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Hip Hop Music and (Reading) the Narrative Soundtracks of New Black Realist Cinema

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Abstract and Keywords

Hip hop is noise. It is a composite binding of contemporary, postmodern technologies and orally based ideologies that disrupts the normative and traditional characteristics of mainstream media and culture in order to create a space for subcultural revolt and resistance. Nowhere is this more fascinating than in the soundtracks of New Black Realism, African American independent cinema of the 1990s. Drawing on case studies from some of the earliest work of Spike Lee, as the foremost proponent of the genre, this chapter reads the sound and music of these narrative films through fundamental characteristics in hip hop as a postliterate orality, arguing that such an approach allows us to explore the rebellious possibilities of the music as, not just on, the cinematic soundtrack.

Keywords: New Black Realism, hip hop, soundtrack, film sound, Spike Lee, postliterate orality, repetition, versioning, voice

Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise" (1988); Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* (1994); Tony Mitchell's *Global Noise* (2002); and the Beastie Boys' "Make Some Noise" (2011)—while just a snapshot of the titles on offer from hip hop's practitioners and researchers, it is clear from this list that throughout the almost fifty-year history of hip hop music, noise, in whatever form, has been one of hip hop's constant companions.¹ While "noisy textures" have always played a pivotal role in African American musics, from the grainy voice of Blind Willie Johnson through to the muted horn of Miles Davis, hip hop, as a postliterate orality,² holds a novel position in this lineage (Walser 1995, 197). As a complex fusion of orality and postmodern technology, hip hop maintains characteristics of orally based expressions while at the same time incorporating and destabilizing elements of the literate and technologically sophisticated society in which its practitioners live (Rose 1994, 85–86). In this intricate balance, hip hop does not just craft deteriorative textures to challenge mainstream media but in fact draws on those structures to dismantle the frameworks of dominant culture. Hip hop is noise because it challenges the normative

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and traditional characteristics of the social order that surrounds it in order to create a space for subcultural revolt and resistance (Attali 2003, 33–34). Nowhere is this more prevalent than in the sound and music of New Black Realist cinema, a collection of African American commercial independent films in which the aesthetics of hip hop culture stand as guiding principles (Diawara 1993, 23–25; Watkins 1998, 98). As an inherently literate medium, in which the two-dimensional frame of dialogue and image are the primary concern, narrative cinema is a channel by which the postliterate forces of hip hop, and its understanding of sound and music, are noisiest. With that in mind, this chapter reads these soundtracks through that clash, analyzing not just the use of hip hop music on film but also the way all elements of the New Black Realist soundtrack—dialogue, sound effects, and music—pull from the aesthetics of hip hop as a postliterate orality in their disruption of this mainstream medium. It is in that disruption that these soundtracks create moments of cinematic resistance, moments of mediated noise. While the genre of New Black Realism encompasses a number of directors and films, and many of these are mentioned in this work, this chapter will draw from select case studies in the filmography of the director Spike Lee, whose films offer some of the genre’s foremost examples, as a way to focus attention and discussion. Before doing so, however, it is first important to clarify what we mean when we talk about New Black Realism.

What Is So “New” about New Black Realism?

Much of the research that explores New Black Realism has defined it in disparate fashion. For example, Dan Flory has talked about “black noir films” (2008, 153); Guthrie P. Ramsey and Henry Louis Gates Jr. have mentioned “rapsploitation” and “guiltsploitation,” respectively (Ramsey 2003, 168; Gates Jr., 1992, 12); Bakari Kitwana has used the term “black gangster films” (2002); S. Craig Watkins has mentioned “hood films” or “ghetto(theme) action films” (1998, 170); Kenneth Chan has gone with the simple “black action films” (1998, 35); Mark A. Reid has alluded to “trendy ‘gangsta rap’ films” (1995, 457); Steven Kendall has drawn on the term “New Jack Cinema” (1994); and Ed Guerrero has been a little more specific with his “male-focused, ‘ghettocentric,’ action-crime-adventure films” (1993, 182). Aside from the fact that the distinct nature of each of these terms connects these films to alternative cinematic lineages, their varied nature also points toward the rather seismic cultural wave that New Black Realism echoed in the 1980s and 1990s, both for the films’ creators and for their audience.

