

2019

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Pablo Lopez

Santa Clara University, plopez2@scu.edu

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### Recommended Citation

Lopez, Pablo (2019) "The Reagan Era's Effect on Hip Hop (and Vice Versa): How Hip Hop Gained Consciousness," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 23 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol23/iss1/12>

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## **The Reagan Era's Effect on Hip Hop (and Vice Versa): How Hip Hop Gained Consciousness Pablo Lopez**

**DISCLAIMER:** *This work includes explicit language. Any explicit content within this paper are solely the opinions of the respective artists or writers and are not reflective of my personal opinion.*

We cannot underestimate how far Hip Hop has come in the last 40 years. Since its birth in the late-1970s, Hip Hop has consisted of four elements: Disc Jockeying (DJing), Emceeing, Breakdancing, and Graffiti. Some these elements have been disbanded over time, nearly to the point of extinction, but there is no questioning the weight that is carried by the Emcees today. Rappers are today's rock stars, surpassing the boundaries of recorded music and finding success as actors, television stars, businessmen and businesswomen. Rap has soared to become the popular music of today, shattering sales, billboards, and becoming a global phenomenon. It is hard to imagine the music industry without the influence of rap music. However, the average listener may know strikingly little about its roots or the influential artists who have paved the way for Hip Hop to become what it is today.

One of the bridges connecting Hip Hop and jazz is the way both genres were solely the products of their respective environment. Hip Hop is inextricably linked to both the experiences of its artists and the history in which it arose. As jazz arose from its pioneers, notably Scott Joplin, Buddy Bolden, and Jelly Roll Morton, it blended Spanish, French, and Anglo-Saxon roots with the rhythms derivative of Africa, and presented it under the traditions of classical music.<sup>1</sup> Jazz began in the red light districts of Storyville, New Orleans among the prostitutes, pimps, and gangsters. From studying jazz's transformations up to the

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<sup>1</sup> Newton Francis, *The Jazz Scene* (New York and Oxford: Da Capo, 1975), 41.

1960s, we can begin to understand just how far Hip Hop has travelled in the past 40 years.

In the 1970s, Hip Hop was birthed by its forefathers, DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa, in the district of South Bronx, New York City. The young genre, carried by predominantly Black and Latino communities, became known for its fast tempo rhyme schemes, danceable break beats, and flashy, unique fashion. Hip Hop's sphere of influence grew as did its knowledge and breadth of its influences. DJs sampled the likes of James Brown, Sly & the Family Stones, Isley Brothers, and Chic, while Emcees rapped over instrumental breaks. However, Emcees' subject matter remained rather limited to the party culture it was surrounded by until the release of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message." The feature 1982 solo track stamped its mark on Hip Hop containing the popularly repeated famous line "It's like a jungle sometimes, It makes me wonder how I keep from going under."<sup>2</sup> This recording is perhaps the most influential early hip-hop record to shine light on on the everyday experiences of urban-based African-American youth.<sup>3</sup> Thus began the tradition and obligation of Hip Hop artists to include political, social, and cultural commentary within their lines.

This political fervor came to fruition in the Reagan Era, an extremely transformative era for the American economy and culture. In the simplest terms, the country transformed alongside the country. Hip Hop found the full breadth of its commercial capabilities with the release of The Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" in 1982. In the mid-1980s, its net-worth was further unleashed, skyrocketing artists such as RUN DMC, Beastie Boys, and Whodini to commercial success. But in the late-1980s, Hip Hop gained a consciousness that it had yet to receive through the Black Nationalist, Afrocentric artists KRS-One (of Boogie Down

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<sup>2</sup> Melle, Melle, and Duke Bootee, *The Message*, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Sylvia Robinson, Sugar Hill, 1982, CD.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, "Postindustrial Soul: Black Popular Music at the Crossroads," *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, no. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 488.

Productions) and Public Enemy. Boogie Down Productions' *By All Means Necessary* (1988) served as a prelude of sorts to perhaps the most influential Hip Hop album of this era, Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988). Hip Hop was still a product of its environment - the environment simply changed drastically. Within the backdrop of the Reagan Era, Hip Hop's adoption of a political consciousness in the late-1980s would be a justified, important, and extremely pertinent narrative telling of the environment which surrounded Hip Hop's artists.

Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism in Hip Hop were in no way limited to KRS-One and Public Enemy; rather, it was these two groups who became the most widespread vocal advocates for many of the issues relating to their social environments. Perhaps one of the most crucial mistakes of those unfamiliar with Hip Hop history is qualifying their music as "gangster rap." Although both "gangster rap" and Black Nationalist rap emerged at virtually the same time, they are far from interchangeable. Music historian Greg Dimitriadis calls the emergence of both subgenres at the same time "an ironic and uncomfortable reality,"<sup>4</sup> namely because of the stark disparity of subject matter between the two subgenres, muddling a unified message and creating an extremely double-sided image for Hip Hop outsiders. Dimitriadis is not alone, as one of the founding fathers of Hip Hop, Afrika Bambaataa, stated an adjacent opinion in a 1993 interview:

Before, we had people that was teaching, in New York...you had Public Enemy, you had KRS, and they was [painting] pictures that was waking up the people. Then [gangster rap] came from the West Coast, which, I'm sorry to say, was

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<sup>4</sup> Greg Dimitriadis, "Hip-Hop: From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative," *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, no. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 588.

negativity. Those are still my brothers, but they was teaching negativity.<sup>5</sup>

“Gangster rap” came to define the times as N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) would release *Straight Outta Compton* in the same year as *By All Means Necessary* (1988). The West Coast group garnered the full attention of media outlets, shedding negative light on Hip Hop music as a whole. However, the works of KRS-One and Public Enemy would prove to be much different, a phenomenon that was “waking up the people” by iterating real, ground level issues pertaining to the politically and socioeconomically suppressed environments that the artists KRS-One and Public Enemy considered themselves products of.

To better understand this environment, we must step into the late-1980s, a time period not so different from the present-day. The decade became defined by the United States’ first celebrity president, California’s own Ronald Reagan. Kevin Phillips, author of *The Politics of the Rich and Poor*, critiques Reagan’s administration: “The 1980s were the triumph of upper America - an ostentatious celebration of wealth, the political ascendancy of the richest third of the population and a glorification of capitalism, free markets, and finance.”<sup>6</sup> The 1980s were a critical time in which many of the disparities that already existed in America were further separated. Reaganomics legislation functioned off the basis of trickle-down economics, awarding tax cuts for the wealthy and big business in an effort to stimulate the economy. However, taxes would increase and benefits would evaporate for poor America, pinning a Black underclass into poverty. At the same time, white-flight promoted the growth of suburban America, furthering racial and economic isolation into the suburban white pockets and the

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<sup>5</sup> Ben Westhoff, *Original Gangstas: Tupac Shakur, Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and the Birth of West Coast Rap* (New York: Hachette Books, 2016), 228. Afrika Bambaataa interview at Columbia University October 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), xvii.

urban black pockets. One of these urban black pockets was the South Bronx, the birthplace of Hip Hop. Hip Hop did not originate from the ripest fruits of the 1980s, but grew out of the shadows of neglect, the underclass, which Reagan's administration deemed a worthy sacrifice for the rest of America to flourish. This was the legacy forced upon Hip Hop.

Boogie Down Productions (BDP) burst onto the Hip Hop scene in 1987 with their debut album *Criminal Minded*. The group, KRS-One and DJ Scott La Rock, quickly garnered a wide following as well as much controversy among other rap groups. KRS-One, the self-proclaimed Teacha, used *Criminal Minded* as a platform to establish not only BDP's rap credibility but the credibility of the South Bronx as the birthplace of Hip Hop, as told in the tracks "South Bronx" and "The Bridge Is Over," alluding to the misinterpretation of Queensbridge as the birthplace. Today, South Bronx as the birthplace is nearly universally accepted among artists. Although *Criminal Minded* is the most crucial to Hip Hop's evolution, it was BDP's next album *By All Means Necessary*, started later that year, that contained most of the grunt work of KRS-One's politically commentative subject matter.

Perhaps one of the biggest reasons for KRS-One's revolution of subject matter was the fatal shooting of his partner and mentor Scott La Rock five months after the release of *Criminal Minded*. The loss of Scott La Rock brought BDP's career to a brief hiatus, but the release of *By All Means Necessary* on May 31, 1988 ended this silence and introduced a new image for the group. The album name and cover directly referenced Malcolm X, reflecting a new militant, black nationalist aesthetic which KRS-One would come to embrace. The iconic cover shows KRS peering through the shades of a window, holding an Uzi in his right hand as Malcolm X did with his rifle in the iconic *Life* magazine shot in March 1964. As KRS-One alludes many times in *Criminal Minded* to his metaphorical armed and dangerous rapping abilities, KRS was now armed with a new purpose for *By All Means Necessary*, tackling the physical barriers that KRS and the Black community faced.

