Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts, postSaxon Futures

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Third Movement

postSaxon Futures
Old/e English Poetics and ‘Afro-Saxon’ Intimacies

In 1987, the Compton-based rap group N.W.A. released its first LP album, *N.W.A. and the Posse*. On its cover, original N.W.A. members Eazy-E, Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, and Arabian Prince, plus a number of friends and relatives, are photographed in front of a graffiti-covered building. Some people in the photo wear oversized clock necklaces set to 11:25, while many others are surrounded by empty and half-drunk Olde English ‘800’ 12-ounce cans and 40-ounce bottles. A conspicuously placed pair of white pumps is the only sign of a woman’s presence in this crowded picture of men. The cover art for *N.W.A. and the Posse* coordinates with Track 2 of the album, titled ‘8-Ball,’ popular slang for Olde English ‘800’ malt liquor. As if amplifying the visuals of N.W.A.’s cover art, on this track Eazy-E proclaims himself an ‘8-ball junkie.’ He drinks Olde English ‘like a madman’

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1 I would like to thank Tayana Hardin for her many insightful comments on early and later versions of this chapter. Dr. Hardin brought to my attention the importance of considering gender and sexuality in readings of race. These considerations have dramatically shaped my arguments regarding the marketing history of Olde English malt liquor.

from morning ’til dark, and, under its influence, cruises through Compton, pulls out a ‘silver gat’ on a ‘sucker punk,’ and harasses women at a party. While Olde English ‘800’ is the source of E’s actions and lyrics, drinking it enables him to express certain gestures, sounds, and language politics that are solicited by the ‘Olde English’ brand itself, which has always capitalized upon the ‘medieval’ quality of its name.

This chapter considers the history of Olde English malt liquor and its frequent appearances in rap music in order to enter into a conversation with Old English, the early medieval language, and its linguistic history as a term of identification for Anglo-Saxon studies as an academic discipline. At first blush, nothing connects these ‘Englishes’ of popular culture and academic scholarship. Yet, in tracing the product design, marketing, and advertising history of Olde English malt liquor alongside the development of Old English historical linguistics, this chapter reveals that these two terms—‘Olde’ and ‘Old English’—operate according to the same logic as the double-edged signifier ‘Anglo-Saxonist.’ They reference, at once, a linguistic representation used by academic scholars and a popular concept that communicates ideologies of nationalism, colonialism, and racism. While ‘Old English’ and ‘Olde Englishes’ (emphasis on the plural, in terms of cultural appropriations) circulate independently in scholarly and popular domains, they function together as cloaked agents of Anglo-Saxonism.

Beginning with N.W.A., these independently circulating terms show their relationship to one another: the Anglo-Saxonist ideologies that bind ‘Old English’ and ‘Olde Englishes’ start to unravel, and rap artists begin to recode Old English into an expression of African American sociolinguistics. As rappers reference Olde English not simply as an alcoholic beverage but, moreover, as a signifier of rap’s poetic displays, they revise the spelling of this term. This revision reveals ‘Olde’ and ‘Old English’ as word concepts that participate in what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls ‘Signifying,’ a term derived from African Ameri-

3 Ibid.
can sociolinguistics, and what Samy Alim calls ‘Hip Hop Nation Linguistics.’
As a sociolinguistic expression, these rap artists expand the semantics of ‘Olde’ and ‘Old English’ to include (rather than exploit) black bodies and black voices and thereby reclaim an Anglo-Saxonist term as an African American one. The poetics of rap music not only disrupt and challenge fundamental assumptions about Old English as a language of limited, academic circulation that operates outside the boundaries of Anglo-Saxonism. Moreover, the use of ‘Olde’ and ‘Old English’ in rap music (which is also a form of critical poetics) challenges academics to disinvent, reinvent, and decolonize Old English as part of the ontological project of ‘becoming postSaxon.’

Brewed originally by Peoples Brewing of Duluth, Minnesota, in the early 1940s, Olde English ‘800’ was initially called Ruff’s Olde English Stout before it was renamed Olde English ‘600’ Malt Liquor in 1947, in reference to its six-percent alcohol content. As an expression that communicates a jaunty nostalgia for something that is vaguely past tense, ‘Olde English’ neither carries the academic heft of ‘Old English’ nor presumes a scholarly audience with any language training or familiarity with medieval studies. Yet the product itself directs consumers towards mistaking ‘Olde English’ for what Sinfree Makoni and Alisdair Pennycook call a linguistic ‘representatio[n]’ of Old English: a word that stands for a language. This mistaken relationship between Olde English and Old English is supported, firstly, by the similar spelling and pronunciation of both expressions and, secondly, by the physiological proximity and psychological partnership between drinking and speaking, acts of oral

5 Tony Dierckins and Pete Clure, Naturally Brewed, Naturally Better: The Historic Breweries of Duluth and Superior (Duluth: Zenith City Press, 2018), 147, 146.
Figure 1. Paper label from Ruff’s Olde English Stout glass bottle. Peoples Brewing Company, Duluth, Minnesota, ca. 1943. Courtesy of the collection of Chris Olsen.

