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## **Impure Dissent**

*Hip Hop and the Political Ethics of Marginalized Black Urban Youth*

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*Now I can't pledge allegiance to your flag*

*Cause I can't find no reconciliation with your past*

*When there was nothing equal for my people in your math*

*You forced us in the ghetto and then you took our dads*

--Lupe Fiasco, "Strange Fruition"

What if anything can be said in favor of today's marginalized black urban youth's production, circulation, and consumption of hip hop? In this chapter, I situate this controversial example of youth engagement in participatory culture against a background of traditions for conceptualizing dissent. The result will be a re-conceptualization of political participation among poor black urban youth that highlights its normatively important expressive dimensions. To understand the difference and relationship between voice and influence, it is critical to probe cases where the goal is voice in and of itself, regardless of influence.

If asked to give a prominent historical example of African American political dissent, many would proffer the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956).<sup>1</sup> This extraordinary mass protest against racial segregation on public transportation followed years of patient and diplomatic attempts to persuade local authorities to end this grossly unjust practice. Though facilitated by Rosa Parks's famous act of civil disobedience, the movement refrained from law breaking, used only non-violent tactics, and was grounded in Christian ethics. The protest was highly organized

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and disciplined, with clear demands, excellent leadership, and a solid plan for action. Its participants demonstrated through their remarkable personal sacrifice, courage, and determination that they believed they were fighting for a winnable and righteous cause. No one could reasonably call the participants' moral commitment or sincerity into question. The movement's leaders, such as Edgar D. Nixon and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, were respected in the community as people of tremendous moral integrity. The protest was also extremely effective in bringing about desirable social change—it ultimately led to the US Supreme Court deciding that segregation on public buses is unconstitutional.

Striking contemporary examples of mass black dissent do not spring so easily to mind. Effective mass mobilizations among blacks, and particularly among black youth, have been in sharp decline since the Black Power movement. However, some black youth, sometimes inspired by the recorded speeches of Malcolm X, regard their engagement with hip hop music as a vital form of political dissent and resistance.<sup>2</sup> Though not all hip hop music has political ramifications or political intent, there is what is commonly called “politically conscious rap.” Marginalized urban black youth (among others) produce, consume, and share this music.

But if you take an example like N.W.A's “Fuck Tha Police” (1988), a protest song against police brutality and harassment, it doesn't appear to have much in common with the Montgomery protest. The Montgomery boycott had a kind of moral and political purity that most political hip hop does not. “Fuck Tha Police,” while rightly condemning the outrageous misconduct of the LAPD, is filled with profanity and racial epithets. It celebrates retaliatory violence against cops and valorizes gunplay and street crime. The song exhibits misogyny and homophobia. It proposes no constructive solutions to the problems it identifies. It was neither a component of nor an inspiration for a social movement for change. Eazy-E, the founder of

N.W.A. (aka “Niggaz With Attitude”), was a former drug dealer, and most of the group’s other recordings evinced a hedonistic and mostly amoral and apolitical stance. “Fuck Tha Police” could almost be viewed as the anthem for the L.A. riots (1992).<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, there are striking similarities between some rap music and ghetto riots. Much hip hop expressive culture is the musical/video equivalent of an urban disturbance—a riot of sound and images, the throwing of lyrical Molotov cocktails. The language and imagery of some hip hop expresses and depicts rage. However, this rage is, at least ostensibly, a response to perceived injustices. The sense that serious injustices are ongoing is the putative source of the anger, hostility, and desire to strike back. Many hip hop songs, like urban riots, are politically ambiguous and morally dissonant, and thus often give rise to sharply opposed reactions among observers.<sup>4</sup> Some see riots as senseless crime, violence, and mayhem on a mass scale, while others see them as spontaneous rebellions against injustice.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, many people view hip hop as nihilistic and devoid of serious political content, while others defend it as the political voice of marginalized urban youth.<sup>6</sup> And this divide manifests itself in profound intergenerational cleavages among blacks—the civil rights generation often viewing rap as symptomatic of the decay of meaningful black politics, the hip hop generation often heralding it as the expression of a new and improved black resistance.<sup>7</sup>

Politically conscious hip hop music that contains various moral and political impurities is easily ignored, dismissed, even condemned. In its defense, I offer some reasons for regarding political rap as valuable political expression even when it fails to meet the demands of purity associated with the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, some political rap (like much of popular culture) can be deeply problematic, from both a moral and political point of view. There is much

to be said against it. As I said at the start, my question is: What if anything can be said in favor of today's marginalized black urban youth's engagement with impure political hip hop?

One kind of sympathetic response is to insist that pure political dissent can't be reasonably expected from youth, even those who live in America's ghettos. The narcissism, impulsiveness, imprudence, rebellion, ignorance, and hedonism typical of young people are to be expected in their initial attempts at political participation. Tolerance, understanding, and patient mentoring might seem the only appropriate responses. With some encouragement and guidance, political maturity will likely set in.<sup>9</sup> After all, young people do grow up, eventually.

Whatever its merit, that is not the response I defend here. While some see impure political rap as a youth training ground for, or gateway to, political engagement, my interest is not just rap's potential or promise. I see value in some political hip hop even if it won't ultimately result in more traditional political participation. My main purpose is to explain the *intrinsic* value of impure political hip hop, that is, its value apart from any beneficial social consequences that may flow from its production, circulation, or consumption. I will develop a non-instrumental argument in favor of impure dissent, showing that much political rap is best understood within a non-consequentialist political ethic. Political participation among poor urban youth is thus reconceived to highlight its normatively important expressive dimensions.