KRS opens many dialogues in *By All Means*, beginning with the tributary single “Stop the Violence.” This single served as a tribute to Scott La Rock, bearing the same name as a music industry movement that began after his death, preaching a message against black-on-black crime. But from the beginning, “Stop the Violence” contrasts from the movement before it as KRS discusses not black-on-black violence, but the political machines behind war:

Social studies will not speak upon political crooks  
It's just the presidents, and all the money they spent  
All the things they invent, and how their house is so  
immaculate  
They create missiles, my family's eating gristle.<sup>7</sup>

Instead of focusing on media portrayal of violence in America’s urban cities, KRS builds a parallel between the way we perceive war. In “Stop the Violence,” the government funded military build-up is just as violent as the black-on-black crime that garners media attention. In the midst of Cold War America, KRS-One’s narrative is an extremely important one. As America pointed a finger at the American underclass for their violence, KRS points one right back at our own government, using underclass taxes to fund the arms race while “[his] family’s eating gristle.” KRS-One’s questioning of authority recurs again and again in *By All Means*, as he moves to the effectiveness of the police force and legislators. Police authority would become one of the more prevalent themes in Hip Hop music to come, most notably in the highly controversial single “Fuck Tha Police” by N.W.A. In “Illegal Business,” KRS questions police, pharmaceutical companies, and legislative branches of their practices:

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<sup>7</sup>Boogie Down Productions, “Stop the Violence,” in *By All Means Necessary*, KRS-One, 1988, CD.

The police department, is like a crew,  
It does whatever they want to do  
In society you have illegal and legal,  
We need both, to make things equal  
So legal is tobacco, illegal is speed,  
Legal is aspirin, illegal is weed  
Crack is illegal, 'cause they cannot stop ya,  
But cocaine is legal if it's owned by a doctor  
Everything you do in private is illegal,  
Everything's legal if the government can see you.<sup>8</sup>

In questioning what drugs are considered legal, KRS-One alludes to the use of crack, an epidemic that infested urban communities throughout the United States. In his eyes, legislation that qualifies certain drugs as illegal unjustly targets people of color in urban neighborhoods. KRS's top-down vision, examining the legislative institutions creating our laws, allows him to see the prejudice underlying within the system. This system causes turmoil for the urban black communities in the form of incarceration and drug addiction. This incarceration became highly prevalent during Reagan's continuation of the War on Drugs, in which mandatory minimum sentences prosecuted offenders using crack cocaine excessively in comparison to offenders who used powder cocaine. This campaign specifically targeted poor black communities to eradicate the use of specific drugs like crack cocaine while maintaining the lax prosecution of others - those "owned by a doctor." The War on Drugs would continue to be a topic of discussion for many other Emcees who experienced its effects first hand throughout the 1980s. Although he was not the first Emcee to speak on the War on Drugs, KRS-One's controversial subject matter continued the pattern of proactivity and consciousness in Hip Hop music. He quickly

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<sup>8</sup>Boogie Down Productions, "Illegal Business," in *By All Means Necessary*. KRS-One, 1988, CD.



became a voice of reason for urban listeners, earning his nickname “The Teacha.” *By All Mean Necessary* is important in the narrative of Hip Hop because it is indeed the album that KRS became “The Teacha,” a title that persists to this day. His informativeness and commanding ethos brought a consciousness to Hip Hop that was previously not seen. Only one month after *By All Means*, another authoritative voice would emerge, creating an album recognized not only as one of the most influential in Hip Hop, but in American music.

Within the template of Reagan’s arch-conservative America, the release of Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* in June 28, 1988 was perhaps one of the scariest phenomena of the late 1980s. Following up their debut album *Yo! Bum Rush the Show!* (1987), Public Enemy would create a counter-culture narrative that continued much of what KRS-One left on the table. As Public Enemy’s publicist Bill Stephney once said, “Hip-Hop was not just a ‘Fuck you’ to white society, it was a ‘Fuck you’ to the previous Black generation as well.”<sup>9</sup> *Nation of Millions* embodied this to the core, clearly distinguishing Hip Hop into the Post-Civil Rights Era and becoming a new outlet of representation for Black people.