Figure 2. Paper label from Olde English “600” glass bottle. Peoples Brewing Company, Duluth, Minnesota, ca. 1940s. Private Collection.
intake and oral expression. These connections between drinking Olde English and speaking Old English are reinforced by the graphic elements of early malt liquor bottle labels, in which the gothic script and scribal points of ‘Olde English’ reference the manuscript culture of this medieval language (see Fig. 1). The coupling of these linguistic and graphic elements with visual ones constitutes what Jürgen Spitzmüller calls an ‘ideological message’ that indexes certain historical, social, or cultural backgrounds refracted by the text and its author.7 Spitzmüller’s arguments bear extensively on the product design and adver-

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7 Jürgen Spitzmüller, ‘Floating ideologies: Metamorphosis of graphic “Germaness,”’ in Orthography as Social Action: Scripts, Spelling, Identity, and Power, eds. Alexandra Jaffe, Jannis Androutsopoulos, Mark Sebba, and Sally Johnson (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 257. Siân Echard extends Spitzmüller’s discussion of graphic power and its participation in ideological messaging to early medieval scripts such as Old English: ‘Even at the turn of the twenty-first century, the link between English text and Saxon letterform persists. In 1999 and 2000, the graphic artist Gareth Hinds produced his own version of Beowulf, using the 1910 translation by Francis Gummere as the base text. He worked with a calligrapher in developing the script, which was designed to suggest insular letterforms.… [T]he “Gothish” characters still stand as powerful signs of the past’ (Printing the Middle Ages [Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2008], 59).
tisements of Olde English in the 1950s, when Peoples Brewing changed its company emblem from a heraldic crest flanked by two horses (see Fig. 2) to the portrait of Daniel Greysolon Sieur du Lhut, the French explorer after whom the city of Duluth was named (see Fig. 3).

As a consequence of this design change, the linguistic and graphic elements of Olde English become attached to an ideological message of colonialism. In a series of advertisements titled ‘Do You Know These Facts About Sieur du Luth?’ (see Figs. 4a–b) Peoples Brewing recounts du Lhut’s career in North America as a trader, treaty-maker, and arbiter of justice between Frenchmen and Native peoples. One ad celebrates his capture and execution of two Ojibwe who have been accused of killing two French colonials. A sketch of these blindfolded and bound Native American men appears above a caption explaining that du Lhut, who seeks their death as recompense for that of the Frenchmen, ‘taught the Indians to respect the Law for years to come!’ While the portrait of a seventeenth-century Frenchman has nothing to do with an ‘English’ brand of malt liquor, by positioning an emblem of Sieur du Lhut on the label and collar of Olde English bottles, Peoples Brewing makes a colonial persona the figurehead of its ‘medieval’ beer. By way of product naming and design, a signifier of medieval language and manuscript culture becomes sutured to a historical reality and a posthistorical fantasy, imbuing Olde English ‘600’ with an intoxicating spirit that it has inherited, by ancestry and violent force of ‘law,’ from its founding, pan-European fathers.

That Peoples Brewing so easily tilts the product design and marketing of Olde English towards an ideological message of American colonialism begs further questions about the language politics of Old English. While language, as Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs argue, may be perceived to be ‘contain[ed] in an autonomous realm set apart from things and social relation,’ it is the often-silent frontispiece for ‘metadiscursive regimes,’ ideological discussions about language that create frameworks for

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what counts as language.\(^9\) The use of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (as it was popularly called in previous centuries, and to which it is still referred in some academic quarters) as referent for both a language and a people highlights the implication of this term in a meta-discursive regime that Mary Dockray-Miller notes, ‘in the nineteenth-century United States…was almost exclusively racial and racist.’\(^10\) Old English and its partner terms ‘Middle’ and ‘Modern’ Englishes likewise date to the nineteenth century. They are based on Jacob Grimm’s evolutionary characterizations of ‘the oldest,’ ‘the middle,’ and ‘the modern,’ a schema that organizes languages according to ‘bounded and discrete linguistic wholes,’ which, in turn, ‘correspond to distinct nations.’\(^11\) The ‘temporal logic’ of Grimm’s old, middle, and modern schema arranges the languages of English into a progress narrative of world languages that ‘hierarchically organiz[es]’ them on a ‘global evolutionary scale’ and ‘implicitly function[s] as a rationale for the political subjugation of its producers and their descendants.’\(^12\) The foundational role that Old English plays in this progress narrative and its colonial politics is measured by the ‘nostalgic rhetoric’ that Grimm uses to describe it and the other ‘oldest languages’ of historical linguistics. For Grimm, these languages express a nation’s original ‘tradition[s]’ which are ‘embodied’ by a ‘masculine national virility that rendered a people creative, powerful, and cohesive.’\(^13\) While Old English appears to be a benign term of historical linguistics, it nonetheless functions as the agent of Anglo-Saxonism. As the first and oldest stage of English, it not only presumes a sense of linguistic superiority but, moreover, leverages this stance as a rationale for politically subjugating those who do not share a similarly