This cinema occurred, in part, “because of the emergence of young, black, college-educated and middle-class directors” who pushed the movement forward collectively (Ramsey 2003, 168). While Spike Lee may be New Black Realism’s foremost proponent, the genre includes the work of John Singleton, Mario Van Peebles, Matty Rich, Ernest R. Dickerson, Leslie Harris, and Allen and Albert Hughes. Here, I roughly situate New Black Realism from Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) to Hype Williams’s sole directorial effort, *Belly* (1998). While the vast majority of New Black Realist cinema was certainly produced within the first five years of the 1990s, key elements of its expression were still felt across a number of films toward the end of the twentieth-century. However, more than dates and

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directors, there is one fundamental characteristic that is key here. While there are of course components of “action,” “gangstas,” and “ghettos” across these films, they are constituent parts of each film’s attempt to reflect, as much as any mediated presentation can, the immediate reality of its creators and intended audience. Most interestingly, for New Black Realist cinema, that intent to engage and explore its contemporary existence places hip hop culture and its expressions at the fulcrum of these films.

The term “New Black Realism” stems from Manthia Diawara’s 1993 work, *Black American Cinema*. Diawara suggests that films such as *Boyz ‘N’ the Hood* (1991), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), and *Juice* (1992) explore “the existent reality of urban life in America,” arguing that, “just as in real life,” these films are set “in neighborhoods that are pulled between gang members, rappers, and education-prone kids.” Diawara qualifies his determination in the assessment of his students, who contend that these films “use hip hop culture” as the new black youth culture in modern America and so “the characters look real because they dress in the style of hip hop, talk the lingo of hip hop [and] practice its world view toward the police and women” (1993, 24–25). In positioning these films at the generic crossroads between fact and fiction (Smith 1992, 57), New Black Realism comes to be defined by the creation of the “New Black Youth Culture” of the late twentieth century (Kitwana 2002, 123). With that, relevant research has tended toward a discussion of the narrative material present on screen and an account of the off-screen world in which these films have been created. In the case of the former, researchers like Ed Guerrero (1993), Melvin Donalson (2007), and Kimberley Fain (2015) assert that, among other things, the physical presence of stars like Ice Cube, Ice-T, Nas, Queen Latifah, or Tupac have offered a sense of authenticity in New Black Realism’s attempts to reflect the reality of hip hop culture (Fain 2015, 132). In the case of the latter, S. Craig Watkins argues, “it is difficult to write about black filmmaking without also considering the specific social and historical processes that forged the space for its production and the spirit for its imagination and vigor” (1998, 5). Watkins explores the institutionalized conservative platform of late twentieth-century America, arguing hip hop culture took shape “within the context of profound social, economic, and technological transformations that reorganized the possibilities for collective and symbolic action” (1998, 7). For scholars like these, New Black Realism stands as film produced within, and reflective of, a very particular set of social and economic conditions, becoming tools for anthropological and ethnomusicological studies of the community. Hip hop is, however, a highly mediated culture, so the cinematic realism of these films depends not just on what is onscreen but also on the way that material is presented to its audience, an obvious point in the films’ soundtracks.

Throughout the short life of New Black Realism, hip hop songs, voices, and musical influences have featured across its soundscapes. For example, the soundtracks of Ernest R. Dickerson’s *Juice* (1993) featured the work of Big Daddy Kane, Salt ‘N’ Pepa, and Cypress Hill, while Mario Van Peebles’s *New Jack City* (1991) featured 2 Live Crew and Ice-T. Scholars have so far proposed two interconnected aspects in this area. First, they have suggested that hip hop merchandising prevails across the New Black Realist soundtrack (Donalson 2007, 38), as the music emerged at “an opportune time for

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Hollywood” (Donalson 2007, 125). In this way, “Black filmmakers . . . [were] not so much actors producing change but rather actors who [were reacting] to and [exploiting] a rapidly changing social world” (Watkins 1998, 103). Second, the field has also pointed toward the intertextual weight of using hip hop music on film soundtracks, contending that the music acts as a cultural artifact that passes into a film’s aural composition and offers audiences a predefined understanding of key points in the film narrative. In this vein Donalson has argued the “codes of masculinity, language, clothing and use of guns emanates from gangsta rap” in films like John Singleton’s *Boyz ‘N’ The Hood* (2007, 38), while Houston A. Baker Jr. has pointed to the fact that these same cultural codes made their way into Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* through the soundtrack’s use of Public Enemy (1991). But this is not where hip hop music’s importance to these filmic expressions ends. The music’s unique nature, as a postliterate orality, means that its role as a guiding principle in New Black Realism offers more than just the simple translation of popular music to the film soundtrack.