### **Hip Hop, New Media, And The Public Sphere**

Ghettos in the United States are predominantly black, metropolitan neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty.<sup>10</sup> The persistence of black ghettos is a glaring social injustice that urgently demands a remedy.<sup>11</sup> Hip hop is a youth culture that, while now a global phenomenon,

emerged initially from America's ghettos (aka "the hood") and often embodies sentiments and communication styles prevalent among young ghetto denizens.<sup>12</sup> My specific interest is the political ethics of ghetto youth, particularly as it is expressed through hip hop culture online.

Young people, including disadvantaged urban youth, are heavy users of web-based information and communication technology. They use this technology to create and share content and to form and maintain online peer communities.<sup>13</sup> Hip hop music, videos, and commentary are often the content created and shared, and these online communities are sometimes organized around a shared interest in hip hop culture. Such practices are a good example of participatory culture, as defined by Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen in this volume. But are they also an example of participatory politics? This hip hop/new media nexus is not only, or even mostly, about politics or civic engagement. Moving listeners to bob their heads to a slick beat and to smile at a clever rhyme or vivid metaphor is the bread-and-butter of the genre. And perhaps only a small percentage of hip hop expression online can be accurately described as "political." Nevertheless, this politically conscious rap, however much there is of it, is *political speech*. It constitutes an assorted set of communicative acts in the public sphere about central civic questions.

To be sure, this public sphere is not one cohesive forum with agreed upon ground rules in which all of society's members are free to participate as equals in a rational dialogue about matters of public concern. Rather, in a highly stratified and diverse society like the United States, the public sphere should be understood as a decentralized network of forums that differ in internal discursive norms and constituencies.<sup>14</sup> In addition to mainstream publics (formal and informal), there are *subaltern counterpublics*—public arenas where members of subordinate or marginalized groups gather to discuss their common concerns, forge solidarity, and formulate

strategies of resistance, free from the interference, constraining norms, and scrutiny of dominant groups.<sup>15</sup> And there are also *parallel publics*, which are alternative arenas for discursive exchange between members of marginalized groups but which largely operate according to mainstream norms.<sup>16</sup> So there is not a unified public sphere but multiple publics of different types, and many participate in more than one public.<sup>17</sup> And while these arenas are sites of discursive exchange and expression, conflict and dissonance are just as important as consensus and mutual understanding.

Young people, black Americans, and the poor are often excluded from the mainstream public sphere and large media outlets. Members of such groups, therefore, often seek discursive spaces of their own, where they can give voice to their distinctive concerns in their own style and idiom without having to conform to mainstream expectations. It is thus tempting to view political rap as a practice within the subaltern counterpublics of marginalized black urban youth—say, the functional equivalent of traditional oratory practices in many black churches during Jim Crow. Accordingly, the perceived impurities of political hip hop can be chalked up to outsiders' inability to understand or appreciate this esoteric or coded practice of ghetto youth. Criticism of the practice could then be rejected as a condescending and illegitimate interference with a subordinate group's internal norms of communication. There is probably truth in this response, but it is not the type of defense I want to offer.

Political rap is communicated to multiple audiences within many different public arenas and is not confined (nor can it be confined) to subaltern counterpublics. Moreover, new media infrastructure (e.g., Web 2.0 technology) has enabled the rapid transmission of these political messages across these multiple “networked publics.”<sup>18</sup> New information and communication technology now facilitates and structures the broader public sphere. Hip hop, which has always

been intertwined with and advanced by technology, has adapted to the new technological environment. In the digital/network age, its sounds and images are circulated through various Internet platforms (e.g., webzines, blogs, Facebook, iTunes, email, YouTube, Twitter, and MySpace) and consumed using various digital devices (e.g., computers, tablets, mobile phones, and mp3 players).

There are many interesting empirical, conceptual, and normative questions in this broad domain. My main focus is hip hop/new media as a vehicle for political expression among marginalized black urban youth. The aim in examining this mode of expression is not only to shed light on a misunderstood aspect of a political culture in ghetto communities, but also, through reflection on this controversial case, to understand the ethics of political dissent under unjust social conditions in the digital/network era.

### **Varieties Of Impurity**

When the ghetto poor use hip hop/new media to express political dissent, the criminal justice system is chief among their concerns—e.g., police brutality and harassment, racial profiling, draconian sentences for non-violent crimes, and harsh prison conditions.<sup>19</sup> They also focus on the low quality of public education in the American metropolis, including the content of the curriculum and the way teachers interact with black youth. There is disquiet about the unavailability of decent jobs that pay a living wage and about discrimination in employment. Complaints are frequently voiced about political powerlessness, about the inability of the urban poor to influence government policy. They object to widespread poverty, economic inequality, and the low quality or unaffordability of housing. There are grievances expressed about the

inadequacy of public services to poor communities. And there are critiques of mass media depictions of black youth and ghetto life.

However, much of this dissent can be described as “impure.” While it contains valid political content, it also includes other elements that diverge sharply from conventional or widely- held normative standards, and these deviant elements may seem to undermine its political aims. Impure dissent is meaningful political dissent that is mixed with, for example, messages urging the oppressed to embrace hedonistic consumption and vulgar materialism; relentless use of profanity, epithets, and other offensive language; enactment of negative group stereotypes; violent and pornographic images; romantic narratives about outlaw figures and street crime; approval of alcohol abuse and illicit drug use; xenophobia, homophobia, and misogyny; devaluation of education and other conventional paths to upward mobility; and celebration of base ambitions like power and celebrity. Some might therefore view impure hip hop dissent as an example of “dark speech,” as Allen uses that term in her chapter.

I should emphasize that in labeling such expressions of dissent “impure,” I am not passing judgment on them. Nor am I endorsing the widely held norms that these hip hop performances violate. The label is meant to be purely descriptive, and by using it, my aim is to identify a familiar phenomenon—normatively transgressive political dissent.