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\(^11\) Bauman and Briggs, *Voices of Modernity*, 201, 203.

\(^12\) Ibid., 203.

\(^13\) Ibid., 206.
Figure 4a. Advertisement: ‘Do You Know The Facts About Sieur du Luth?’ Du Luth ‘established pacts of peace and arranged for reciprocal inter-trial marriages to strengthen the new ties,’ ca. 1952. Courtesy of the collection of Pete Clure.
Figure 4b. Advertisement: ‘Do You Know The Facts About Sieur du Luth?’ Du Luth ‘taught the Indians to respect the Law for years to come!’, ca. 1952. Courtesy of the collection of Pete Clure.
ancient linguistic ‘tradition.’ Likewise, as a term that remains overtly wedded to the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ period and people, the ‘nostalgia,’ ‘masculinity,’ and ‘virility’ with which Old English is associated thereby identifies it with the meta-discursive regime of Anglo-Saxonism: a belief in the superiority of English-speaking peoples that often is associated, in both scholarly and popular imaginations, with a northern European/Germanic homosocial, ethnically separatist, and racist heroism typified by these very characteristics.

Although worlds apart, Olde English malt liquor and Old English language fall under the common sign of Anglo-Saxonism. As variants of one another, these terms index the deeply rooted partnership between the popular and the scholarly Anglo-Saxonist—a figure introduced in the first pages of this book and explored at great length in previous chapters. Yet, as partners that circulate freely across and between academic and lay audiences, Old and Olde English reveal themselves as non-proprietary signifiers. While early medieval scholars may make special claim to expertise in the linguistic aspects of Old English, we do not own nor fully control the many valences of this term, but we are beholden nevertheless to the politics sedimented within its nineteenth-century origins and twentieth-century uses. These politics are not only European but also American, yet distinctive racial histories underwrite America’s colonial past. In the following pages, this chapter enters into an expansive discussion of Olde English (then returns, much later, to Old English) in order to talk about how the Anglo-Saxonist politics of this particular brand of malt liquor perpetuate racist and colonialist myths about African American race, sex, and alcohol consumption. This chapter develops a deep sense of how Olde English operates as an agent of American Anglo-Saxonism, which rap artists resist and recalibrate in sociolinguistic terms. Ironically, critically ruminating upon Olde English malt liquor enables us to think more clearly and openly about the stakes of colonialism and racism in Old English and Anglo-Saxon studies from within a distinctively American context.
Despite its popularity in Duluth, Peoples Brewing could not keep up with regional or national competition, and, in 1957, the company liquidated its holdings. Olde English ‘600’ was sold to Bohemian Breweries of Spokane, Washington, which transferred rights to Atlantic Brewing, also of Spokane.\(^{14}\) Atlantic brewed and distributed Olde English until 1962, and, in 1964, Blitz-Weinhard of Portland, Oregon, bought the brand, brewing and distributing it for almost two more decades.\(^{15}\) Olde English ‘600’ maintained its name, gothic font, and scribal points throughout these moves, and Sieur du Lhut remained the label’s figurehead. Still, it never sold well. Marketed to a white, middle class, suburban consumer, Old English ‘600,’ like other malt liquors during the 1950s and 1960s, was advertised as a champagne alternative that had a much higher alcohol content than regular ale. In the late 1960s, when Blitz-Weinhard examined its customers’ demographic information, it discovered that almost one-third of malt liquor consumers were African Americans, who were exposed to the same medieval branding and colonial advertisements as the white drinkers to whom the product was marketed.