In his discussion of digital sampling in hip hop, for instance, Jeff Rice argues the music is built on a “whatever process”—the idea that you take whatever you find and use it to construct the music (2003, 454). Hip hop, then—or at least the hip hop comparable to the timeframe of these films—is not just a collection of canonic songs or sonic artifacts but rather a process of compositional techniques and aesthetics that can encompass any and all forms of sound or music. Therefore, rather than focusing simply on the use of particular songs on these soundtracks that fit into the genre of hip hop, it is in fact pertinent to read the dialogue, sound effects, and music of New Black Realist cinema through the aesthetics of hip hop. This is not a radically alternative approach to cinematic sound but a simple extension of conventional thought on the matter. Traditional film music scholarship, including that of Claudia Gorbman (1987), Caryl Flinn (1992), and Kathryn Kalinak (1992) has consistently drawn on the aesthetics of opera and the concert hall in its discussions of mainstream cinematic sound, from the connections of particular instrument groups with certain expressions of gender or otherness, to the focus on the leitmotif—drawing on the traditions of Richard Wagner—and its role in character development onscreen. This chapter simply calls for hearing this culturally specific cinema and its soundtrack through the musical aesthetics that are particular to its cultural existence. That same scholarship, and the neo-classical Hollywood film soundtracks at the center of much of its focus, also offers an important counterweight in this study.

Emerging as the dominant approach to cinematic soundtracks in the early 1970s, the return to classical scoring practices can be interpreted as operating in tandem with these same films’ reference to the narrative techniques of 1930s and 1940s classical Hollywood, as the narrative format for the blockbuster was seen to match with the B-movie adventure films popular at that time (Davison 2004, 3). This style of composition, apparent in the scores of composers like John Williams, worked to “encourage the audience to surrender to the film and fully engage with the emotional worlds and action depicted on screen” (3). To do so these scores privileged dialogue, synchronized music and action, and used music as content to “control narrative connotation” (Kalinak, cited

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in Davison 2004, 2). Still, as classical cinema and its soundtracks were not just a “historical moment or set of conventions” but a “nexus of style, ideology, technology, and economics which coalesced during a particular time and particular place” (Kalinak cited in Davison 2004, 2-3), the return to those aesthetics in the cinema of the 1970s, as Anahid Kassabian points out (2001), functioned as a regeneration of conservative, Western-centric, bourgeois, heterosexual, and largely masculine values (Davison 2004, 3). As those values have continued to reflect projections of mainstream culture, so too has the neo-classical Hollywood film score functioned as a form of dominant ideology in relation to which alternative scoring and soundtrack practices assert themselves (Davison 2004, 6). So, as we explore the influence of hip hop as a postliterate orality on the sounds and music of the New Black Realist soundtrack, we must do so against the ballasts of the neo-classical film score.

The rest of the chapter is separated into three distinct sections. Exploring aspects of repetition, language and orality, and versioned samples, these sections progress from a more obvious focus on the aesthetics of hip hop in the use of the music on film to the reading of these noisy aesthetics in the structuring of sounds and musics not necessarily thought of in discussions of the genre. This approach highlights the way hip hop sound and music disrupt the mainstream film soundtrack to create culturally specific meanings and narratives in New Black Realist cinema and thus craft noisy soundtracks that use film as a space for a mediated resistance.

“Sound of the Funky Drummer”: Repetition, Nonteleological Patterns, and the Haptic Soundtrack in *Do the Right Thing* (1989)

Repetitive words, rhythms, and musical phrases have long been recognized as a focal constituent of African music and its contemporary American descendants (Snead 1984, 68). While the success of Run-DMC in the middle of the 1980s “consolidated and commodified hip hop as an aural form” (Dimitriadis 1996, 185), its early years on the block corners of New York City were the soundtrack to dancing at neighborhood parties. DJ Kool Herc, one of hip hop’s earliest practitioners, noticed the young dancers who came to his performances were waiting for certain parts of each record to play. They were focusing on the breaks, when the lyrics and musical interests of the track would dissipate to reveal the simple, usually percussive heart of each song. Realizing this, Herc developed a technique known as the “merry-go-round.” Here two copies of the same record were played on two record players and back-cued against each other so that Herc could turn five- or ten-second breakdowns into five-minute loops (Chang 2006, 79). In this emphasis on repetition, hip hop brought “the cut,” the moment when the music skips back to the beginning of the sample, to the fore of its expressions (Snead 1984, 69). While in dominant media such breaks tend to be hidden, smoothed over so as to not expose the frame of the expression, in hip hop the prominent use of “the cut” is an attempt to control the uncontrollable by looking to make room for accidents and rupture inside the system

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of expression itself (Snead 1984, 67), creating noise that can bring to the fore a repressed “truth-content” (Thompson and Biddle 2013, 4-5). In that sense this repetition establishes hip hop as a nonteleological structure that drives not toward a singular goal but rather to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path through the moment when the music is “cut” and to draw on what that “cut” represents (Fink 2005, 38).

Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” is the musical centerpiece to Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989). While it features as the nondiegetic soundtrack to the opening credits, it also appears as a diegetic motif throughout the film story. Although it uses a myriad of different samples, it is the drumming of Clyde Stubblefield on James Brown’s “Funky Drummer” (1970) that serves as the backbone of the track. Emanating from his portable boombox onscreen, the song is tied to Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), a character whose death marks the film’s closing. In this connection “Fight the Power” appears at junctures of potential communal or cultural conflict: from Raheem’s first appearance, where he professes “peace” to his friends, to his “Love and Hate” speech with Mookie (Spike Lee); from the scene preceding his heated discussions with the Korean store clerks over batteries to his boombox “volume” battle with a group of young Latino men. At each of these points in the narrative the balance of peace and violence seems to be in question. And at each of these points, as a sense of tranquility and calmness descends, that balance eventually tips toward peace. This changes when Radio Raheem and Buggin’ Out (Giancarlo Esposito) confront the pizza parlor owner Sal (Danny Aiello) over the lack of African American figures on the “Wall of Fame” in his pizzeria. Raheem and Buggin’ Out argue that as his paying customers their culture is as important to Sal’s establishment as his own Italian heritage. As the scene climaxes, Sal smashes what he calls the “noise” of Raheem’s boombox, which once again plays “Fight the Power.”

In film sound’s fundamental academic text, *Unheard Melodies* (1987), Claudia Gorbman defines the role and purpose of the cinematic soundtrack in relation to the film image. She suggests that because of its abstract nature, sound and music in mainstream cinema tend to be constructed so that the spectator does not consciously hear the film score. This “inaudibility,” Gorbman contends, creates a state of regression and safety in which film music allows the audience to willingly engage with the fantasies onscreen (1987, 31-32). The pizza parlor scene in *Do the Right Thing* marks a distinct move away from this approach. Traditionally, here, we would expect that a portion of the nondiegetic soundtrack would underpin the theatrical buildup of this scene, making the eventual clash between Sal, Radio Raheem, and Buggin’ Out seem natural within the progression of the film. As the images and dialogue crescendo toward this spillover, we would expect the music to guide the audience as they followed the story to its climax (Copland, referenced in Prendergast 1992, 222). We would also expect that the nondiegetic soundtrack would help to underline the psychological refinements of the characters and scenario at hand (Prendergast 1992, 216). This is, however, not what happens in this scene. Instead, as the characters scream at each other, “Fight the Power” continues to play diegetically on Raheem’s boombox. As we inch toward the impending clash, the music heads in the opposite direction. Line by line “Fight the Power” drops its components of musical interest, leaving just Clyde Stubblefield’s drum break, the bassline

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of The JB's "Hot Pants Road" (1970), and the vocal exclamations of Bob Marley and the Wailers' "I Shot the Sheriff" (1973). As the bare bones of the music continue to repeat, Sal smashes the music player. It is here that hip hop *creates* a moment of noise in the film soundtrack.

In defining hip hop as a postliterate orality, Tricia Rose notes that the music blurs the "distinction between literate and oral modes of communication by altering and yet sustaining important aspects of African American folk orality" (1994, 64, 85). Repetitive rhythms and cuts are one of the most prominent of these aspects, as they "illustrate a heightened attention to rhythmic patterns and movement between such patterns via breaks and points of musical rupture" (Rose 1994, 67). Rose further argues that the cutting and mixing of hip hop music "keeps the listener in a perpetual state of anticipation" (1994, 93). By locating Sal's violence against Radio Raheem's boombox in the cut and repeated loop of "Fight the Power," *Do the Right Thing* disrupts the climactic moment by locking the viewer into "a perpetual state of anticipation." In the nonteleological structure of hip hop's repetitive samples, the film soundtrack—theorized by traditional film literature as inaudible—becomes all too audible. As the music consciously returns to its point of origin again and again, the audience remains aware of its presence in a way that undercuts the scene's teleology. It provides no narrative progression in connection with the film image, instead offering, in the context of narrative cinema, a *noisy* silence. As Lisa Coulthard argues, silence can demand "a kind of resonant listening, one aimed not at full understanding, but rather unsettling openness" (2012, 17). This "silence" brings our attention to the materiality of the cinematic soundtrack and so troubles the "untroublesome" space that music usually offers to the film theater audience in narrative cinema (Kulezic-Wilson 2009). It takes away the safety and support of that space, the finality of the scene's climax, instead leaving the audience in a loop that remains open, unresolved.

