audience (Lunn, 1982, p. 122).[1] These (significant) difficulties aside, hip-hop *does indeed* self-consciously combine styles, but does this warrant Shusterman's postmodern distinction? Again, no, as Brecht's avant-garde theories demonstrated "a flexible position which allowed the reworking of many different aesthetic forms . . . and influences which he made his own" (Lunn, 1982, pp. 120-121).

Despite the popularity of Walter Benjamin in the academy, Shusterman (2000) somehow feels comfortable, buttressed by Jameson's notion of the "postmodern or technological sublime" in making the audacious link between the embracing of technology in aesthetic production and postmodernism (p. 208). Here, he again fails to come to terms with hip-hop reality, as the decision of graffiti artists and musicians to turn to technology was not made in a philosophical vacuum but rather in a highly structured reality: "At a time when budget cuts in school music programs drastically reduced access to traditional forms of instrumentation and composition, inner-city youths increasingly relied on recorded sound" (Rose, 1994, pp. 34-35). Moreover, as Lunn (1982) observes, "the cubists show a more hopeful, or at least open attitude toward the *social* meaning of industrial society . . . [and] This is more explicit in variants or successors cubist impulse after 1917," and such successors would include the constructivists and Brecht himself (p. 49). His epic theater, in which "humans and social relations were shown to be constructions capable of being 'reassembled,'" sought, above all, to use technology to attack the "cyclical myth or the eternalizing of the present immediate" (pp. 103, 122). With regard to localization and temporality, Shusterman (2000) sees hip-hop as suggestive of "the Deweyan message that art is more essentially process than finished product" by "explicitly thematizing its own temporality in its lyrics" (pp. 206-207). However, the nominally

Dadaist dramatist Erwin Piscator, whose impact on Brecht could hardly be overstated, as the two worked together in Berlin during the 1920s, "used modern technical media such as multiple and simultaneous film projections, newspaper headlines, and moving platforms . . . to define the historical era of that struggle" (Lunn, 1982, p. 55).

It is within his discussion of Shusterman's (2000) most important characteristic of postmodern aesthetics—the undermining of aesthetic autonomy—that he subsumes nearly all discussion of politics, and the way in which he does so is suggestive. Rap, it seems, undermines the autonomy of art through "its belligerent insistence on the deeply political dimension of culture" (p. 211).[2] Shusterman—via this abstract and ahistorical notion of "culture"—is therefore unable either to admit a nonsubsumptive relationship between art and politics (i.e., that the two exist independently) or to recognize an *instrumental* situation (i.e., in which art is a means to political ends). This puts him in an awkward position, as the presence of both apolitical and explicitly political rap prove the unwieldiness of his framework. Even if we accept this roundabout attack on aesthetic autonomy, however, we are still in difficult territory with relation to the postmodern, as the cubists and constructivists laid the ground for the subversion of aesthetic autonomy, and Brecht would make this central by seeking "to demystify the notion of art as an autonomous and privileged 'illusion' of life's integration" (Lunn, 1982, p. 119). His alternative, innovative for both aesthetic and Marxist theory, was the subsumption of aesthetics under production, as the value of art "derived . . . not from any allegedly privileged position 'above' the tumult of the everyday world, but from the opposite: art's position as part of the productive forces of society" (Lunn, 1982, p. 120).

If the individual characteristics of the postmodern were scattered widely among drastically different 20th-century art forms as Shusterman suggests, or indeed even characteristics of different strains of the modernist avant-garde, we might be sympathetic to his claims for the novelty of aesthetic postmodernism. But given that these characteristics can be seen not only in closely related and allied wings of the avant-garde, but for the most part even as *con-*

verging in and around the work of an individual, we cannot be so generous as to overlook it. Rather, a distinction between artistic mainstream and avant-garde may indeed serve us better, and this is precisely what is offered in Peter Bürger's (1984) seminal text *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.[3] Despite citing the work twice, Shusterman (2000) fails to realize that the book is directed in large part against the very sort of conflation of which he himself is guilty (pp. 311, 6f., 7f.). Bürger (1984) defines the avant-garde as consisting of a sustained attack on the institution of art combined with an undermining of the organic totality of the individual work of art (pp. 83-84), and we have seen both of these elements play implicit and explicit roles in Shusterman's argument against an oversimplified, straw-man "modernism." Bürger's (1984) analysis, moreover, leads us out of Shusterman's quandary by emphasizing the importance of *political engagement* to "the avant-gardiste protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveal[ing] the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences" (p. 22). Hence, an avant-garde work of art is that in which "engagement itself is the unifying principle that articulates itself throughout the work," and this is only achieved via its nonorganic character:

> Where the work is no longer conceived as organic totality, the individual political motif also is no longer subordinate to the work as a whole but can be effective in isolation. On the basis of the avant-gardiste type of work, a new type of engaged art becomes possible. One may even go a step further and say that the avant-gardiste work does away with the old dichotomy between "pure" and "political" art. (pp. 90-91)

It is perhaps of little surprise, given our discussion thus far, that Bürger emphasizes the importance of Brecht, "the most important materialist writer of our time," for comprehending the importance of the avant-garde (pp. 88-90). But before embarking on a Brechtian analysis of post-gangsta hip-hop, I must first disentangle some misunderstandings regarding the political engagement of hip-hop that Shusterman and others leave largely unresolved.

A multitude of authors go to great lengths to deny the political content of hip-hop, and it is no coincidence that these are often the same authors who wish to divorce the genre most radically from its socioeconomic and historical roots. Although we have seen a tacit dismissal of politics in Shusterman's framework, perhaps a more important reference point is the analysis that Tim Brennan (1994) lays out partially as a response to the former. In a drawn-out discussion that is most striking for its open contradiction, Brennan seeks to emphasize the "feel" of rap, and in doing so takes aim at a variety of targets—the most important of which, as suggested in his offensive title, is the assertion by some critics that rap *just is* political. Although admitting that much rap "offers a rich exposure of a domestic imperialism" and that rappers such as "Paris, Tupac, and The Coup (all Oakland based) often voice an implicit left agenda that sounds very much like the Panthers," his approach is one of reverse reductionism (suggesting that a proper appreciation revolves around a pop culture analysis of "feel") that leads him to fall into the self-help trap, concluding that rap is all about business (p. 688).[4] If an "appreciation" of rap implies devaluing those who would use it progressively, and moreover those who took to the streets of LA (Los Angeles) in desperation, then one might be inclined to sacrifice true appreciation for a more internal and intimate cooperative relationship.