Just as the so-called ‘Middle Ages’ and its signifiers have often been imbricated within America’s long history of colonial politics and racism, African Americans have frequently been entangled within the medieval. For example, in *De Bow’s Review*, an agricultural and industrial periodical popular in the antebellum South, the behaviors and attitudes of ‘Puritan’ Northerners and ‘Cavalier’ Southerners are attributed to their differing medieval European ancestries.\(^{16}\) These genealogical discrepancies became popular in the decades leading up to the Civil War,\(^{17}\) and as the Southern cavalier made way for the Con-
federate chevalier, medieval reenactments in the form of ring tournaments spread from Maryland and Virginia to the Deep South, continuing as a sport and entertainment for the Confederate cavalry throughout the Civil War. In the post-war period, these tournaments expanded to include not only white Southerners, who used them as fundraisers for Southern relief efforts, Confederate veterans, and Civil War memorials, but also African Americans, who organized all-black tournaments across the South from 1865 to about 1875. While some white newspapers express concern that these black-organized events are spurred by ‘Northern’ politics, others view them from within a racist frame of ‘innocent amusements’ that attempt to participate in the ‘polite arts’ of Southern society. Whether subversive acts or spectacles for whites, Texas artist Merritt Mauzey offers a visual commentary of this phenomenon in his undated ‘Tournament Practice’ (see Fig. 5). This small lithograph on paper depicts the back of a black rider on horseback, who holds a jousting spear and heads towards a series of rings that dangle from ropes on poles. As the eye moves from the circle made by the rider’s head to those of the rings, the latter begin to look like nooses, and a ring tournament suggests the site of an imminent lynching.

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19 ‘The Colored Tournament,’ The Louisiana Democrat, September 27, 1876, 2.
20 ‘The Young Colored Men of our Parish…,’ The Louisiana Democrat, September 13, 1876, 2.
21 I would like to thank Alexandra Cook for bringing this image to my attention.
22 Merritt Mauzey’s father was a Union soldier, and after the Civil War, the Mauzeys moved to Texas, where they sharecropped cotton before purchasing 160 acres of land to farm. Merritt was born in 1897 in the central Texas town of Clifton and would have been a young adult when Birth of a Nation
In Mauzey’s depiction of the postbellum South, medieval fantasies turn towards racial terrorism when the African American ‘knight’ is imagined in the company of the white knights of the Ku Klux Klan.\(^{23}\)

Despite Mauzey’s allusion to the deadly undercurrents of American medievalism, among other African Americans artists and writers, such as Jessie Fauset, medieval iconography was perceived as a fantastic way beyond American race prejudice. In Fauset's essay, ‘My House and a Glimpse of My Life Therein,’ she imagines herself within a ‘fortress’ as ‘a queen come into her very own.’\(^{24}\) Published in NAACP’s *The Crisis*, Fauset’s depiction of queenly sovereignty is given a medieval patina when her nar-

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23 Paul Christopher Anderson writes that ‘[e]nthusiasm for the joust in 1866, in the springtime of Confederate defeat, flowered in tandem with the formation of the Ku Klux Klan. Between them were obvious connections of ritual. Tournament rider and night rider became knights on horseback; both were liberated by masquerade and costume’ (‘Rituals of Horsemanship: A Speculation on the Ring Tournament and the Origins of the Ku Klux Klan,’ in *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War’s Ragged Edges*, ed. Stephen Berry [Athens: Georgia University Press, 2011], 217). When Reconstruction-era Klan activity is associated with Klan-sponsored lynchings of the 1920s (see footnote 22), Mauzey’s lithograph seems to document a relationship between the medievalist fantasies and racist atrocities of the Ku Klux Klan.

24 Jessie Fauset, ‘My House and a Glimpse of My Life Therein,’ *The Crisis* 8, no. 3 (1914): 144.
Figure 5. Merritt Mauzey, ‘Tournament Practice,’ lithograph on paper, undated. Courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum.
rative is accompanied by visual elements printed in the magazine: a decorated initial begins the essay, as if it were appearing on a manuscript page; and a photograph of Fauset, dressed as a pre-Raphaelite, is flanked by text from her essay about ‘valiant knights,’ ‘distressed ladies,’ and ‘lorn damsels.’ Unlike Mauzey’s ‘Ring Tournament,’ which positions African Americans within the threatening frame of American racism, Fauset appropriates the medieval as a space of African American possibility. In ‘My House,’ she can be, at once, queen of her castle-fortress, distressed lady within it, or forlorn damsel in need of knightly rescue. Fauset uses both narrative and visual strategies to conjure herself within a medieval world. At the end of her essay, she moves into the medieval by concluding, ‘my house is constructed of dream-fabric, and the place of its building is — Spain!’ A very real place in modern Europe where light-skinned African Americans may be presumed Hispanic, Spain is likewise the site of medieval Iberia where, Alexandre Dumas famously stated, Africa begins. In Spain, Fauset ‘passes’ into a medieval

25 Ibid.

26 These claims to Spanish ‘passing’ can be traced to mid-nineteenth-century American literature. For example, in the ‘Spanish masquerade’ scene of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, George Harris makes his skin darker so he can pass for a Spanish gentleman in order to escape enslavement; James Fenimore Cooper’s The Prairie heroine, Inez, is a Spanish ‘Creole’ who is taken prisoner by a slave trader and slave-owning family; and African American writer Pauline Hopkins’s short story ‘Talma Gordon’ sends her protagonist to live in Italy because her darker skin could be more easily explained as Iberian.