"Blast of the Iron": Sound Effects and the Language of Crime and Control in *Clockers* (1995)

Language and the voice are pivotal components of both hip hop music and the mainstream narrative soundtrack, though each medium structures these elements in distinctly divergent ways. As mentioned previously, neo-classical Hollywood film and its soundtrack privilege dialogue, which is placed at the forefront of the film's sound world, leaving sound and music to back up and support that dialogue without challenging its primacy. To do that, sound and music restate the meanings of the pictures that they accompany from such a distance as to not call attention to themselves (Kracauer, referenced in Larsen 2007, 42). As a postliterate orality, hip hop privileges the voice and dialogue from a different vantage point. In *Black Noise*, Rose defines hip hop music as a "complex fusion of orality and postmodern technology" (1994, 85). The result of such a fusion is, simply, that hip hop's oral articulations are innately connected to postmodern

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technology and technological processes, “not only in the way that such oral traditions are formulated, composed, and disseminated, but also in the way that orally based approaches to narrative are embedded in the use of technology itself” (1994, 64). For Rose, this means that the music, its rhythmic patterns, and the idiosyncratic articulations in the voice are essential to the song’s meaning (1994, 88). In New Black Realist cinema, those articulations are often the vocalization of sound effects normally found in the periphery of the film soundtrack that are used to reflect the impinging nature of policing and social control on contemporary black culture and its mediated existence. It is in that disruption of the voice that these films are once again noisy cultural statements.

In his research on sound design in Hollywood, Gianluca Sergi has argued that the film sound effect is a “technical matter,” mapped by sound designers to augment the “emotional and sensual level of the film medium” (2006). He suggests that film sound effects “are understood as customarily providing ambience, mood, scope and size, but not information, characterisation and plot development” as these central elements of the film’s construction are left for the soundtrack’s more prominent components of music and, more specifically, dialogue. Sounds like these, for narrative film, qualify the existence of the world onscreen but seem to proffer little more than that. For that reason they reside almost exclusively at the borders of the film soundtrack, marking out the edge of the onscreen world and rarely intruding any further. In Michel Chion’s “Aural Triage,” in which he outlines the vococentric nature of film, the sound effect is narrative cinema’s tertiary component (Rogers 2006). In contrast, comparable sounds hold a much more important place in hip hop. The music’s focus on these sounds, which often include gunshots, whirring helicopter blades, and police sirens and radio, stems from “surveillance tracks,” a collection of songs that rose to prominence at the end of the 1980s (Nielson 2011, 351). Albums like Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* and N.W.A.’s *Straight Outta Compton* marked a sizable shift in hip hop, as the music became a vehicle for political discourse and change. This approach saw hip hop’s creators and performers looking to confront what they saw as the blatant racial inequalities in the world around them, and their challenge was mounted specifically in opposition to the American criminal justice system (Nielson 2010, 1257–1258). But, while songs like Public Enemy’s “Louder Than a Bomb” or N.W.A.’s “Fuck tha Police” talked of the intrusions of these forces in the lives of the black youth community, and the resistance that this community showed to such forces, there was also a tacit recognition of the futility of this resistance when challenging a “foe that is far more organized, powerful and technologically advanced” (Nielson 2011, 351). Despite the intent and artistic freedom of these artists, it appeared that the presence and power of the criminal justice system was impossible to evade. The result was a recurring presence of these tropes within hip hop’s lyrics and their ubiquitous sound in the music’s soundscapes. As these sounds became constituent elements of the music at the end of the 1980s so too did they become part of hip hop’s culturally coded language. Then, in their translation to the New Black Realist soundtrack, the iteration of these sounds carried that language with them.