There are at least four types of impurity that a given instance of political dissent might contain: (1) *moral* impurities are those elements in the expression of dissent that are widely viewed as morally objectionable; (2) *political* impurities are the elements that are generally taken to conflict with or undermine desirable political aims; (3) *cognitive* impurities are those features that fail to satisfy widely recognized standards of rationality; and (4) *aesthetic* impurities are



components that most find unattractive, unpleasant, or repulsive. Political rap is often criticized on all four grounds, but I will confine my discussion to moral and political impurities.

Some of what people object to in politically conscious but impure hip hop are its (alleged) negative social consequences (e.g., it causes people to view blacks in a negative light, incites violence, or corrupts the youth). These objections are premised on the idea that impure dissent has these negative consequences *in virtue of its impurities*. That is, the criticisms are not based solely on *how* people react to these messages, as people might react in counterproductive or irrational ways to “pure” dissent; they are also based on *what* people are reacting to—namely, the apparent morally abhorrent, politically problematic, irrational, and ugly aspects of this genre of expressive culture.

### **Dimensions Of Dissent**

Political dissent, broadly construed, has several dimensions within which one might find impurities. The *content* is the particular message (the specific propositions) communicated through the activity of dissent. This content can be true or false, right or wrong. Sometimes the content of hip hop/new media dissent is relatively transparent and thus easy to discern. But often it isn't. Considerable interpretive skill and background knowledge may be required to extract the content. The main message might be, in some way, morally or politically problematic, or there may be secondary messages that lack purity.

*Inflection* concerns the tone of the message. It has to do with whether the content includes elements that are, say, conciliatory, polite, respectful, and diplomatic or vulgar, abusive, offensive, and irreverent. The content, taken in the abstract, may be unproblematic, but the

language or images used to express that message might have impure elements. Much of political rap is criticized for its inflection rather than its substantive content.

The *grounds* have to do with the agent's justification for the message of dissent. These grounds may be stated in the content of the message or may be implicit therein but need not be. Political opposition is sometimes publicly registered without a justification being offered for it. This is not unusual with dissent that takes the form of artistic expression. Reasonable dissent doesn't require that the grounds be made fully explicit in the content. But, given the right conditions, the dissenter should be prepared to defend the grounds of his or her dissent.

The *medium* has to do with the technology through which a message of dissent is produced or disseminated. Using web-based information and communication technology to create and convey political messages is now entirely commonplace. It is no longer (if it ever was) transgressive to express political dissent through new media technologies. There are some who argue that the content of some dissent should not, or cannot, be communicated using new media; or that if such dissent is communicated, it will inevitably be coopted to serve the ends of political and economic elites. I won't pursue this issue, however.<sup>20</sup>

The *mode* is the type of activity used to express the content of dissent (e.g., a political speech, petition drive, terrorist act, documentary film, or graffiti art). The activity itself might be immoral even if the content conveyed through the activity is not. I assume that *rapping* (rhythmically rhyming over beats), even when accompanied by video, does not fall into this category. But commercial hip hop (as opposed to underground hip hop) might be thought to be politically dubious. Political dissent joined with ambition for wealth and fame is widely thought to be an unholy alliance. And political messages can be blunted by the need to prioritize commercial profit over political content.<sup>21</sup>

The *mood* of dissent is defined by the mindset that animates the act. For instance, it is about the attitude with which the dissident engages in dissent (e.g., with ambivalence, fanatical zeal, or cynicism) or the motive that prompts it (e.g., personal gain, amusement, or a sense of justice) or the intention of the act (e.g., to raise consciousness, provoke, frighten, or attract publicity).<sup>22</sup> Attitudes, motives, and intentions are all subject to moral appraisal.

It is also important to distinguish the act of dissent from its *messenger*. The perceived moral impurities of the dissidents themselves can taint their acts of dissent in the eyes of their interpreters. If the messenger is known to have committed serious moral wrongs or to have engaged in politically reactionary activities, then his or her acts of dissent might be regarded as impure even if the acts are themselves devoid of impurities. Ad hominem attacks on dissenters are a common way of dismissing the content of their dissent.

It might also be useful to distinguish the act of dissent and its various dimensions from the time, place, and social context of dissent. Some acts cannot be understood as dissent without reference to these. And some acts might be thought to be impure because of when and where they occur and under what social conditions. As I'm mainly interested in hip hop dissent that is conveyed and consumed through digital networks or new media technologies, I will give limited attention to time, place, and context, as these are often ambiguous in cyberspace.

### **What Impure Hip Hop Dissent Is Not**

Some seem to think that meaningful political dissent must be entirely earnest and devoid of play or enjoyment or else its message will be weakened. Perhaps because of the example of the Civil Rights Movement (or certain representations of it), many feel that dissent must be delivered with

the utmost moral seriousness, even piety. Self-restraint is expected. Humor must be eschewed. Fun is out of place. However, as a number of theorists have argued, and as Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen elaborate in their chapter, when thinking about the scope of the “political,” it is important to recognize that there are no sharp boundaries between politics, play, and pleasure.<sup>23</sup> So while some may regard politically conscious hip hop as inauthentic if it is mixed with entertainment, this is not the kind of “impurity” that interests me.

Nor is the kind of impure hip hop dissent I want to discuss a form of “infrapolitics.”<sup>24</sup> Its content is not generally covert, disguised, or veiled. The impure hip hop dissent that interests me is “in-your-face” political expression. It is openly transgressive. There is nothing subtle or cryptic about “Fuck Tha Police.” The content of hip hop dissent may be esoteric and so widely misunderstood, but dissidents are not trying to hide the content of their message from the powers that be. The dissent is public and often highly visible (on the web and elsewhere). It is not a tactic to avoid notice or evade repercussions.