27 Fauset’s geography of ‘Spain’ is a fraught place where medieval Orientalism and medieval utopianism meet. On the one hand, Spain is the site of an Orientalizing exoticism where the ‘Moorish’ woman functions as an object of desire enclosed in her fortress. In this medievalist fantasy of early modern Spain (during which time, Moriscos endured mass persecution), 15th- and 16th-century stories tell of a Christian knight who finds himself at a castle, where a dark woman ‘opens her doors wide’ for him. This trope of the exotic, entrapped, and sensual female Other finds its way to America in the nineteenth century by way of ‘The Legend of the Three Beautiful Princesses’ in Washington Irving’s Tales of the Alhambra. Irving’s contemporary, Alexandre Dumas, famously claims that ‘Africa begins in the Pyrenees,’ a mountain range in which Spanish Iberia — home
‘dream fabric’ that can offer inclusion and welcome to black bodies when contemporary America does not. 28

Whether African Americans of the early twentieth century are viewed as racial subjects or sovereigns, black men and women understood and responded to the visual and literary iconography of medievalism and the Middle Ages, finding in them fantasies that could conjure up home-grown terror or empowering dreamscapes. Consequently, while African Americans were not the intended audience of Olde English ‘600’ advertising...
campaigns, they understood the racial politics of its medieval branding very well.

In 1968, after more than a decade of ownership by Portland-based Blitz-Weinhard Brewing, the company applied for a patent that rebranded their malt liquor as Olde English ‘8oo.’\(^{29}\) This name change was accompanied by a redesign of the brand’s medieval iconography, in which the gothic lettering of ‘Olde English’ was replaced by a font that approached the broad strokes and round forms of Insular Half-Uncial, a script used during the Anglo-Saxon period. The white, Half-Uncial lettering of Old English ‘8oo’ appears on a circular background of deep red, and the rest of the can is stamped in gold (see Fig. 6). The portrait of Sieur du Lhut was replaced by golden crowns— which look like castle battlements—that trace the circumference of the product’s red background and punctuate its initial ‘O.’ The font changes maintained the brand’s conceptual reference to an early medieval language and manuscript culture but repositioned both within a vaguely Anglo-Saxon context. In addition, the visual contrast between red and gold, in association with the golden crown-like and fortress-like shapes, display a fantasy that is limned with potency and strength. On tap for drinkers in 1968 were graphic and visual iconographies that mapped explicitly onto Grimm’s nostalgia for the ‘masculin[ity],’ ‘virility,’ and ‘power’ of the ‘oldest’ English language. Blitz-Weinhard’s new packaging associated its product, Olde English, with the linguistic representation, Old English, and its meta-discursive regime of Anglo-Saxonism.

While the new can design of Olde English ‘8oo’ extended popular perceptions of Old English linguistic and writing systems towards an Anglo-Saxonist regime, Blitz-Weinhard’s new ad campaign did not target white drinkers. Advertisements which appeared in the 1968–69 editions of the New York Am-

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Netherlands, New Pittsburgh Courier, and Los Angeles Sentinel announced the arrival of Olde English ‘800’ exclusively in African American newspapers. Marketed explicitly and specifically for an urban, black, male consumer, these Olde English ads took advantage of key moments in 1960s African American history: the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.; the Civil Rights era giving way to the Black Power movement; and a constellation of political and social efforts that recognized the insufficiency of desegregation and sought to make a space for economic empowerment, racial pride, and African American cultural and political institutions.\footnote{Blitz-Weinhard’s new ads first appeared in August 1968, just months after King’s death, capitalizing on the loss of King and the arrival of Black Power. In one ad, a 12-ounce can is photographed from below, presenting it as tall, vertical, and dripping with ‘sweat,’ while bracketed by the statements ‘MIGHTY’ and ‘Big Daddy.’ In another, a light-skinned, innocent-looking young black woman finds herself positioned in the middle of two well-built, dark-skinned African American men. A caption below claims, ‘You get more out…because we put more in. More flavor, more pleasure, more king-sized}