If Brennan's reaction to Shusterman fails to resolve the question of political rap as posed above, where does this leave us? One crucial point to recognize is that despite his express desire to avoid Shusterman's "aestheticization," Brennan (1994) admittedly remains within the realm of a formalistic approach, merely attempting to develop "a different theoretical apparatus than the familiar one of postmodernism" (p. 676). He even toys with the idea that "salvaging the aesthetic [may] merely petrify rap," but despite citing Amiri Baraka, who might reject the latter in favor of a sort of Black anti-aesthetic under the guise of "poems that kill" (Baraka, 1973, p. 213), Brennan (1994) admits failure and attempts to recreate an alternative (but no less appropriative) aesthetic framework (p. 676). Following Baraka, however, is the crucial step that he was unwilling to take, especially given the clear lineage

between the Black arts movement and the development of hip-hop culture. Indeed, as Gladney (1995) observes, "Black art has always been rooted in the anger felt by Afrikan-Americans" and that it "cannot be divorced from this reality" (pp. 291-292). We are immediately reminded of the central assertion of the avant-garde: namely, that art must not be separated from the praxis of life.[5]

Aside from questioning the weighty postmodernist claims of Shusterman, I hope to have established the relevance of Brecht and his cultural milieu to the question of political hip-hop, if only indirectly. The remainder of the discussion will be devoted to an analysis of some elements of hip-hop that raise the specter of Brecht in a more salient way, and I will use Brechtian aesthetics tactically in the interest of advancing the effectiveness of post-gangsta political hip-hop.

SELF-PRODUCTION AND DIDACTICS

Perhaps the most useful element of Brecht's theories for an interpretation of hip-hop is his notion of aesthetic democracy, which developed most clearly in debate with Lukács:

> Brecht's view of the emancipatory potentials of a redirected modern technology was related to his critique of art as the "closed" creation of an omniscient author "distributing" his/her finished cultural products to an audience. . . . Culture was not seen by Lukács as qualitatively redefined by self-determining, collectivist production, but as the passive quantitative *distribution* of the given traditional literary forms. . . . Brecht envisioned modern media, if functionally reutilized, working against traditional elitist practices. (Lunn, 1982, p. 126)

Specifically, Brecht discussed the potential for a universal two-way radio that may at present remind us of something like the Internet, but if we step back to the late 1970s, such an idea evokes something akin to a self-produced and interactive musical phenomenon originating in the South Bronx.[6]

The development of hip-hop revolves around a singularly crucial but often overlooked medium: mixtapes. These represent "the other music industry, the one where labels don't exist, . . . where the CDs are sold by vendors hawking them off dirty blankets on city streets, and bootlegging is encouraged" (Reid, 2003). Although the origins of the mixtape were not particularly democratic—fairly expensive recordings of hip-hop concerts and personalized song mixes made by DJs for individuals—technological developments have facilitated their production and broadened their availability. Today, a mixtape has come to mean a combination of "unreleased 'exclusive' tracks . . . Freestyles . . . DJs' special mixes of songs or the blending of two different tracks . . . [and] Turntablists and artists speaking out on current topics," among other things (Reid, 2003). Brecht emphasizes how "a democratically controlled technology could dissolve the previously closed processes of social and cultural transmission" through, in his own words, "turning the audience not only into pupils but into teachers" (Lunn, 1982, p. 127), and in a technical sense, mixtapes do indeed fulfill such a role. Anyone with an access to turntables and a CD burner can begin to produce their own raps or establish their mixing talents as a DJ, and for an extraordinarily low cost these tapes can reach local distribution points. As Samir Meghelli (personal communication, December 2, 2003), a member of Philadelphia-based hip-hop collective Midnite Children, has observed, "self-production is crucial to the hip hop cultural movement," and its origins are also "organic and indigenous to the community" in which such culture found its subsistence, as the idea of "self-sufficiency and self-production, carried over . . . [in] Black Arts Movement folks, like Amiri Baraka . . . who stressed the importance of establishing outlets for the production and distribution of Black Art" (see also Gladney, 1995).[7]

Noted hip-hop commentator Nelson George (1998) once observed that the broad trend toward the commercialization of rap "has made rap more democratic—but is democracy good for art? Hiphop was, at one point, a true meritocracy" (p. 113). But given the sustained importance of mixtapes in lessening the financial risk of record labels seeking new talent—one mixtape hawker observes, "Look, there wouldn't be a rap industry if it weren't for mix-

tapes" (quoted in Boucher, 2003)—George's facile equation of commercialization and democracy does not hold water. Rather, although concerns about commercialization are certainly valid (and indeed prerequisite for an understanding of hip-hop), George remains blinkered by a sort of Lukácsean notion of democratization as distribution and fails to recognize that mixtapes represent another *type* of democratization. They serve as a crucial medium through which the rap underground, acting as a sort of gadfly, bestows legitimacy on the mainstream. More crucially, self-production is considered by many directly to counteract commercialization, as the latter can be defined as a forcible separation of rap music from the broader cultural context of hip-hop (Shomari, 1995, pp. 30-31).

As suggested before, the mixtape has always played a crucial role in the development of hip-hop, but there is reason to believe that its once-declining influence is in resurgence. Evidence for this lies both in the fact that last year's most commercially sucessful rapper—50 Cent—emerged from years of mixtape dissemination and that established artists such as P. Diddy are using them as testing grounds to "break" new talent. In fact, "in the battle of legitimate albums versus mixtapes, mixtapes are increasingly the winners. . . . At a time when the 'real' music business is crumbling . . . the mixtape industry is thriving" (Reid, 2003). By dint of its self-produced character, accessibility, and facility of distribution, the hip-hop mixtape is a profoundly Brechtian medium. As such, mixtapes represent an often overlooked source of hope for escape from what has been characterized as a zero-sum dilemma of dissemination: "In Hegelian fashion, rappers' efforts to stay true to the music's core are undermined as they try to expand its reaches—an irresolvable conundrum that exists when popular culture clashes with mass culture" (Lusane, 1993, p. 49).