In his well-known discussion of “black nihilism,” Cornel West focuses not just on the loss of hope among black youth but on a loss of *meaning*.<sup>25</sup> He is concerned with what he regards as an *existential* crisis in black America. Marginalized black people, he claims, are looking for identity and a sense of self-worth in an unjust world. Although this search for meaning is no doubt to be found in impure hip hop dissent, my focus is on its self-conscious opposition to injustice, not on the ways in which it serves (perhaps without its participants’ conscious awareness) as a psychological coping mechanism within oppressive conditions.

Although some impure hip hop dissent is arguably analogous to civil disobedience, much of it should not be so understood. Though it is attention grabbing, impure hip hop dissent need not be an attempt to garner the notice of the state or sympathetic citizens with the aim of moral

suasion. Some impure hip hop dissent is also unlike civil disobedience in that the impure dissidents do not seek to demonstrate the moral purity of their motives or character. On the contrary, they make no pretense at being “respectable.” With civil disobedience, dissenters typically accept the penalty for breaking the law to show that they act from moral conscience rather than ignoble motives. They are concerned to show that they are morally upright and break the law only to force the complacent to listen. Some impure dissidents have rather different aims and are not enacting a political strategy.

The point of impure dissent need not be to foment revolution or rebellion either. The dissidents may not be trying to fundamentally change the social order. Indeed, they may not be attempting to effect social change at all and may embrace some of the more decadent aspects of the society they regard as unjust. This attitude can be puzzling, but I hope to make it less so below.

I should also say that I am not concerned with the *right* of dissent. I take it for granted that people have a moral right (though sometimes not a legal one) to dissent from social practices they regard as unfair, oppressive, or unjust. Nor is my concern the *limits* of dissent, that is, about when dissent goes too far to be legitimate (e.g., acts of terrorism or violent revolution). My main interest is in hip hop dissent that is permissible as a communicative act in the public sphere but whose content, inflection, ground, medium, mode, mood, or messenger is widely perceived as morally or politically objectionable. These impurities are often thought to justify ignoring, dismissing, or condemning hip hop dissent.

### **An Example: Nas and the “Nigger” Album**

In April 1994, an eighteen-year old, high school dropout from the Queensbridge projects released *Illmatic* to critical acclaim, a recording that is universally recognized as a hip hop classic. On the album, the artist Nas (Nasir Jones), an extremely talented street poet, raps about life in the ghetto with an uncanny mix of politically conscious lyrics and gangsta sensibility. The rapper is now internationally famous and has gone on to make several well-received albums exploring similar themes. He has a strong online presence (e.g., on MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and is beloved and revered by the black, young, and urban.

But when Nas announced, in 2007, that his next album would be titled *Nigger*, civil rights activists including Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Bill Cosby and representatives of the NAACP, spoke out publicly and pressured the label to change the name. Sharpton, for example, argued that the album was undermining efforts to make using the epithet a hate crime and that it gave comfort to racists who want to demean black people. Jackson condemned the title as “morally offensive” and urged media outlets and fans to boycott the album.<sup>26</sup> And it should be noted that Nas’s public announcement of the inflammatory title occurred just a few months after the NAACP had conducted a widely publicized symbolic funeral for the notorious “N-Word” at its annual national convention in Detroit.

Although there was an acrimonious exchange in the press between Nas and his critics, ultimately Nas and his label Def Jam relented and released the album as *Untitled* (which ironically was later nominated for a Grammy Award). On May 19, 2008, through the online magazine AllHipHop.com, Nas released the following statement about the name change:

It's important to me that this album gets to the fans. It's been a long time coming. I want my fans to know that creatively and lyrically, they can expect the same content and the same messages. It's that important. The streets have been waiting for this for a long time. The people will always know what the real title of this album is and what to call it.

Nas, now forty-years old, can't be regarded as young any more. However, he does make music for youth, self-consciously so, and he strongly identifies with black urban youth in particular. Moreover, hip hop is almost universally viewed as youth music—though plenty of people over age twenty-five are fans or regular listeners. In the liner notes to *Untitled*, Nas says this:

May hip hop continue to scare the hell out of all the people who planned genocide against black people everywhere ...may it crush those who constantly try to criticize it and stop it, and silence the youth just because they don't understand them. Ya plan backfired and now we run sh\*t. If you would only listen to the youth more you would be in tune with what lies ahead in the future.

Also in 2008, Nas released a free mixtape produced by DJ Green Lantern called *The Nigger Tape*, which includes a few songs from *Untitled* and several others. It was an underground hit and remains widely available online.<sup>27</sup> There is a music video for the single, "Be a Nigger Too," which appears on *The Nigger Tape* but not *Untitled*. It has more than 500,000 views on YouTube, and the song itself has more than a million plays on Nas's MySpace page.<sup>28</sup> Nas begins his rap with: "This is my opening scripture / I been preparing this album my whole

life / Might be uncomfortable for most of you listeners.” The main theme of the album, mixtape, and video is black people’s creative and reflective responses to American racism, including, of course, their response to the most hateful racial epithet in the English language. These new media/hip hop pieces articulate—through text, sound, and images—a political ethics of the oppressed for black youth in ghetto communities.

The songs that appear on *Untitled* and *The Nigger Tape* protest substandard public schools, police brutality and an unfair criminal justice system, segregation and poverty in the ghetto, and the low quality of public housing. There is a spirit of resistance, an unwillingness to accept defeat, and an undying will not only to survive but also to find pleasure and beauty in a life of undeserved hardships. There is some expression of hope for changes in the future, including some qualified support for Barack Obama and his message of interracial unity. But there is also a celebration of materialism, drug dealing and illicit drug use, street crime and pimping, gunplay and retaliatory violence. There is strong skepticism toward traditional modes of political engagement (e.g., organized protests and electoral politics). There is profanity, vulgar language, and a liberal use of the words “bitch” and “nigger.” And the title cut from *Untitled* is a tribute to the notorious Louis Farrakhan.