\footnote{Put a different way, as Roland Murray argues, the Black Power movement sought to ‘reconstitute the patriarchal black family, reclaim the autonomy of the masculine black body, retool the politics of male oratory [and] assert the necessity of new forms of masculine sexuality…in interpolative models that were intended to counter historically entrenched racial subordination’ \cite{Murray2007}. Textually and visually, the advertisements for Olde English ‘800’ in African American newspapers attempted not only to appeal to an African American consumer who desired to ‘reconstitute…patriarch[y],’ ‘reclaim masculin[i]ty,’ and ‘assert…sexuality,’ but also to present Olde English ‘800’ as an alcoholic drink that offered these things, easily and cheaply, if only for a short while.}

These ads conjure up a supposedly safe, ‘integrationist scene,’ in which an extremely light-skinned black woman (whose bouffant flip hairstyle and wide headband — popularized by stars such as Mary Tyler Moore and Sally Field — accentuates her ‘whiteness’) smiles innocently at two dark-skinned men who wear turtlenecks. Further, the ads signify a ‘king-sized satisfaction’ that resonates with the recent memorialization of Dr. King, thereby pulling the crown-shaped iconography of the new can design towards both Anglo-Saxonist imagery and King’s Civil Rights-era leadership. At the same time, the placement and timing of these advertisements appear to celebrate the arrival of a more oppositional, less assimilationist ‘Black Power.’ Yet by summoning a ‘Big Daddy’ who stands ‘mighty’ in the transitional moment from Civil Rights to Black Power movements, the language of these ads promulgates long-standing myths about black men that are positioned at an intersection between race, sex, and alcohol.

The arguments in this chapter, which reference racist myths about African American sexuality and alcohol, are repeatedly associated with nineteenth- and twentieth-century US political movements, legislation, and legal disputes. In its attention to the triangulation of race, the law, and power, this chapter acknowledges the work of Critical Race Theory. More specifically, this chapter attends to myths that operate at the intersection of race and sexuality, and it acknowledges the role which black women have been forced to play as ‘light-skinned’ objects that stand in for ‘white’ women. Consequently, this chapter draws upon and acknowledges, in particular, the work of legal scholars and social scientists who have been mapping the complex landscape of self and identity under overlapping modes and forces of subordination and oppression: see, among others, Kimberlé Crenshaw (‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,’ Stanford Law Review 43, no. 6 [1991]: 1241–79), Kathy Davis (‘Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes Feminist Theory Successful,’ Feminist Theory 9, no. 1 [2008]: 67–85), Elizabeth R. Cole (‘Intersectionality and Research in Psychology,’ American Psychologist 64, no. 3 [2009]: 170–80),
As William James and Stephen Johnson write, when the National Prohibition Party was organized in 1874, ‘[m]uch of the party’s focus was on the link between alcohol use, race, and crime (especially sexual crimes).’ White southerners, James and Johnson continue, ‘used the Prohibition movement to promulgate their prejudices against and fears of African American males. They spread the rumor that liquor sometimes gave the African American man, stimulated by the pictures of semi-naked women on the labels of the whiskey bottles, the courage to overcome his inferior status and to loose his sexual desires on white women.’ Although popularized during the Reconstruction-era temperance movement, the portrayal of black men as drunken, primitive, and sexually dangerous extended into the twentieth century, when the Eighteenth Amendment, which outlawed the sale or transportation of alcohol from 1920 to 1933, ‘gave the Ku Klux Klan the majority of its four million members.’ By trading on white myths of the danger that intoxicated black men posed to white women, the KKK was


35 Ibid.


37 These movements of the 1920s coincide with the artistic and cultural developments that take place in urban, black neighborhoods as a consequence of the Great Migration. As Denise A. Herd explains, some blacks turn to bootlegging in order to supplement their small incomes, and white drinkers turn to the ‘wet’ nightclubs of urban black communities. Herd continues, arguing that ‘these factors set the stage for the creation of black cultural images in which intoxication, sensuality, and black “primitivism” were dominant’ (‘Contesting Culture: Alcohol-Related Identity Movements in Twentieth Century America: Part I,’ American Sociological Review 63, no. 1 [1998]: 156).
enabled to act as ‘the extreme militant wing of the temperance
movement.’ Fearful of maintaining control in America’s post-
slave society, whites obsessively articulated the bodies of black
men as dangerous and threatening, generating myths about Af-
rican Americans and alcohol that pathologized blackness as ra-
cially aberrant in terms of physical strength and sexual appetite.