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Adapted from Richard Price's novel of the same name, Lee's 1995 film *Clockers* follows Ronald "Strike" Dunham (Mekhi Phifer) as he coordinates a small group of low-level drug dealers for the neighborhood drug lord, Rodney Little (Delroy Lindo). The narrative plays into the central motif of Lee's work: the young black male body at the end of the twentieth century. Specifically, the film explores the damage and deterioration of this body through Strike himself, who—beyond beatings, murder, and drug use—suffers from severe stomach ulcers exacerbated by key moments of criminality, fear, and pressure. Lee explores this body through the voice and vocal exclamations of his characters in *Clockers*, specifically in their use of nonorganic sounds in the central vocal track. Film sound effects such as gunshots, car noises, explosions, and train whistles can be heard echoing through the human voice as "pop," "boom," "beep," "bam," "gat," and "choo choo." These sounds reflect Adam Krims's "percussion-effusive vocal style" of rapping in hip hop music, where musicians use their mouth as a percussive instrument (2000, 50–51), a style that can be heard on the *Clockers* soundtrack in the chorus of "Blast of the Iron" by Rebelz of Authority. Onscreen these vocal exclamations are apparent in the interrogation scenes in which Victor Dunham (Isaiah Washington) retells his story to Detective Rocco Klein (Harvey Keitel) and, later in the film, when Detective Klein interviews Tyrone "Shorty" Jeeter (Peewee Love). Rather than just providing a qualification of the onscreen space from the periphery of the cinematic soundtrack, the vocal utterance of these sounds creates a unique and nonlinear narrative expression. On one hand, these vocalized samples highlight the impending and unavoidable nature of what these sounds represent. While across other cinematic genres crime and the criminal justice system may move in and out of the lives of the characters, in *Clockers* such things are central to the mediated existence of the black male bodies onscreen. They are fundamental to the narrative. The presence of these sounds in the voice, then, not only qualifies the space onscreen but also defines a very particular space and a particular interaction with that space. On the other hand, these sounds also echo the control that such elements have, or attempt to have, over the film's central protagonists. During Shorty's interrogation, Detective Klein talks the young boy through what to say when the tape recorder is on so that he will escape the full repercussions of shooting Errol Barnes (Thomas Jefferson Byrd). As he does, the film image switches between the immediacy of the room in the police station and the visualization of Detective Klein's new version of the incident. The vocal exclamations of gunshots are first heard behind Klein's central vocal, as two gang members point guns at each other and shout "pwoch pwoch" and "blup blup." As Klein rounds off his telling of the events, he then vocalizes the final gunshots as "bum bum." Interestingly, for Strike and Shorty these sounds happen around them rather than in them. Neither of the two characters, each an extension of the other, vocalizes these sounds and both therefore avoid being controlled by the narrative that they represent. As the final scenes close out, Strike leaves New York City on a train and Shorty avoids conviction for Barnes's murder. Reading these sounds in *Clockers* through the aesthetics of hip hop music, the language of what could otherwise be considered "nonsense" can be better understood as noise specifically designed to disrupt the system and challenge those unable to recognize it.³

“Revelation 33 1/3 Revolutions”: Postliterate Perceptions and the Versioned Soundtrack in *He Got Game* (1998)

While hip hop as a musical genre reverberates across Lee’s *He Got Game* (1998), once again in the sounds and voices of Public Enemy, it is not where our attention falls in this last section. Instead, this part of the chapter reads the (re)use of previously composed music on the film soundtrack not normally thought of in discussions of hip hop because it is the final noisy point of divergence between those subcultural aesthetics and this mainstream medium.

The relationship between reused musical material and narrative film, established through the cue-sheet of the early 1900s, is almost as old as the cinematic medium itself (Gorbman 1987, 35). In recent years, though, such an approach to the narrative film soundtrack has been heavily tied to postmodern cinema and, in particular, to *auteur mélomane* directors like Quentin Tarantino, Sally Potter, and Martin Scorsese. While Lee slots into this category of film director, the relationship between hip hop culture and music and some of his earliest films means that his work functions differently than that of some of his peers. In contemporary postmodern film the composite, reused soundtrack is a crucial component in the nostalgia that permeates the genre (Booker 2007, 48). M. Keith Booker has argued that this postmodern nostalgia is particular in that it explores the “representations of remembered representations” (51), a style disengaged from the “memories of any specific historical past” (51). These highly referential film soundtracks set up a plurality of lines where it is not the meaning or narratives of each line that necessarily matter but rather the “overload of meaning” that they establish (D’haen 1986, 225). Booker highlights this in his mention of the Jack Rabbit Slim’s restaurant scene in Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994), where music and images from the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s create the “perfect postmodern setting,” drawing from history in a purely “ahistorical way, showing little real sense of the pastness of the past or of past history as the antecedent of the present” (Booker 2007, 47). For much postmodern cinema then, the (re)use of previously composed material is not about clear determinations of fixed temporal statements, ideas, or issues. It is about the structuring of a general aura or atmosphere in which such is the profusion of moments that no one particular moment matters. In the postliterate orality of hip hop, however, the “sampled sounds of the music” and their specific histories are definitive nodes in the crafting of narrative and meaning (1994, 88).