The album, mixtape, and videos all represent impure dissent. The relevant impurities have not gone unnoticed by critics and reviewers of the album.<sup>29</sup> One way the *Untitled* album represents impure dissent is that it includes pop singles with crossover appeal (e.g., “Hero” and “Make the World Go Round”). This can give the impression that all the controversy over the title was just an attempt at publicity to increase sales or at least a capitulation to the demands of capitalism. Critics have also complained that the album has no coherent message or new political ideas and that it offers no solutions to the well-known problems it dramatizes. Also, there is the



fact that Nas gave in to the pressure to change the title. The rapper's apparent desire for fame and fortune leads critics to mock Nas for insincerity and hypocrisy.

### **What (if Anything) Makes Impure Hip Hop Dissent “Political”?**

Adolph Reed claims that black youth culture, and rap music in particular, celebrates cynicism and alienation.<sup>30</sup> It is, he claims, posturing posing as politics. It is not “resistance,” as is often claimed, but submission and resignation. He maintains that hip hop culture rejects direct political action that challenges the state and dismisses conventional political action. He characterizes it as a disregard for civic engagement and the embodiment of defeatism. For example, he says, “There is no politics worthy of the name that does not work to shape the official institutions of public authority that govern and channel people’s lives. Anything else is playacting.”<sup>31</sup>

There is a reply to this type of critique familiar from the Black Arts Movement (widely regarded as the aesthetic arm of the Black Power Movement), whose art has much in common with impure hip hop dissent (consider, for instance, Amiri Baraka’s poem “It’s Nation Time,” which uses the word “nigger” more than thirty times). This reply claims that impure dissent is, in fact, politically efficacious in bringing about social change, even revolutionary change, at least potentially or in the long run. For example, the kinds of defenses of impure dissent that Baraka provides are *instrumental* justifications—e.g., that it shakes people out of their petty bourgeois complacency, helps the oppressed to overcome their self-hatred and alienation, instills a sense of empowerment and unity among the dispossessed, raises consciousness about vital but suppressed ideals, educates and mobilizes the masses, and so on.<sup>32</sup> There is no doubt that those who produce and consume impure hip hop dissent sometimes regard it as having this kind of instrumental

value. That is, they believe its ultimate objective is to change society, perhaps by mentally equipping or inspiring the oppressed to fight for justice.

Consistent with both Baraka's and Reed's perspectives, many people regard political dissent as having at least two essential elements: (1) a consciously chosen action that publicly expresses the conviction that a wrong has occurred or is ongoing, thereby condemning the wrong; and (2) the act of condemnation is intended to garner ameliorative steps by some targeted group (e.g., the state or grassroots actors). While the expression of condemnation is important, it might appear to be only cathartic or mere posturing (a way for the dissenter to appear as if he or she cares) if not also aimed at correcting the problem. Accepting this conception, some might regard hip hop dissent as *politically* impure if it fails to satisfy condition (2). However, I want to question the assumption that all valuable political dissent must be aimed at correcting a wrong or injustice.

To sharpen the issue, it may be helpful to reflect for a moment on Albert Hirschman's influential model of political engagement.<sup>33</sup> *Voice*, on his account, is any attempt to change an objectionable state of affairs by publicly expressing one's disapproval or dissatisfaction. With *exit*, those dissatisfied with a political organization or polity simply leave it, refuse to support it, and perhaps join another more to their liking, which can sometimes pressure the former organization or polity to change its ways. Voice and exit, in Hirschman's view, are both political tactics, sometimes used in combination, to bring about change. When exit is not an option (for example, when there is no place to go or one cannot leave), voice is what remains (leaving aside revolution).

Notice that on this account "voice" is deemed valuable because of its potential to influence those with decision-making power. However, I think a broader conception of voice in

political affairs is needed. We might contrast *voice as influence*, which is aimed at altering the status quo, with *voice as symbolic expression*, which is not primarily concerned with its impact on those in power (Allen will make use of this distinction in her chapter). I'm seeking to understand the morality of dissent without relying on consequentialist reasoning, and this means, at a minimum, not reducing voice to influence. Many people think the only *point* there could be to dissent is to effect social change and its only *justification* is the moral right to influence government policy.<sup>34</sup> Dissent is not, however, always a means to some extrinsic end; it is not only a political tactic. Its value cannot be measured solely in terms of the good social consequences it brings about. Its "effectiveness" is sometimes properly measured by how well it gets its message across to its intended audience and not by whether that audience responds with political activism or policy initiatives.

Not all impure dissent should be understood as a kind of political activism or a substitute for activism. Impure dissent, in all its forms is, however, as I've emphasized, political speech, a form of communicative action in a complex and multilayered public sphere. Dissent is a public act. Messages of dissent call out to be agreed with, rebutted, and sometimes acted upon. The public sphere is widely viewed as a forum for reasoned communicative exchange about matters of public concern. So what are we to make of dissent, like much political rap, that does not appear to be offered in the spirit of rational exchange, when the call does not seem to be looking for a response? When dissent is one-sided in this way, it may be regarded as *morally* impure, for the dissenters are, in effect, refusing to listen to criticisms or replies to their claims. The dissenters may appear arrogant, thinking themselves infallible oracles; or they may seem to be lacking in an appropriate civic spirit of reciprocity.