But merely to say that the mixtape *qua* medium is Brechtian in a technical sense is only half of the story, as the real usefulness of Brecht is his emphasis on didactics.[8] The importance of didactics is most marked in Brecht's "teaching" plays, or *Lehrstücke*—roughly, those written between 1928 and 1934—that demonstrate "his intention to convey in dramatic form the lessons of Communist

doctrine" (Gray, 1976, p. 43). But the overt didacticism of the *Lehrstücke* and his later wielding of the *V-effekt* against Aristotelian catharsis are best interpreted as distinct and historically conditioned means toward a consistent end: the creation of "an activist and collectivist value structure [that] would help emancipate the lower classes" (Lunn, 1982, pp. 116-117). It is around the centrality of this didactic element that we will now consider hip-hop mixtapes, the resurgence of which has coincided with another important rise that bears this second characteristic of Brecht: that of post-gangsta political hip-hop.

Dyson (1996) has observed that "by 1991 the rules and rulers of hip-hop were changing, with biting black nationalist commentary and an Afrocentric worldview giving way to sexual hedonism and the glamorization of violence. Public Enemy failed to react" (p. 167). Although such a statement overlooks the *descriptive* importance of much so-called gangsta rap, it is an accurate representation of the initial decline of the politically *prescriptive* rap that had been dominant in the late 1980s. Perhaps the first political rap song, if one excludes the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, is "The Message," released in 1982 by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (see, e.g., Jones, 1994, pp. 36, 55; Stephens, 1991, p. 56), and although many counterpose its austerity to the later "hedonism" of gangsta rap (Dyson, 1996, p. 166), the truth is that the two share a descriptive quality. The fact that the song opens with the mundane observation that there is "broken glass everywhere, people pissin' on the stairs you know they just don't care" is no coincidence, and the ultimate development is toward a narrator that is rendered unstable by conditions, warning, "don't push me, cause I'm close to the edge." This descriptive quality is shared by two icons who would, despite the posthumous ascription of the label, come to signify gangsta for much of the mainstream: Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G.: "Ultimately, Tupac and Biggie, like most of the controversial and best rappers who came after Public Enemy's political spiels, were both poets of negation . . . [who] made harsh, contemplative, graphic, deliberately violent American pulp art" (George, 1998, p. 48). Whether it be Tupac's description of "thug life," Biggie's description of the crack-selling imperative in Brook-

lyn, or even the early antipolice rhetoric of Compton's N.W.A., whose members would go on to spearhead some of the most flagrantly violent rap of the period, so-called gangsta rap rarely transcended description. But therein lies its importance:

> Rather than attempt to explain in global terms the relationship between joblessness, racism, and the rise of crime in the inner-city communities, gangsta rappers construct a variety of first-person narratives to illustrate how social and economic realities in late-capitalist L.A. affect young black men . . . the use of "I" to signify both personal and collective experiences also enables gangsta rappers to navigate a complicated course between what social scientists call "structure" and "agency." In gangsta rap there is almost always a relationship between the conditions in which characters live and the decisions they make. (Kelley, 1996, p. 124)

Aesthetically, we are in this passage reminded clearly of both a cubist perspectivalism, in which a total view can only be achieved through rotating the object of inquiry, and also of Bürger's (1994) observation of the avant-garde that "the individual political motif . . . is no longer subordinate to the work as a whole but can be effective in isolation" (p. 90). Although it is self-evident that such rap remains didactically incomplete (though I hesitate to use this term, as such rap makes no grand didactic claims), it removes a fundamental obstacle for our understanding: It reveals the ridiculousness of the culture-of-poverty argument, described as a trap by some (Rose, 1994, p. 144; see also Grosfoguel, 1999; Kelley, 1997; Reed, 1991), thereby revealing that, to "paraphrase Marx, young urban black men make their own history, but not under the circumstances of their own choosing" (Kelley, 1996, p. 124). The full importance of such a step will become evident in the course of the analysis, as we will see that such descriptive revelations highlight a significant drawback of Public Enemy's "political spiels," preventing the latter (and indeed most early political rap) from providing a substantively didactical perspective.[9] It would take the historical playing out of the heightened descriptiveness of the gangsta era, its undermining of the culture-of-poverty argument, and subjective

identification with its realism to allow for the full integration of both faces of didacticism.

Indeed, the immediate gangsta-era decline of politically prescriptive rap would not last long, as within a few short years a number of less well-known artists—including Paris, Nas, The Roots, Common, Mos Def and Talib Kweli, The Coup, and dead prez—would make their appearance in the underground as "organic intellectual voices . . . hip-hop Gramscians" influencing the mainstream (Dyson, 2003, p. *xiv*). The last of these, and the most recent to appear—dead prez—represents one of the most unflinchingly didactical acts ever to gain a widespread audience, and their recent move into the mixtape arena can be understood as a unification of two central elements of Brecht's theory (and indeed elements indigenous to hip-hop itself): production and politics.[10]

Nelson George (1998) is certainly onto something when he observes that "hip hop is not a political movement in the usual sense . . . [having] had surprisingly little concrete long-term impact on African American politics" (p. 154).[11] But he continues by noting that "Hip hop's major problem as a political movement is that MCs [emcees] are not social activists by training or inclination" (pp. 154-155), and although such a statement would be accurate with regard to the majority of rappers, it is actively undermined by the efforts of dead prez. Activists first and rappers second[12]—and as such embodying Bürger's (1984, pp. 89-90) emphasis on engagement as a unifying principle—the duo composed of M-1 and Stic came to be active in the Uhuru Movement, a secular contender for post-Panther Black nationalism. Their 1999 debut album, *Let's Get Free* (selling 300,000 copies), featured a censored cover of gun-toting Soweto insurgents, and the video for their hit single "Hip-Hop," whose explicitly instrumental view of the medium is best summed up in the repeated chorus "It's bigger than hip-hop" (dead prez, 1999a), was visibly Maoist inspired and ended up tacitly banned from MTV.