Although in its most straightforward form sampling in hip hop is a specific technique for the organization of previously composed material, it is as much a “process of cultural literacy and intertextual reference” as it is just a simple musical tool (Rose 1994, 89). In fact, as Justin Williams outlines in the introduction to his 2014 *Rhymin’ and Stealin’*, remixing the past permeates the aesthetics of each of hip hop’s expressions, “whether it is taking an old dance move for a breakdancing battle, using spray paint to create street art, quoting from a famous speech, or sampling a rapper or 1970s funk song” (2014a, 1).

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To put it another way, sampling is a culturally driven understanding of the way preexisting material in various forms and media can be organized to create new and “original” narratives (Rose 1994, 88). For hip hop, sampling is not about the creation of postmodern nostalgia to color our reading of a particular narrative moment through disengagement but the particular structuring of particular narratives through particular samples. So, while on one hand, the use of previously composed musical material in New Black Realism echoes fundamental elements of the postmodern soundtrack, in that both deal in a plurality of lines, switch with ease between historical moments, and focus on mediated representations of culture and society, on the other hand, New Black Realist films often spotlight the reused material on their soundtrack, consciously drawing on their historical and cultural specificity to craft developed utterances that are as much a part of the film’s narrative as its dialogue or images.⁴ At moments throughout the genre, these soundtracks deal in an “unconcealed intertextuality” when the sample and the way in which that sample is used become fundamental parts in the performance of the film’s narrative (Williams 2014b, 193).

Lee’s *He Got Game* (1998) follows Jesus Shuttlesworth (Ray Allen) as he navigates both his burgeoning career as a basketball player and his complex relationship with his father, Jake Shuttlesworth (Denzel Washington). What is fascinating about this soundtrack is the role that the music of twentieth-century American concert hall composer Aaron Copland plays in this film. The film’s Copland cues are drawn from a number of more famous moments in the composer’s back catalog, including “Billy the Kid” (1938), “Fanfare for the Common Man” (1942) and “Appalachian Spring” (1944). Copland is viewed by many as “Mr. Musical Americana,” and his music holds a definitive role in the determination of dominant American culture at the end of the twentieth-century (Tommasini, referenced in Gabbard 2000, 374). Copland rejected elements of American Classical music that had been deemed too Eurocentric and instead concentrated special attention on American folk melodies, quoting them in his compositions without irony or patronizing gestures. He also explored melodies that gave his music a spacious, uplifting quality, which then became linked to the open plains of the American West (Gabbard 2000, 374). Krin Gabbard has suggested that by mixing the film’s images with Copland’s sounds, Lee signals to viewers a “new set of associations” between the quintessential sound of America and the sight of young black males on screen (371). These bodies, Lee suggests, are as American as anything Copland represents. Gabbard also contends that the interesting balance of Copland’s left-leaning political views and sexual orientation may loosely mirror the complex relationship that the African American community shares with dominant mainstream culture (374, 375).

However, in approaching the discord of sound and image in this fashion, Gabbard determines it as just that: discord. He mentions both the “unusual juxtaposition” of the music and images and the film soundtrack’s role as “background music,” where its purpose is to supplement the action onscreen (2000, 370, 372). Here, Gabbard depends on the same normative, Westernized understandings of the (re)use of previously composed music on the film soundtrack that sidelines similar relationships as a postmodern nostalgic disengagement built on a stylistic statement with little correlation