The weight of American racism, which treats the bodies of
black men as terrifyingly aberrant, is refracted in Blitz-Wein-
hard’s advertising campaign and drawn into conversation with
its newly redesigned cans, which join together an Old English
language representation and font type with an Anglo-Saxonist
rhetoric of masculinity, virility, and strength. Ads that ran in
the New York Amsterdam News, New Pittsburgh Courier, and
Los Angeles Sentinel emphasize sexual ‘size’ and a supposed lust
for light-skinned women. They invite male drinkers to claim the
recent benefits of the Civil Rights movement and the emerging
political and ideological goals of the Black Power movement by,
paradoxically, participating in myths from the Jim Crow era that

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in Contemporary African American Communities, Contemporary Drug
Problems 20 [1993]: 752). While the trope of black primitivism stretches
much further back in time — to the rhetoric of slavery — Herd’s body of
scholarship draws attention to the use of this trope in the early part of the
twentieth century. The Prohibition Era, during which ‘the Klan became the
leading law-and-order spokesgroup,’ is a historical moment in which black
men are figured as a dangerously ‘primitive’ power of ‘savage lust’ that
must be kept in check by the vigilante actions of white Americans (Linda
Gordon, The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s
and the American Political Tradition [New York: W.W. Norton, 2017], 96).
It is not a coincidence that the racial politics of Prohibition coincided with
the end of the Great War and the return of black soldiers, whose service to
their country positioned them as threats to America’s white patriarchy.

38 Ben F. Johnson, III (Barleycorn Must Die! The War Against Drink in Arkan-
sas: 1920–1950 [Little Rock: Old State House Museum exhibit]), quoted
in Gordon, The Second Coming of the KKK, 95. Consider ‘Big Daddy’ of
Tennessee Williams’s play Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, a character modeled in
part on G.D. Perry, owner of a large plantation near Tunica, Mississippi,
and played by robust actors such as Burl Ives (dir. Richard Brooks [Culver
Debbie Allen, Broadhurst Theatre, New York, 2008). Big Daddy has been
figured as white and black, depending on the production.
portray intoxication as a vehicle by which black men become ‘mighty’ ‘Big Daddies’—physically powerful and sexually vigorous. These very claims about blackness, which pathologized it as a condition to be feared and kept in check, bear a distinct likeness to the characteristics of Grimm’s Anglo-Saxonist rhetoric, which are broadcast visually across the cans of Olde English ‘800.’

While the placement and context of these advertisements present Olde English as a product that is in step with and in advocacy of the Black Power movement, the print and visual rhetoric used to market it to black consumers continues to project racist myths of what ‘black power’ means, physically and sexually. Further, while these ads lean on the trope of the innocent and vulnerable white woman, they do so at the expense of the light-skinned black woman photographed in the ad, who is rendered invisible, yet is nevertheless the visible agent of this racist myth. When potential consumers arrive at the liquor store and purchase Olde English ‘800,’ the product that they hold, open, and drink bears the fantastic markings of Old English iconography and Anglo-Saxonist ideology. Racist fears of black men, racial fantasies about white women, and the racial (in)visibility of black women coordinate in the linguistic-ideological signifier, ‘Olde English.’ Marketed to a black consumer, its joint promise of terror and possibility interpolates men and women within a medievalist logic that dates to the late-nineteenth century ring tournaments of Mauzeys’s ‘black knight’ and the early-twentieth-century queenly fantasies of Fauset.39

Although its rebranding efforts and bi-coastal advertising campaign were successful in reaching African American urban communities, Blitz-Weinhard was, ultimately, a regional brewer and could not keep pace with the growth of national brands, which increasingly dominated American beer sales. On April 2,

39 As my colleague, Tayana Hardin, pointed out, as if to show the hidden hand of racism at work, the Olde English advertisement’s claim that ‘we’ white brewers ‘put more in’ so ‘you,’ the black consumer, ‘get more out,’ has homoerotic undertones that suggest the extent to which Olde English ‘fucks over’ its target demographic (personal communication).
1979, the company sold Olde English ‘800’ to Pabst, which kept the brand’s ‘Anglo-Saxon’ design but recalibrated Blitz-Weinhard’s racist depiction of African American men in order to capitalize upon changes in the Black Power movement during the 1970s, when this movement was dynamically reshaped by Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism — intellectual, social, and cultural philosophies and practices that emerged hand in hand with African decolonization and African American desegregation. Two key cultural events that recognized the mainstream popularity of the Black Power movement, and of the constellation of ideas that circulated around it, were the 1977 and 1979 broadcast of Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and *Roots: The Next Generation,* which depict the capture and enslavement of Kunta Kinte, a Mandinka warrior who strives to pass on his West African ‘roots’ to the African American generations that succeed him. Two months after *Roots: The Next Generation* was broadcast, Olde English was sold to Pabst, which immediately launched the ‘It Is the Power’ campaign. This multimedia outlet campaign openly co-opted the language of the Black Power movement, leveraged the popularity of *Roots,* exploited the decolonizing activities taking place across Africa, and manipulated the popularity of Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism in order to sell Olde English ‘800.’