Dead prez was originally signed to Steve Rifkind's semiminor label Loud Records, and after the label folded, their contract was sold off to Columbia Records in 2001. Despite attempts to avoid their fate—M-1 recounts that "We tried to run from the plantation"

(quoted in Fayemi, 2003)—dead prez ended up on a major corporate label that was none too interested in releasing inflammatory material. When it came time to release their second studio album, *RBG: Revolutionary But Gangsta*, Columbia held back and, in an attempt to get their voices out while skirting contract restrictions, dead prez adopted the moniker "dpz" and began to release independent-label mixtapes: *Turn Off the Radio: The Mixtape Volume 1* in 2002 and *Get Free or Die Tryin': The Mixtape Volume 2* shortly after their official dropping from Columbia in June 2003.

Of the first mixtape, M-1 notes

> In a good way that experience of being bought and sold and feeling like a slave led us to think of ways to do-for-self on our own. That's when we produced the mixtape, *Turn off the Radio: Volume 1*. . . . that album helped us to make statements about Iraq and other issues, when there really were no avenues on the radio or anywhere else to do it. (Fayemi, 2003)

What is particularly interesting about this passage is that the hostile atmosphere of commercial hip-hop is such that self-production becomes almost a necessary precondition of political hip-hop. In what follows, I will discuss the dpz mixtapes and their Brechtian qualities, with an eye toward the formulation of a theory of didactic hip-hop. Methodologically, I will focus on a central theme within the mixtapes and see how the provision of divergent perspectives on that theme facilitates comprehension of and response to it. Such an approach makes aesthetic sense given the avant-garde emphasis on undermining the sanctity of the individual work of art in favor of individual political themes, but moreover, it hopes to avoid the incoherence and contradiction embodied explicitly in Brennan's (1994) individuation of rap songs but practiced tacitly by most critics.[13]

The didactic intent of the two dpz mixtapes is clearest in guest MC Askari X's statement that "I put the message in the music to wake you up out your sleep" (dead prez, 2003b). However, Brechtian didactics is more than the mere placement of a message, and the lifelong struggle of the playwright against what he perceived as the catharsis of traditional aesthetics is a testament to the

difficulty of the task.[14] In his 1930 play *The Measures Taken*, Brecht closes with the assertion that "only when instructed by reality can we change reality" (as cited in Gray, 1976, p. 44), and it is this fundamental observation that serves as our starting point. A better quotation from which to begin with the mixtapes might then be the following: "My life ain't worth a damn unless I'm dealing with reality . . . and I would rather deal with the truth and falsehood than being fake with my people and claiming 'it's all good'" (dead prez, 2002c). As will be seen, the dpz mixtapes weave reality and propaganda—descriptive and prescriptive—with a skill that is no doubt rooted in their anti-imperialist activist education and which, in many ways, represents a characteristic Brechtianism as well as arguably a dialectical advance over even the most overtly political elements of earlier hip-hop.

There are several central didactic axes that extend throughout the work of dead prez and the two mixtapes, and for our purposes we will trace the progress of the most central, from which many others emanate: the "war on drugs" and the criminalization of Black urban youth. With the Black prison population recently surpassing 1 million, it is perhaps a surprise and more likely a shock that mainstream hip-hop is not more preoccupied with the drug war and its impact. Rap responses to the subject vary, as of his own crack dealing Biggie contends that "I was just tryin' to make some money to feed my daughter" (Notorious B.I.G., 1994), and even after Tupac criticizes as "sleazy" the selling of crack to children, he concludes his verse with the fatalism of "that's the way it is" (2Pac, 1998). The most sophisticated analyses of the issue, not surprisingly, emerged from militarized LA, but Ice Cube's "A Bird in the Hand" and "The Product," Ice-T's "New Jack Hustler," and NWA's "Dope Man" remain almost entirely within the realm of the first-person narrative and are in many ways undermined by the profound inconsistency of the rappers who created them (Henderson, 1996, p. 330). Moreover, Public Enemy frontman Chuck D's collaboration with Partnership for a Drug-Free America is suggestive of prescription without context (and as such, the inversion of gangsta shortcomings), as is his statement in an interview about the death of Tupac that "Niggas never win in the drug game. Even when we kill

ourselves over that, it's just the bottom of the barrel type of *stupidity*" (quoted in Davey D, 1996).[15] The problem with such assertions, as discussed earlier, is that they fall into the individual reductionism of the culture-of-poverty trap, viewing individual consciousness as determinant in the last instance.[16]

As will be seen, like most of the hip-hop community, dead prez revere the late Tupac and Biggie, and their description of the catch-22 of crack dealing is strikingly similar. As the chorus of "Sellin' D.O.P.E." observes, "Sellin' dope, servin' weed, we have to hustle to hustle just to eat," and continues

> ain't no hope in the streets, you broke—you sell dope
> all my young niggas outside hustlin' coke
> you know the drama, if you ain't sellin' crack then its ganja . . .
> I ain't planned to get rich from sellin' that shit—it was survival . . .
> but who am I? Just a young nigga caught in the mix
> and if this weed don't sell, I'm gonna cop me a brick.
> (dead prez, 2002d)

The renunciation of the responsibility of poor, young Blacks is framed in terms on par with the gangsta-era rappers, as seen in Stic's recounting of his youth in Florida:

> the job is a joke—they ain't hiring . . .so what other choice do i have?
> I've got niggas on the Ave pushin' slabs that'll break me off a portion
> so I can stand on my own two . . .
> whether I make a record or serve dope, I refuse to keep bein' broke . . .
> as long as I come up—don't give a fuck about the method.
> (dead prez, 2003d)