There's another possibility, though. Perhaps the dissenters regard some of their critics as arguing in bad faith. These listeners' callous indifference to the plight of the oppressed, the dissidents may have concluded, is a sign that meaningful reciprocal exchange is not possible. Of course, those offering impure dissent may have open and fruitful exchanges with *some* members of the public (say, within various counterpublics or parallel publics), those they regard as having the *moral standing* to disagree (e.g., those among the oppressed or those who participate in and respect hip hop cultural expression).<sup>35</sup> But they may refuse to engage in dialogue with the public at large or with those in power.

So, impure hip hop dissent, when it takes the form of symbolic expression, is often an unconventional act in the public sphere. But when political voice does not aim to effect social change or to advance public debate, what might be its point or value?

### **The Ethics of Symbolic Dissent**

There is a *complicity* argument for symbolic dissent. Thomas Hill explains its underlying principle this way: One should avoid being a willing contributor to wrongdoing even if this won't prevent or end the wrong.<sup>36</sup> This kind of argument works well for those who could be mistaken for collaborators in the wrong or perhaps for third-party bystanders who are in some way associated with the perpetrators. Wealthy rappers like Nas can thus offer this kind of defense of their impure dissent. But the complicity argument does not work so well for the severely disadvantaged, like poor black kids still stuck in the ghetto. The oppressed are the ones being victimized by harmful wrongdoing; no one suitably informed could reasonably take them

to be (culpably) complicit in their own degradation (which is not to deny that they might sometimes make choices that make their plight worse).

Hill argues that one justification for symbolic dissent is to “disassociate oneself from evil.” This can be accomplished through publicly denouncing the wrongful actions and standing with the victims in solidarity. However, the need for disassociation presupposes that one has (perhaps implicitly) associated oneself with the offending group—i.e., that one is a member or could be reasonably regarded as a member. If one cannot just quit the group or if quitting would entail high costs that it would be unreasonable to expect one to bear, then one should at least make one’s opposition to the group’s action explicit. Again, the disassociation argument, when offered by rich and famous hip hop artists, may have merit. But it is hard to see how this works for marginalized black urban youth, many of whom participate in symbolic hip hop dissent. It is not plausible to conclude that they condone, say, the state’s failure to ensure a just opportunity structure, to provide adequate public schools, or to maintain a fair criminal justice system. So they do not seem to have a compelling reason to disassociate themselves from the agents of injustice, as their silence cannot be interpreted as a sign of consent or approval. But Hill points us in the right direction with the idea that symbolic dissent is a way of expressing solidarity with the victims of an injustice. Unfortunately, he does not develop this idea.

To see how we might advance it, let’s return briefly to Hirschman’s (1970) framework. In addition to voice and exit, Hirschman places emphasis on the workings of *loyalty* within the dynamics of political engagement. Loyalty is the special attachment to an organization or polity that keeps one from exiting even when one is deeply dissatisfied with it. Loyalty leads one to stick it out despite one’s discontent. Hirschman argues that loyalty can lead one to resort to voice (understood as influence) even though one could just leave. He also insists that, when one is

dissatisfied, loyalty is rational only if there is a reasonable expectation that things will improve. It is this belief that reform is feasible that leads one to voice discontent with the expectation that one will be listened to and positive changes will occur as a result.

Many organized protests during the Civil Rights Movement—from the Montgomery boycott to the March on Washington—can be understood within Hirschman’s schema. One can readily find in, say, King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech that familiar mix of militant dissent, loyalty to an imperfect nation, and hope for a brighter future. Many in the Civil Rights Movement firmly believed that reform from within could be achieved. The framework also makes sense of the actions of ex-patriates like Stokely Carmichael and W.E.B. Du Bois, figures who loudly protested against US injustices for years only to conclude that reform from within could not be achieved and thus chose exit.

However, understanding the impure dissent of the young ghetto poor requires a revised framework of political engagement. Black ghetto youth often do not believe that they have the power to change their society. In fact, they often feel that their voices are completely ignored in public deliberation. Moreover, they generally lack the option of exit, from the ghetto or the society at large. So it is natural to wonder: Why are they still engaging in dissent, and what do they hope to achieve by it? I think the answers do have something to do with loyalty, but these loyalty-based answers don’t fit Hirschman’s treatment.

I want to suggest that impure hip hop dissent, in addition to publicly condemning an injustice, has at least two further expressive functions: to publicly pledge loyalty to the oppressed and to explicitly withhold loyalty from the state.<sup>37</sup> Symbolic dissent is often a public declaration of loyalty to an oppressed group. This dissent is the expression of solidarity with the oppressed against perceived injustice, not so much because those in power may change course as a result,

but because the dissenters want to make clear whose side they are on. This expression of solidarity need not be an attempt to mobilize an oppressed group to engage in some political action. But it does go beyond attempts to avoid complicity or to disassociate oneself from evil. It is not simply about keeping one's hands clean. Rather, it is a positive expression of association with those most burdened by the injustices one condemns. Such dissent is a way of pledging allegiance to the downtrodden (or perhaps the affirmation of a vow already made), a way of signaling that one is prepared to come to their defense and can be trusted as an ally. Often the oppressed are eager to have their grievances acknowledged, to know that others recognize and empathize with their undeserved plight. Impure dissent is sometimes a response to this (implicit) call. In other words, rap songs like Nas's "N.I.G.G.E.R. (The Slave and The Master)" not only denounce the structural injustices that reproduce ghetto conditions, but they also say to the ghetto subaltern, "I'm with you in solidarity," or, in the black urban vernacular, "I'm a 'nigger,' too."

However, the audience for impure dissent is not limited to the oppressed. It often also includes the perpetrators of injustice, those otherwise complicit, and even third-party bystanders. This "speaking truth to power" need not be aimed at getting the powerful to change course. Where there is the conviction that no realistic hope exists for social justice, those engaged in political dissent may not be aiming at garnering assent from the powerful or the broader public. But while the dissenters may be not trying to convince others of the validity of their claims of injustice, they still seem to want the general public to know that they dissent, that they stand in opposition to some social practice, even when they know the public is highly unlikely to agree with, or even take seriously, their stance. The *content* of the dissent is what is being communicated, not the grounds of the dissent. But, again, what is the point of this act of communication with the wider public?