Public Enemy’s lead Emcee, Chuck D, would call Hip Hop “the black CNN” in years to come.<sup>10</sup> The group’s obligation to inform the urban black public through music would be their greatest strength. *Nation of Millions* demanded authority with their political and social commentary that was nearly as dense as the sonic wall of sound that Public Enemy created within their instrumentals. *Nation of Millions* was a nonstop attack from front to back, beginning with the album art.

The album art showed Chuck D and Flavor Flav behind bars with the Public Enemy logo - a black man in the crosshairs of a gun scope - above them. Through their simple imagery Public

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<sup>9</sup> Bill Stephney, *The Search for Identity* (Harlem, New York, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Mark Anthony Neal, “‘The Message’: Rap, Politics, and Resistance,” *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, no. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 435.

Enemy directed attention towards mass incarceration of African-Americans which grew from 87,000 in 1985 to 169,500 in 1990, nearly double in just five years.<sup>11</sup> Upon buying the album, consumers stared at the issue in the face, reminded that Public Enemy, as Black leaders, were not exempt from these trends. In the track “Terminator X to the Edge of Panic,” a sample of Minister Louis Farrakhan is heard proclaiming, “The federal government is the number one killer and destroyer of Black leaders!”<sup>12</sup>

On multiple occasions, the voice of Minister Farrakhan and other Islamic leaders is heard in *Nation of Millions*. Public Enemy were members of the Nation of Islam, unapologetically proclaiming their teachings and presenting themselves with their signature militancy. Minister Farrakhan, one of the most prevalent Nation leaders, was a vital reason for the Nation of Islam’s growth among Black communities in the 1980s. The Nation’s message was instilled within the very fabric of Public Enemy’s music, adding the political fervor of the teachings of Malcolm X, Farrakhan, and Marcus Garvey to name a few. But despite the heavy Black Nationalist firepower behind them, Public Enemy made clear that they were not concerned with continuing the Civil Right Movement. *Nation of Millions* did not open a dialogue between them and America, but rather they used history to completely denounce the government as revealed in the lyrics of “Party for Your Right to Fight”:

This party started right in '66  
With a pro-Black radical mix  
Then at the hour of twelve  
Some force cut the power and emerged from hell  
It was your so-called government that made this occur

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<sup>11</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear*. U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 1985, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Public Enemy, “Terminator X on the Edge of Panic,” in *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Chuck D, Rick Rubin, Hank Shocklee, 1988, CD.

Like the grafted devils they were.<sup>13</sup>

P.E. spins-off of Beastie Boys' popular song title "Fight For Your Right to Party" to reference the suppression of the Black Panther Party (created in 1966) by the U.S. government. He calls this government "grafted devils" in reference to the Nation of Islam's Doctrine of Yakub, claiming black asiatics as the original humans and white people as "grafts" off of the black population. The potency of Minister Farrakhan's Pro-Black rhetoric is not shied away by Chuck D, whose anti-government stance points to the heart of the issue: Black people do not have just representation in America. As evidenced by the suppression of the Panthers, Public Enemy now carried the flame, vowing to continue the work of the Panthers and oppose the white supremacy of the U.S. government. The anti-government stance stretches further, as Chuck D advocates for Reagan's impeachment in "Rebel Without A Pause":

Impeach the president, Pulling out the raygun (Reagan)  
Zap the next one, I could be ya shogun.<sup>14</sup>

This simple rhyme is evidence of Public Enemy as perhaps the first Hip Hop group to completely utilize their platform for political commentary. Through music, they became extensions of the same movement as KRS-One's "Teacha" platform, raising their audiences' awareness of issues around them. This recognition of power and responsibility is undoubtedly what made Public Enemy so effective to Black listeners. Pro-black radicalism was the megaphone that informed black listeners of why their conditions in America were they way they were. For Public

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<sup>13</sup> Public Enemy, "Party for Your Right to Fight," in *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Chuck D, Rick Rubin, Hank Shocklee, 1988, CD.

<sup>14</sup> Public Enemy, "Rebel Without a Pause," in *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Chuck D, Rick Rubin, Hank Shocklee, 1988, CD.

Enemy, the great majority of black oppression was America's continued possession of black bodies.