Here, we see a clear recognition of the fact that despite Chuck D's strictures about "stupidity," dead prez explicitly reject the argument imposed by mainstream culture that it is irrational for young Blacks to engage in the drug trade—and that to do so is precisely

what is rational within that context.[17] The sophistication of dead prez's analysis lies in the fact that they do not stop there, and recognition of this rationality does not undermine an equally fundamental recognition of the overall effect of the drug trade on the Black population: "The one thing bigger than dope games is prison: one million niggas inside" (dead prez, 2002d). But the effect of the presentation transcends a merely cathartic despair, as this seemingly impossible situation is first confronted by something akin to the moral outrage of comparison that Brecht saw as "conducive to critical thought" (Lunn, 1982, p. 116): "When I look at all the niggas they hit with mad time, in proportion to the big kingpins, it don't fit, you can get caught with barely a half-a-slab, and the judge sentence you like you ran the Ave" (dead prez, 2002d). The division of labor that makes up the drug trade is put into perspective with the elementary observation, in a conversation by Stic about his brother's bout with crack addiction and prison, that "We don't own no boats, we don't own no planes, we don't make no cellophane bags to bag it up, *we just caught up in the game*" (dead prez, 2003f, italics added).

Although gangsta rappers sought to negate the blame on young Blacks without effectively shifting it, and whereas more "preachy" elements place the majority of the responsibility on individuals, the political training of dead prez has allowed for a sharper critique and the identification of an enemy by, as emphasized by Brecht, "reveal[ing] the contemporary dynamics of collective social structures" (Lunn, 1982, p. 116). They allege that the U.S. government (via the CIA) has been central to the importation of crack cocaine and that the structure of laws and the economy provide a legal and financial incentive for the continued criminalization of Blacks via the war on drugs. The former charge has been forgotten or ignored by most Whites but remains in the foreground for many Black Americans for obvious reasons, with a recent study showing that 59% of Blacks surveyed believe it to be at least a possibility and one quarter believe it to be the truth (Waters, 1997, p. 117). This allegation is raised by dead prez (2003e) in trademark style:

> didn't know drug-dealing was a government job . . .
> illegal business controls America . . .

> the White House is the [crack] rock house,
> and Uncle Sam is the number one pusher-man.

Moreover, the charge that capitalism benefits from prison labor is undeniable, and the gulaglike implications of such a fact are not lost on dead prez (2003f):[18]

> it's a war, even though they don't call it a war
> it's chemical war, unleashed on the black and the poor
> and it benefits the police, lawyers, and judges
> that profit on prison-industry with federal budgets . . .
> who profits? It's obvious, and it's going too good for them to stop it.

Given the development to this point, one would perhaps not be surprised if dead prez were to fall back into hopelessness or, equally daunting, a broad but ineffective oppositionalism characteristic of even the most pointed gangsta critiques. This is not the case, however, as the music has the same sort of utilitarian urgency that drove Brecht (Lunn, 1982, p. 99), and activist potential is even explicitly asserted in such statements as "it's not impossible to make a change in our lives" (dead prez, 2003f) and "we hip to this game tho, and we feelin to change this whole reality" (dead prez, 2002f). The latter is especially instructive, as it reflects our starting point in Brecht's notion that only by grasping reality, and indeed a reality that is obscured by traditional opinions and politics, does one gain the insight that reality itself is a construct, and that despite structural constraints it is also something capable of being dismantled and reconfigured.

The assertion of the potential for transformation, no doubt the result of the fact that dead prez approached music via political activism, is then extended into prescription, thereby serving as a sort of bridge between the pessimistic description of some so-called gangsta rappers and the disconnected prescription of some knowledge rap. In the dead prez mixtapes, this prescription has two significant elements: an *ethical* prescription linked to the denial of the culpability of Black youth and a *political* prescription. The for-

mer takes the form of a renunciation of political obligation and assertion of a right to resist, a sort of ground-clearing exercise prerequisite to any revolutionary activity (see Norwood, 2002) and arises most crudely in a song titled "Fuck the Law," whose chorus states "you wonder why we burn the cities down, cause we don't give a fuck—the time is now" (dead prez, 2003a). But the same point is made in a much more subtle manner when, after a severe indictment of the American judicial and legal systems, they argue that "right or wrong, we say fuck the law, cause the law wasn't made for us—ghetto prisoners" (dead prez, 2003e). In this formulation, the argument is much closer to those made by Peter Singer (1974) and Michael Walzer (1970), with the former arguing that a lack of sufficient representation in a political system negates the obligation to its law and the latter observing that conditions are such that Black Americans are indeed in many cases freed of such obligation (p. 48). Whereas those succumbing to the culture-of-poverty argument would recreate structures of obligation, dead prez takes their ethical cue from the descriptiveness of gangsta rappers, and moves forward accordingly.

The explicitly political prescription present in the mixtapes is voluminous and many sided. Although its total breadth cannot be accurately covered here, it suffices to note briefly that it involves a radical, and indeed almost Sorelian, separation—the rejection of voting, the negation of legality and post-9/11 patriotism, as well as a politics of political, cultural, and economic sabotage (see especially dead prez, 2004). But their strategic approach is summarized on the first mixtape in what amounts to a declaration of war, where a list of accusations—with the shouted response "That's War!"—is followed by prescription:

> marching in the streets is a strategy of WAR
> knowing self-defense is a strategy of WAR
> soldiers try to link with other soldiers in the WAR
> Revolutionaries gotta know the art of WAR
> What about hip-hop? Use that, matter fact,
> fuck a rap battle, what about a gat battle?
> (dead prez, 2002e)

This verse provides both a broad vision of what is considered to be useful politically—within which we see a diversity of tactics and the importance of a "circulation of struggles" (Cleaver, 2000, p. 58)—as well as propounding an explicitly *instrumental* vision of aesthetics by deemphasizing the traditional legitimization technique of verbal proficiency in favor of usefulness in struggle. In both mixtapes, the two interludes titled "Hood News" drive this point home by serving as a "newspaper of the ghetto" (Reid, 2003) and highlighting recent developments such as the Patriot Act, deaths at the hands of police, and even the arrest and incarceration of their own guest rapper, Askari X.