One possibility is this: By engaging in this symbolic expression, they are signaling publicly that they are withholding their allegiance from the state and other mainstream institutions. They are registering that they do not recognize the state's authority over them and are voicing their lack of respect for society's unfair rules. In its most radical form, this type of dissent is a way of publicly declaring one's unwillingness to submit freely to society's unfair expectations. And where the dissenters do yield to the power of conventional authority, they are putting everyone on notice that their compliance is not given out of loyalty or a sense of civic duty.

Where loyalty to a nation is expected of all its citizens, the traditional way to signal that one is withholding loyalty is to exit the society and join a different one—"to love it or leave it." However, one can withhold loyalty without literally exiting, and it is possible to voice dissent without doing so as a member of the loyal opposition. This *symbolic exit* is one of the things that impure dissent, as a performative act, can accomplish. Though the possibilities for achieving social justice are judged to be dim and emigration is not an option, rather than simply capitulate and stand by in silence or sigh and passively hope that things get better, one may choose symbolic dissent.

This interpretation can shed light on one of the most notorious features of impure political rap—its tendency to celebrate lawlessness and outlaw figures. When civic loyalty is publicly withheld or disavowed, the reason may be that the dissidents regard the social order as so unjust and irredeemable that it has no legitimacy in their eyes. The society no longer has (if it ever did have) the power to summon spontaneous allegiance from many who are subject to its laws. In view of the longstanding and gross injustices that ghettos represent, legal demands in



particular are sometimes treated as non-binding.<sup>38</sup> As Nas raps in “Breath” (2008), “In America, you’ll never be free / Middle fingers up, fuck the police / Damn, can nigga just breath?”

The themes of lawlessness frequently found in hip hop dissent may not, then, be an expression of “nihilism,” at least not if that term implies a rejection of all values—moral, legal, and religious. Rather, they may be a public declaration that positive law (the rules that comprise a legal order) has no normative force, at least not for the ghetto poor. This is not the same as saying that morality has no normative authority, since the opposition to the status quo is generally premised on its injustice. Moreover, the other expressive function of impure dissent—to communicate solidarity with the oppressed—is also motivated by a moral concern, namely, the undeserved suffering of the victims of injustice. This is, I believe, a defensible political morality rooted in the everyday experience of the dispossessed in America’s ghettos.<sup>39</sup> And thus, at least *some* of the moral and political impurities found in conscious rap are part of the point.

### **Impurity of the Dissenter**

Even if we can accept (or at least tolerate) the moral and political impurities of the content and inflection of hip hop dissent, we might still object to the impurities of its messengers. If the dissenter is widely believed to be seriously deficient in virtue (perhaps he’s an unrepentant former drug dealer or pimp), those who observe his acts of symbolic dissent may be inclined not to take him seriously as a political agent and therefore not to engage with the content of his message. There is the belief, perhaps mostly implicit rather than openly defended, that dissenters must be morally upright if their grievances are to be given an honest hearing. (Consider the tactics of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.) If the virtue condition is accepted, though, impure hip

hop dissent will almost always be dismissed or ignored, for many who participate in it are far from paragons of moral virtue. But the virtue condition is unfounded. It is an elementary fallacy to reject the content or ground of a claim simply because the person who puts it forward exhibits major vices.

Now, one might reasonably be reluctant to express agreement or solidarity with an impure dissenter if the dissenter's impurity is evidence that the dissenter is insincere or an opportunist. So perhaps there is a *sincerity* condition, though not a virtue condition.<sup>40</sup> Here the dissenter's mode (the type of activity used to express it) and mood (the state of mind that animates it) are relevant. For instance, all things being equal, underground hip hop artists have more political credibility than successful commercial rappers. This is fair. Impure dissent that gains artists immense fame or wealth makes it reasonable for observers to wonder whether the performance of dissent is simply a posture taken for private advantage, a cynical exploitation of the plight of the oppressed to fill the artists' pockets with cash. Similarly, we have reason to doubt the sincerity of impure dissenters when they regularly violate the moral principles on which their protest rests or culpably contribute to the reproduction of the unjust structures they are ostensibly opposed to. Such hypocrisy and complicity can be evidence that the impure dissenter is not a trustworthy or loyal ally in the fight against injustice, notwithstanding the fact that his or her message of dissent has merit.

Sometimes, however, attacks on the sincerity of a rap artist are really misplaced criticisms of a *character* the rapper plays within the context of a hip hop narrative. Rap is a popular art form in which the MC often assumes a persona in accordance with the conventions of a subgenre. For instance, gangsta rap (like gangster films) follows certain familiar stylistic norms and narrative conventions. A rapper may deploy the voice of the gangster figure, rely on over-

the-top violent lyrics, construct menacing crime stories, or use other conventions of gangsta rap to convey his or her message of dissent. It is therefore easy to confuse the norms of the subgenre with the content of the political message or to mistake the persona for the artist who adopts it.<sup>41</sup>

Some regard the lack of a consistent message (within a given song or album or across a body of work) as a sign of insincerity. For instance, Nas is notorious for one minute rapping about the greatness of the black militant Huey Newton and the next boasting about the size of the rims on his Lamborghini. However, a hip hop song or album is not the musical equivalent of a treatise in political philosophy or even an op-ed. It cannot be held to the same standards of coherence. An album like *Untitled* may have multiple objectives, some of which may be in tension. Inconsistency and lack of cohesiveness may be markers of subpar art, but they are not necessarily signs of moral insincerity or a disregard for the truth.