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to any specific historical past. Meaning, in that sense, is assembled in spite of ironic distance. Through the hip hop culture that drives New Black Realist films like this one, that correlation is not sufficient. These are sampled sounds that, in this postliterate orality, become innate aspects of the film's narrative expression and meaning. More specifically, these moments of unconcealed intertextuality are statements of a versioned soundtrack. Stemming from hip hop's relationship with reggae music, versioning is the obvious and overt mix of old and new materials (Rose 1994, 90). It involves the reworking of a piece of music with some new elements that do not detract from or completely rupture the original but add to it so that, as Dick Hebdige puts it, "the original version takes on a new life and a new meaning in a fresh context" (quoted in Rose 1994, 90). In *He Got Game*, the most iconic of these filmic moments is in the street basketball scene where "Hoedown" from Copland's *Rodeo* is heard alongside images of two groups of young black men at a pickup game. Copland's cue plays largely uncut and uninterrupted, unhidden so as to maximize the versioned nature of its presence on the soundtrack. As the music plays alongside the images, so too do the voices of the young men onscreen punctuate Copland's piece. This, then, is not about one element playing over, under, or against the other but both coming together as singular, noisy utterance. They exist in comparable, parallel lines where neither one leads the other. The narrative meaning of this moment exists not simply in the dialogue or images as they are supported or challenged by the music but in an intrinsic contrapuntal mix of the two. It is a versioned moment that updates the perception of "Americanness" with the social and cultural "history" tied to these young black bodies onscreen. It is not so much about borrowing from Copland's "Americanness" so as to lend it to these young men; rather, the scene reaches back into history and carves out a cultural space not afforded to this community through the mediation of America in film and music. Reading the sound and music of *He Got Game* as a postliterate orality, rather than as an ironic statement of contemporary postmodern cinema, acknowledges the hip hop aesthetics that drive New Black Realist cinema and their soundtracks and allows us to read through the unique cultural statement being made, to experience the noise of this moment on film.

Conclusion

In Ice-T's 2012 documentary, *Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap*, a collection of the music's greatest emcees, deejays, and producers chat about the unique nature of old-school and golden-era hip hop music. One of the standout interviews is that of Grandmaster Caz, an emcee and deejay associated with groups like The Cold Crush Brothers, in which he argues, "hip hop didn't invent anything," rather it "reinvented everything." While Caz's point may be wildly ambitious, at its core it hints toward the *raison d'être* of hip hop—its disruption of mainstream media and culture in an attempt to shape a space for its own unique existence. As Dean Rader has suggested, since the 1940s, movies and popular music have provided the pictures and soundtrack for how America sees and hears itself (2011, 91). So to challenge and distort the normative structures of cinema is to claim a space for hip hop culture and the hip hop community outside of the mediation in which that statement is made. But, while hip hop has framed

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the images, characters, and storylines of New Black Realist films, it is on the film soundtrack where this revolt is most fascinating. As a postliterate orality, hip hop occupies a unique space in contemporary culture. At the same time that it maintains the characteristics of the orally based expressions that have preceded it, it incorporates various elements of the literate and technologically sophisticated society in which it exists. In the sound and music of New Black Realist cinema, and through aspects of repetition, language and dialogue, and versioned samples, this means creating mediated moments that may at first appear as traditional or innocuous postmodern statements but, when read through the aesthetics of the culture and movement that drive them, are in fact utterances of cinematic resistance, moments of mediated noise.

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ This is not the first research in film sound and music to speak about hip hop as noise. For example, Anahid Kassabian does so in her 2003 article on diegesis and the film soundtrack, if only in passing (Kassabian 2003, 92).

⁽²⁾ The term comes from the work of Walter Ong (2002), originally published in 1982. The concept describes the way oral traditions are revised and presented in a technologically sophisticated context. It also explains the way literate-based technology is made to articulate sounds, images, and practice associated with orally based forms (Rose 1994, 86).

⁽³⁾ For more on this see J. Millea, "The Vulgar Voice on the New Black Realist Soundtrack: Sounds of Resistance, Policing and Crime in Spike Lee's *Clockers*," *Journal of Hip Hop Studies Online* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 23–42.

⁽⁴⁾ Amanda Sewell highlights this point in her 2014 article on Public Enemy, the Beastie Boys, and sampling. Here, Sewell notes that the cultural lineage of sampled material can be important to a musical artist. So, while funk, soul, and hip hop account for nearly 83 percent of samples on *Fear of a Black Planet*, funk, soul, hip hop, and rock account for about 82 percent of the total samples on *Paul's Boutique*. Then, while the music of white

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artists makes up over 25 percent of the samples on *Paul's Boutique*, for *Fear of a Black Planet* that number only comes to 6.8 percent (2014, 42).

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