In "Night of the Living Baseheads," P.E. continues a conversation started a month earlier by KRS-One: drug infestation in urban America. Baseheads, users of free-base cocaine, were portrayed as horror film monsters possessed by drug addiction. This possession is best articulated by Dr. Khalid Abdul Muhammad in the opening of the song when he says, "Have you forgotten that once we were brought here, we were robbed of our name, robbed of our language. We lost our religion, our culture, our god...and many of us, by the way we act, we even lost our minds."<sup>15</sup> For Public Enemy and Dr. Muhammad, drug addiction is a continuation of the physical possession of black bodies initially brought forth by slavery. "Night of the Living Baseheads" as an antidrug statement not only tells of the dangers of drug use but the dangers of drug dealing, a self-destructive vice-grip on the Black community. Chuck D identifies another form of physical possession comes from the army recruits targeting African-Americans. Chuck D recalls getting a recruit letter in "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos:"

I got a letter from the government the other day  
I opened and read it, it said they were suckers  
They wanted me for their army or whatever  
Picture me giving a damn, I said never  
Here is a land that never gave a damn  
About a brother like me and myself because they never did  
I wasn't with it but just that very minute it occurred to me  
The suckers had authority.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Public Enemy, "Night of the Living Baseheads," in *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Chuck D, Rick Rubin, Hank Shocklee, 1988, CD.

<sup>16</sup> Public Enemy, "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos," in *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Chuck D, Rick Rubin, Hank Shocklee, 1988, CD.

Army recruits targeting young black men would often present a military career as a “way out.” Upon receiving a recruit letter, Chuck D’s expression in “Black Steel,” like KRS, examines a prejudiced system from the top-down. As America “never [gave] a damn” about him in the past, he finds no reason to give a damn about serving in a war on their behalf. To Chuck D, army recruitment is yet another outlet which suppresses black people under a white government, putting black bodies in the unconcerned, disposable role as the frontliners in America’s wars. Although the “suckers had authority,” Chuck D attempts to dismantle this authority by informing the public, stressing the consciousness and questioning of the institutions around them. This theme persists throughout the whole album.

*Nation of Millions* is not just a series of political commentaries over instrumentals. Public Enemy desired to create an institution of Black empowerment. In studying this purpose, Mark Anthony Neal writes, “Chuck D’s call for truth, justice and a black nationalist way of life was perhaps the most potent of any political narratives that had appeared on a black popular recording. Public Enemy very consciously attempted to have hip-hop serve the revolutionary vanguard, the way soul did in the 1960s.”<sup>17</sup> The tradition of soul artists like Gil-Scott Heron and Marvin Gaye took it upon themselves to not only entertain, but to educate listeners of the socio-political issues around them. This spirit, present in the same records that created Hip Hop, is carried by the Black Nationalist works of KRS-One and Public Enemy.

The instilling of a clear ideology within Hip Hop music effectively marked the genre as what Todd Boyd calls an “alternative institution.”<sup>18</sup> Marking the end of the Civil Rights movement, the Hip Hop of the late 1980s crafted the genre into an institution that has taken it upon itself to remain conscious, inform, and educate, launching America into what Todd Boyd boldly calls

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, “Postindustrial Soul,” 142.

<sup>18</sup> Todd Boyd and Yusuf Nuruddin, “Intergenerational Culture Wars: Civil Rights vs. Hip Hop,” in *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, no. 2, 440.

“The Reign of Hip Hop.”<sup>19</sup> We should not take it as coincidence that the genre’s pinnacle transformation happened in the late-1980s. Reagan’s America made clear the great divides that plagued America: White and Black, rich and poor. Hip Hop artists took it upon themselves to transform the genre from a commercial institution to a conscious institution. Artists such as Ice Cube in the 1990s, Mos Def and Talib Kweli in the 2000s, and Kendrick Lamar in the present day have continued the work of this institution.

In concluding, I am reminded of a stanza from Amiri Baraka’s poem “Black Art” written in 1969:

We want “poems that kill,”  
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot  
Guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys  
And take their weapons leaving them dead.<sup>20</sup>

In the grand scheme of American Black Art - beginning with the blues, jazz, stretching to soul, rhythm and blues, transcending into motown, funk, and disco - Hip Hop birthed from the combination of all Black Arts, sampling music of the African-American traditions and speaking a new breed of poetry. When Baraka craved “poems that kill,” he may have been craving the sounds of Public Enemy: militant, defiant Black Nationalist power that stand opposed to the authorities put before them. More than 40 years into Hip Hop’s history, we are led to examine if the works of KRS-One and Public Enemy still hold weight. Are we struggling with the same issues they faced? If so, who is continuing the flame? Whether or not we are still living in “The Reign of Hip Hop” is solely reliant on the consciousness of its artists.

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<sup>19</sup> Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.D. (Head Higgaz In Charge): The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (New York, NY: NYU Press), 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York, NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 219.