## **Conclusion**

Following conventional wisdom, we might conclude that there are basically three options for oppressed groups: (1) stand and fight for justice, (2) try to escape injustice by leaving the oppressive environment; or (3) quietly submit to injustice and attempt to eke out a tolerable existence within its constraints. These options are not mutually exclusive, as they can be combined or taken up sequentially. Fighting for change and escaping unjust circumstances can also be joined with impure modes of dissent. That is, the oppressed can engage in normatively transgressive political speech as a tactic to effect change or as a last salvo as they exit the scene (Ethan Zuckerman's discussion of China in this volume resonate here).

But there is a fourth option—open and principled dissent without fleeing and without expecting or fighting for change. When this symbolic protest takes the form of impure dissent, it is not a tactic to effect reform, since its messengers have lost hope for meaningful social progress. It is not exactly a good-bye message either, since these impure dissenters are generally not seeking to exit nor, in most cases, are they able to. But it is not mere submission or even accommodation, for impure dissenters are, despite the consequences, publicly and honestly voicing their dissatisfaction with the status quo and announcing their refusal to willingly go along with their society’s unreasonable demands and expectations. They are effectively choosing symbolic exit, explicitly disavowing any loyalty to the polity and its norms. Yet they are, in a sense, standing their ground, remaining firmly opposed to the prevailing social order and to the malicious, selfish, and complacent attitudes of their fellow citizens.

Viewed in this way, symbolic impure dissent can be a valuable public act of protest, a meaningful mode of resistance to injustice. But its value is easily missed if we fail to recognize that the political morality of dissent includes non-instrumental elements that are purely expressive. This type of symbolic expression is not always aimed at shaping debate within the broader public sphere. Nor is its objective always to pressure the state into enacting reforms. But neither should it be viewed as merely cathartic, escapist, or some other way of “coping” with oppression. In publicly communicating condemnation of injustice, solidarity with the oppressed, and defiance in the face of illegitimate authority, impure dissent is a vital element of the political ethics of the oppressed, and hip hop/new media is sometimes the vehicle for its expression.

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<sup>1</sup> King, Jr. 1958; Robinson 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Lott 1992, Rose 1994, and D with Jah 1997.

<sup>3</sup> This theme is explored in the documentary *Uprising: Hip hop and the L.A. Riots*, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> These diametrically opposed, even Manichean, assessments of hip hop are helpfully reviewed and incisively critiqued in Rose 2008.

<sup>5</sup> For more nuanced discussions of the meaning of urban riots, see Gooding-Williams 1993.

<sup>6</sup> For brief overviews of this debate, see Dawson 2001, 74-82 and Jeffries 2011, 10-15.

<sup>7</sup> See Boyd 2003.

<sup>8</sup> For further reflections on the limits of the civil rights paradigm of political dissent, see Beltrán, this volume.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of some of the ways adults have historically sought to supervise and shape youth's political development and civic engagement, see Light, this volume.

<sup>10</sup> See Jargowsky 1997, 12-17.

<sup>11</sup> See Shelby 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Forman 2002 and Perry 2004.

<sup>13</sup> See Watkins 2009 and Cohen and Kahne 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Allen elaborates this point in her chapter for this volume. Also see Young 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Mansbridge 1994 and Fraser 1997, chap. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Spence 2011, 8-11.

<sup>17</sup> Warner 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Boyd 2010 and Varnelis 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Ogbar 2007, chap. 5.

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of this issue, see Dean 2003.

<sup>21</sup> In this volume, Wendy Chun explores the concerns connected to the monetizable status of culture products that circulate digitally.

<sup>22</sup> The difference between a motive and an intention can be distinguished in terms of two questions: what is the agent trying to achieve (intention) and why is he or she trying to achieve this objective (motive)?

<sup>23</sup> Kelley 1994 and Hanchard 2006.

<sup>24</sup> See Scott 1990, chap. 7. Impure hip hop dissent within repressive regimes does often take the form of infrapolitics, as dissidents can be jailed, raped, maimed, or killed for open dissent.

<sup>25</sup> West 1993, chap. 1.

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.contactmusic.com/news/reverend-jackson-blasts-nas-for-controversial-album-title\\_1046952](http://www.contactmusic.com/news/reverend-jackson-blasts-nas-for-controversial-album-title_1046952)

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.datpiff.com/Nas-The-Nigger-Tape-mixtape.15983.html>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mfz7wVxzuoE>; and <http://www.myspace.com/nas/music/songs/be-a-nigger-too-9659882>

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Weiss 2008; Hintz 2008; and Caramanica 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Reed 2000, 167-170.

<sup>31</sup> Reed 2000, 170. For a similar point of view, see Bynoe 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Baraka 1999.

<sup>33</sup> Hirschman 1970.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Schochet 1971.

<sup>35</sup> See Morgan 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Hill 1979.

<sup>37</sup> These are not the only reasons marginalized black youth might find intrinsic value in impure symbolic dissent. This type of dissent can also be a way of affirming one's moral worth in the face of injustice, a way of preserving one's self-respect. I develop this point in "Liberalism, Self-Respect, and Troubling Cultural Patterns in Ghettos," in *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth*, ed. Orlando Patterson and Ethan Fosse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>38</sup> Lawson, 2005, argues that political rap artists, in light of continuing injustices against blacks, view the social contract in America as voided.

<sup>39</sup> See Shelby 2007.

<sup>40</sup> In her insightful discussion of the ethics of symbolic communication, Danielle Allen emphasizes sincerity as a condition for just "culture jamming." See Allen, "Political Equality and Communicative Action," (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>41</sup> For a helpful analysis of the role of personas in hip hop and the challenge this poses for extracting the meaning of rap messages, see Thompson 2005.