The most significant component of the dpz mixtapes is their ambitious fusion of Black nationalist and Afrocentric politics with the more recently cultivated gangsta image. This is done symbolically through the translation of Marcus Garvey's red, black, and green nationalist flag into the catchphrase "revolutionary but gangsta" and then conversely of the respectful term "O.G." (original gangster) into "Original Garvey." Substantively, the tapes then commandeer those admirable qualities that they see as having been gleaned from the gangsta era, raising the gang to nearly the level of a Guevaraist guerrilla *foco*. In the presentation of an ideal revolutionary, the mixtapes answer the question "What type of soldier is a RBG soldier?" with "we bangin' for the red, black, and green, ain't with no red, white and blue," and again conversely that "to me, a G [gangsta] is a freedom-fighter" (dead prez, 2002f). This is a position no doubt drawn from their political involvement, as at one point dead prez frame Uhuru leader Omali Yeshitela as an O.G. and insert a clip of a speech in which he attributes to the broadly oppositional notion of "fuck the police" the character of "a statement of revolutionary culture" (dead prez, 2002b). The nature of the ideal gang is explained as a unified ghetto movement:

> what is a gang? A gang is an organization
> a formulation of riders with a common foundation
> a nation, a tribe, unified by a common creed
> dedicated, ready to bleed for what they believe
> hard like the Mafia, but smart like Malcolm . . .

> chain linked to your brother like in the hull of a slave ship.
> (dead prez, 2003c)

This position on gangs adds the significant element of street unity to the dead prez political platform—arguing to the notorious Bloods and Crips that "it's one team: get up and let's ride" (dead prez, 2002a)—while also placing normative constraints on what exactly the existing gangs should strive toward. Although the unification of street gangs surfaced in the earlier wave of rap, it rarely transcended the "Stop the Violence" or "We're all in the Same Gang" mentality—that is to say, it was focused on the immediate threat of Black-on-Black violence at the expense of broader political aims. A better reference point for framing the work of dead prez is certainly Sam Greenlee's (1969) seminal *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, in which the first black CIA agent uses the skills he is taught to politicize the gangs of Chicago in a bid for liberation.[19]

It is in the goal of the political—the outcome of struggle—that we come full circle in an understanding of the advance made by the dpz mixtapes. Perhaps as an additional suggestion of why passivity and reconciliation are not the solution, the admission arises that "I blame it on the system, but *the problem is ours*, it's not a question of religion, *it's a question of power*" (dead prez, 2003f, italics added). But to understand the crucial distinction between their notion of power and that of many gangsta rappers, one must also recall the caveat that "power ain't money, dog, it's self-determination" (2002e). One is immediately reminded of the recent spate of discussion in Europe regarding the two notions of power expressed in many languages, which translate roughly as "power to" versus "power over," with dead prez clearly favoring the former (Virno & Hardt, 1996, p. 263). This qualification is crucial, especially in light of dead prez's embracing of elements of gangsta culture, as it prevents a reconciliation with power as exercised within the system that gangsta rap describes and as such, a possible escape from the concern that ghettocentricity "draws its arsenal from the dominant ideology" (Kelley, 1996, p. 139). Although much of the flagrant offensiveness and danger within rap grows directly from the description of life on the street—as poverty begets the celebra-

tion of wealth and powerlessness begets the celebration of domination, in misogyny and elsewhere—dead prez is attempting to salvage those elements crucial to moving forward while vaccinating against the "spiraling matrix of empowerment and reaction" that prevents gangsta rap from "projecting a liberating and prescriptive paradigm for the future" (Lusane, 1993, pp. 36, 49).

IMPLICATIONS

Although this dialectical development in hip-hop remains a bit fuzzy, comparison to past rap criticism will throw into relief its advantages both in understanding the development of rap music as well as offering a positive vision for the future. Specifically, we will be considering the point-counterpoint offered by two of the most important pieces of rap scholarship to date: Errol Henderson's (1996) discussion of Black nationalism and Afrocentricity and Robin D. G. Kelley's (1996) analysis of gangsta rap. Like many other works, these two consider the importance of the interaction of subgenres,[20] but Henderson's model fails partly through its inability to come to terms with the very subjective developments that he problematizes, and although Kelley is more sensitive to the importance of the latter, the scope of his contribution is such that he does not make the most of his findings.

Henderson (1996, pp. 313-314) utilizes Karenga's typology of justifications for Black nationalism to identify the sort of nationalism based on shared culture as less reactionary than either oppression based or programmatic nationalisms. He sees, moreover, a linear progression within hip-hop nationalism: from oppression to agenda, and finally, with X-Clan, to shared Afrocentric culture (pp. 314-315). Henderson's diagnosis of the early wave of political rap is correct—as he accuses Public Enemy and others of fostering a "myth of action" (pp. 323-329)—but despite noting the emphasis that KRS-One and the Black Panthers placed on the lumpen underclass, he nevertheless fails to come fully to terms with that underclass, and it is here that he runs into difficulty. He documents the rise of a "nihilistic and self-destructive set of tenets that emerge

from the drive for survivalism" and even notes that the subjective development was flowing away from religious organization and toward gangsta, but nonetheless seems to believe that merely affirming Afrocentricity will be enough to stem the tide. It is on the topic of gangsta subjectivity that Henderson, in an extended footnote, takes issue with Kelley's (1996, pp. 136-140) identification of a "ghettocentric" culture, centered on the racial, class, and spatial identity of the "nigga." Henderson's argument on this subject is not convincing in the least—not least for its philosophically untenable association of the word with its original usage, but equally because he fails to recognize the valid complaint against some Afrocentricity that the word "nigga" and its cultural milieu embody. Specifically, Kelley highlights the way in which gangsta rappers have taken aim at an *overemphasis* on Africa and a concomitant devaluation of Black suffering in the United States, which is justified by the culture-of-poverty argument. Such a dichotomy arises perhaps most clearly in the classic anthem of Afrocentricity—"A.F.R.I.C.A."—whose closing verses mark a clear distinction: "they [i.e., Africans] need help, but so do we—them with their *government*, us and *mentality*." The implication that American Blacks, especially those representing the urban underclass, do not have a problem with the U.S. government is downright wrong, and gangsta rappers were entirely justified in critiquing the construction of such a false dichotomy.

