Pulse of the People: Political Rap Music and Black Politics. Edited by Lakeyta M. Bonnette. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 219 pp., $49.95 (cloth).

doi:10.1017/rep.2016.17

Candis Watts Smith,
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Rap music has been at the center of a moral panic among white and middle class Black Americans for decades. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, rap artists such as those in 2 Live Crew and NWA ignited debates around the meaning, message, and worth of rap music as a legitimate art form and as a form of political resistance. This panic is ignited and dies down on a seemingly regular basis, as when Don Imus (a white conservative radio host) claimed he could call Black women "nappy headed hos" because Black male rappers have done so for decades. The moral panic is rooted in perceptions that rap music, *writ large*, portrays Black people in a negative light, demeans (Black) women, and can warp the attitudes and behaviors of young Black people. Lakeyta Bonnette pushes against these broad claims in *Pulse of the People*. Bonnette agrees with scholars like Tricia Rose and Lester Spence as well as artists like Chuck D, who claimed that "Rap music is Black America's CNN." Rap music, from this perspective, is an information network that affects Black political attitudes and ideology. Bonnette's book focuses on the content and effects of *political* rap music and situates this subgenre of rap music in "everyday talk" as well as in traditions of coded messages in Black culture as a form of resistance (148).

The author maintains two central claims. First, rap music is not a monolithic genre; rather, rap music includes "gangsta rap" (the usual suspect at the center of moral panics) as well as party rap and political rap, to name three subgenres. Secondly, she argues that we must also consider the notion that themes and messages within each genre are likely to have different influences on Blacks' political attitudes and behaviors. Through an experiment, she finds suggestive evidence that political rap actually bolsters Black Millennials' alignment with Black nationalism and Black feminism.

Bonnette begins the book by asserting, "political rap music acts as a counter-public for presenting alternative images" of Black peoples'

politics. She classifies rap as political when lyrics make political references to leaders or institutions *and* to a social problem (which, theoretically, would raise listeners' awareness of the issue), and/or advocates a solution to social injustices. Rather than classify certain *artists* or entire albums as political, her definition allows individual songs by mainstream rappers to be included as potentially positive influences on Black youth. Bonnette's new definition is helpful because it allows us to find elements of political rap across American rappers, and increasingly abroad, as with rappers like British native MIA, or rappers considered to be political dissidents in Middle Eastern and North African countries.

The heart of the book analyzes the influence of political rap lyrics. First, Bonnette discovered that many rappers who incorporate political messages are affiliated with organizations whose missions and ideologies are rooted in Black Nationalism. Then, to determine whether political rap can *influence* Black listeners' affinity with Black nationalism, and as a corollary, Black feminism, she conducted experiments in which subjects listened to three songs from among four genres: political rap, non-political rap, rhythm and blues (R&B), and pop. She found a positive effect for political rap's influence, for both nationalism and feminism. She also found that exposure to *non*-political rap led to a significant decrease in support for Black feminism.

Bonnette's intervention contributes to the literature in a positive way. She dispels the myth that all rap music is bad, tasteless, and superficial. She suggests that a new generation of rap artists, attentive to politics and injustice, is likely to arise because established artists are now relying less on mainstream record labels and distributors. In addition, new technologies foster broad access to lesser-known artists, particularly those who are not beholden to profit-driven record companies. These are important insights.

At the same time, while one-time controlled experiments help discern causal relationships, they are not helpful in determining the persistence of the treatment's influence. The author provides no guidance on this question. In addition, Bonnette is well aware that political rap is not mainstream, with political rap songs interspersed among the other subgenres in each listener's experience. Her conclusion would be more persuasive had the experiment examined the effects of political rap songs in varying *proportions* rather than just simple exposure. The contradictions and complexity of rap's subgenres are noted, but are not fully examined.

Similarly, the author notes gender differences in affinity for Black nationalism after subjects were exposed to political songs, but does not

https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2016.17 Published online by Cambridge University Press

discuss what we should make of this. Without charts or tables describing subjects or their responses, readers are unable to see a holistic picture of the results and interpret the data for themselves. Finally, it is clear the author is well-versed in the methodologies and theories of political psychology, but followed her experimental presentation with a focus on the activities of elites and activists—rather than using psychological approaches to examine how exposure to various types of rap music might influence the *behavior* of her respondents, or shape behavioral precursors such as feelings of political efficacy. Nonetheless, these choices by the author do not prevent this from being an important and informative work, which offers in-depth analysis of political rap, and outlines its potential to advance and deepen the political ideologies of Black youth.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2016.17 Published online by Cambridge University Press