Henderson's framework of different types of nationalism fails, above all, because it has a static notion of "culture" and as such cannot accommodate Kelley's identification of a new sort of ghettocentric Black culture. The clear irony of such an essentialistic approach is that it is merely an inversion, a mirror image of those culturally determinist "clash of civilizations" arguments that would attempt to fix an American or Western culture and defend it from perceived threats.[21] But beyond this, Kelley (1997) has more recently argued that essentialistic visions of culture "reduce their subjects to cardboard typologies" and have explicitly served the sort of social-scientific analyses that feed into the culture-of-poverty argument: "Once culture is seen as a static, measurable thing—behavior . . . it is not hard to cast black people as pathologi-

cal" (pp. 17, 9-10). Although Kelley's sights are trained on social scientists and Black conservatives, Henderson's approach shows that progressive and even radical critics can slip almost imperceptibly into a dangerous position, conflating culture and behavior in an attempt to defend Afrocentricity. The dialectical development that we have seen in rap subverts Karenga's and Henderson's typology of nationalism, nudging it in a positive direction, and it is no coincidence that dead prez's incorporation of the song "A.F.R.I.C.A." into "I'm an African" seeks to fuse Afrocentricity with ghettocentricity by replacing the chanted names of African countries in the original with the names of diasporic communities—"Puerto Rico, Haiti, and J.A., New York and Cali, F.L.A." (dead prez, 1999b). Moreover, dead prez has continued to subvert fixed cultural categories, as their most recent foray into the mixtape arena has been their track "Hell Yeah," in which Roc-a-fella rap entrepreneur Jay-Z delights in disproving those critics who would counterpose business rap to Afrocentric politics,[22] shouting "We on the same track now, baby! What you gonna call us now?" (DJ Envy, 2004).

The significance of such a cultural fusion is hard to overstate: Much as Marx recognized capitalism as a prerequisite to revolutionary mobilization, so too is dead prez engaged in a process of dialectical Hegelian *Aufhebung*, and taking advantage of the gangsta-era aggregation of ghettoized Blacks—expressed most clearly in descriptive and violent rap (nominally the *antithesis* of political rap's *thesis*)—as a first step toward unification and radicalization (*synthesis*).[23] Such a dialectical development is, at root, a process of relentless self-criticism, of the type that Tate (1993) demands and which Bürger (1984) associates with the surging efforts of all avant-garde cultural movements. Furthermore, one could characterize Henderson's difficulties as arising from an overly philosophically *idealist* perspective that often accompanies Islamic rap (i.e., mind over matter, knowledge as a weapon)—viewing Karenga's three cultural spheres as more or less isolated and dictated by individual choice—and as such is particularly susceptible to sliding into the culture-of-poverty position.[24] The gangsta imperative is a more philosophically *materialist* one—

emphasizing the realities of life in the ghetto and moreover demonstrating the inconsistency of the Afrocentric position. Our approach has been more flexible and anti-essentialist than that of Henderson, as the tactical use of the instrumental aesthetic framework of Brecht has allowed us to be more sensitive to didactic approaches to mobilization and, more important, to better understand the broader development of rap. This development, contrary to Henderson, is not one of isolated spheres but one that must be characterized *dialectically* if we are to simultaneously influence the direction of hip-hop while maintaining an understanding of actual historical conditions and respecting those who speak subjectively from within such a position. Lusane (1993) notes of gangsta rap that

> the conflicted lived experiences of rappers give rise to their consciousness which in turn forms the substance of their creative work. Rap's pedagogy, like the initial stage of all pedagogies of oppressed people, emerges incomplete, contradictory, and struggling for coherence. (p. 42)

The development that I have identified, it is hoped, represents a less contradictory and more complete and coherent pedagogy for the future of political hip-hop.

In an interview on the impact of the likes of dead prez, another progenitor of political rap—KRS-One—suggests that hip-hop develops cyclically and that today's political artists will give way to another generation of less serious rap (in Thompson, 2002, pp. 263-264), and it is perhaps not surprising that Bertolt Brecht consistently attacked this dangerous "cyclical myth" that served only to immobilize the present and discourage action (Lunn, 1982, p. 122). Without yielding to determinism, it is clear that at least in the case of hip-hop, there is some cause for hope that dialectical development has indeed been occurring and that subjective developments within the industry have driven forward didactic potential. Insofar as aesthetic theories serve to illuminate what happens on the ground, be it in the mainstream hip-hop industry or on street corners, we should embrace them. This is what we hope has been achieved with Bertolt Brecht, whose theories have the advantage of

being by nature didactic and broadly instrumental and, as such less, prone to be misused in an appropriative manner. But as with all surging social phenomena, we must allow content to dictate form, be it in the realm of academic theories or critical moralizing against lumpen elements of our own society and culture. Those of us who value the political content of hip-hop need to be constantly aware of the impact of our own academic work, and more important, we must be self-reflexive regarding the situated perspective from which we speak if we want to avoid the stifling of hip-hop: It is the closest thing the world currently has to a "Black poem," and following Baraka (1973, p. 214), we must not attack it for speaking . . .

> "Silently
> or LOUD."

NOTES

1. Here, I am interested less in asserting my interpretation of the context of sampling than with demonstrating that Shusterman's framework clouds the different contexts that do indeed exist.

2. See the sharp response to such positions offered by Robin Kelley (1997, pp. 37-42).

3. Many thanks to Martin Jay for bringing to my attention this important work.

4. For a good, nonreductive discussion of rap that also emphasizes feel, see Kelley (1997, pp. 37-42).

5. I hope that this is not perceived to be running afoul of Robin Kelley's (1997, pp. 37-42) insights, as I am not reducing rap to politics but merely seeking an approach that (unlike Shusterman and Brennan) allows for a proper understanding of those elements of rap that are undeniably political.

6. Lukács's more distributive views, on the other hand, when transposed into the 1970s evoke something more like Andy Warhol's ludicrous comment that Coca-Cola is democratic because it is available in similar form to rich and poor alike.

7. Meghelli also emphasizes the importance of the Nation of Islam's "do-for-self" ideology in this trend, and although I agree with Kelley's (1997, pp. 79-91) worries about the reactionary elements of Nation of Islam policy, it also appears that do-for-self can be potentially transformative if it is radically divorced from culture-of-poverty reasoning.

8. I am tempted to engage in a sustained discussion of stylistic similarities between mixtapes and Brecht, that is, a discussion of the *V-Effekt*, but such a broad discussion would necessarily come at the expense of the elements that I feel are more crucial. It suffices to note here, first, that the basis of rap is such that "distancing" is often present and, second, that this

is even more prominent in the mixtape, whose didactical shock value is often higher and whose low fidelity production parallels Brecht's affinity for anti-illusionist props.

9. See specifically Chuck D's (1997, pp. 241-262) characterization of gangsta rap as a "cry for help" and his defense of Reverend Calvin Butts and C. Delores Tucker. This approach is not limited to Public Enemy, as KRS-One's "edutainment" has been described as bordering on "pretentious" (Henderson, 1996, p. 312).

10. Shomari (1995, p. 44) emphasizes the work of Paris as a successful example of total self-production, but often his critiques do not extend beyond the individual members of the Bush family. As such, he clearly misses a fundamental point of Brechtian didactics and in doing so slides dangerously close to conspiracy theory (see also Byrne, 2003, pp. 18-25). It should be noted that the accuracy of this article has been attacked by Paris himself. Regardless, recent research in the Black community undermines the traditional association of conspiracy theory with political paralysis (Waters, 1997, pp. 120-121).

11. But Lusane (1993) has also observed, credibly, albeit with reference to the current wave of post–civil rights leaders, that hip-hop has had more impact than all recent Black political leaders combined.

12. This point seems to be overlooked by Kitwana (2002, p. 155). The author attempts to maintain George's assessment despite explicit mention of dead prez.

13. Such an approach is somewhat strange, as it clearly maintains the quintessentially modernist organicism of the individual piece. It is also demonstrably futile and contradictory as, in Brennan's piece, his desire for a taxonomy of rap genres leads him to fail: He characterizes the seminal 5% Islamic/Maoist Digable Planets as "Candy Rap" alongside Kris Kross, lumps the 5% notion of minds/words as weapons as manifested in the Poor Righteous Teachers as a "boast" and in fact is forced to double categorize individual songs such as one by Del tha Funkée Homosapien as both "prankster" and as anticommercialization. Even if such a framework were useful—which is doubtful—it would still be far from coherent.

14. Although it has been objected that Brechtian didactics depend at least in part on content, this argument fails on two levels. First, Brecht of all people would have been loath to attach his method to a specific politics—it is about dialectical education and societal contradiction and, as such, certainly leans toward a certain sort of politics (within which dead prez fit comfortably), but is not reducible to them. Second, a programmatic reductionism of Brecht's theories would preclude any comparison with an age as distant as the post-Soviet, postindustrial present.

15. Chuck D's (1997, pp. 247-262) position on gangsta rap is slightly more nuanced, but he still insists on a full counterposition between the latter and "positive rap," and indeed it is disturbing that he devotes considerable space to discussing the gang "problem" while neglecting to even discuss drugs and the drug war.

16. Such a position puts Chuck D closer to someone like Henry Louis Gates who, despite identifying structural impediments to the agency of Black youths, paradoxically places the future of the race on the capacity of the latter to integrate into the (mythical) American dream. See Grosfoguel (1999, p. 415) on the individual reductionism embodied in this founding myth. Also on this subject, see the discussion of James Baldwin in Norwood (2002).

17. As fundamental and well documented as this point is, many are too blinkered to recognize it or refuse its political implications. See Cockburn (1989).

18. For those who would doubt the prevalence of prison labor, the profit margin it allows, or the exploitativeness it implies with relation to wage labor, it must be noted that many of America's largest corporations—from Starbucks to Nike—employ prison labor and sometimes pay as little as one tenth of their standard free-market wage (Barnett, 2002). On the role

of the profit motive in the Stalinist gulag, and hence the aptness of the analogy, see Lewin (1985).

19. Incidentally, a recent article on the film version of *The Spook* sheds additional light on the striking degree to which even progressive Black intellectuals buy into the American dream myth, as Henry Louis Gates attempts to frame his own work as a sort of fulfillment of Greenlee's vision: "We all wanted to be inside the system, integrated into the historically elite white institutions of America, transforming them from inside" (quoted in Nichols, 2004). The irony—clear to anyone familiar with the story—is that Greenlee's hero uses knowledge gained within the system to then get out and transform the system from without.

20. Most studies use similar distinctions: Lusane (1993) emphasizes the importance of gangsta and political rap (which together constitute "hardcore"); Brennan (1994) counterposes the gangsta to the preacher; Ogbar (1999) counterposes X-Clan to gangstas; and "First Person" (2002) draws a distinction between the "Black capitalist spirit of self-determination" of Jay-Z and the revolutionary "utopian, twenty-first century Africanity" of dead prez and Black Star, concluding that both are insufficient; the list could be extended.

21. Samuel Huntington is, of course, the undisputed champion at perpetuating such fallacies. See his attack on Islamic culture (Huntington, 1996). More recently, the same author (Huntington, 2004) has taken aim at Latino culture.

22. Jay-Z could almost be responding directly to "First Person" (2002), which draws a distinction between the two artists along capitalist/revolutionary lines.

23. A step that is implicitly recognized, albeit fatalistically, by KRS-One in Shomari (1995, pp. 34-36).

24. It is hoped that the use of these terms (*idealist* and *materialist*), whose philosophical connotation is completely distinct from their everyday usage, will not be misleading.

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