The ‘It Is the Power’ campaign, which ran in print, radio, and television media, features the image of another black woman whose light skin, feathered hair, and sweatband anticipate aerobic culture of the early 1980s and thereby orient her racial identity towards whiteness. Yet, she is scantily clad in a yellow bikini and stands between two Bengal tigers. Sexual prey and jungle

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40 For example, Herman Gray argues that *Roots* provided ‘some of the enabling conditions necessary for the rearticulation of the discourse of Afrocentric nationalism’ (*Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for ‘Blackness’* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, 87]), and Mark Anthony Neal asserts that the series ‘resurrected the possibilities of an “enabled” African heritage and a reconstructed black patriarchy’ (*Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* [New York: Routledge, 2002, 71]).
predators populate the visual world of Olde English, which emerges as a tour-de-force of essentialised, pan-African, tribal desire. And just as the woman and tigers occupy the shared position of an exotic, native Other, the viewer is asked to imagine himself a ‘Kunta Kinte’ warrior. Pabst’s poster appeals, at once, to Black Power, Pan-Africanism, and Afrocentrism. However, it manipulates these political, social, and cultural ideas and philosophies in order to reinscribe blackness as a pathology that operates, once again, by triangulating race, sex, and alcohol consumption via images of black women. The woman on the Pabst poster no longer figures desire in relation to white women but rather to exotic animals and animalization. Through her body and its relationship to a pair of Bengal tigers, Pabst repackages a myth of American racism into a myth of Anglo-American colonialism as expressed in narratives that extend from Rudyard Kipling’s India, William Blake’s ‘The Tyger,’ and William Jones’s ‘Hymns’ to Hindu deities, to the African travels in R.M. Ballantyne’s youth fiction, where hunting elephants, gorillas, lions, and tigers associate the virile huntsman-explorer with an erotics of ravishment. These literary images were produced in relation to the British Raj (1858–1947) and the Scramble for Africa (1881–1914) — periods of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during which Britain ruled the Indian subcontinent and pursued military campaigns across Africa under the sign of England’s Anglo-Saxon past and Anglo-Saxonist future. Referencing them in Pabst’s advertising expresses an anxious desire on the part of white America to suppress the realities of mid-century decolonization, which threaten to impact the balance

of racial power in the United States. Despite the poster’s images of primitive, sexualized tribalism, it still asks the viewer to lust after a light-skinned woman while drinking malt liquor. Once again, Olde English positions the markings of an Old English linguistic signifier and manuscript culture against the visual rhetoric of an Anglo-Saxonist meta-discursive regime and its fantasies about the non-Anglo Saxon Other.

When Pabst’s print ad was televised, its imagery asked African American consumers to not only look but also participate in the African world of Olde English. A tiger’s roar breaks the commercial’s on-screen silence. The close-up shot of a woman’s eyes fades to those of a Bengal tiger and back again. A masculine voice calls out ‘Smooth!’ as a large, black hand slams a can of Olde English onto a hard surface in slow motion. The sound of thunder and a flash of purple lightning accompany the jingle, ‘It’s the Power…Olde English “800”,’ and, in a new scene, the woman of the campaign’s print advertisements breaks into a run. The ad cuts to a shot of the black hand, which now reaches towards the aluminum tab on the can, and then the video cuts again to a pair of running Bengal tigers. These quick-moving shots transition to a slow-motion scene in which the woman jumps on the back of the Bengal tiger. As she ‘rides the tiger,’ the hand opens the tab on the Olde English can, and foam sprays from it, visualizing a thinly veiled sexual innuendo. The jingle continues, ‘[i]t’s that smooth, mellow taste that gets ya,’ and the ad returns to a facial shot of the now-smiling woman, and then to the tiger’s open-mouthed roar, and, finally, to the label on the can. Throughout the advertisement, camera shots of woman, tiger, and Olde English pivot on the image of the hand, a synecdoche that enables any black drinker to imagine himself a Kunta Kinte warrior returning to his African homeland and taking physical and sexual possession of the inhabitants of Pabst’s tribal, pan-African ‘world’ by opening up a can of Olde English. While the viewer is

summoned to enact the brand’s Anglo-Saxonist fantasies, these heroics are not characterized by feats of actual dominance but by drinking cheap beer. Thus, the African American viewer is hailed to access Anglo-Saxonist empowerment by playing his part in a centuries-old myth of blackness. Intoxicated by cheap beer and the allure of a light-skinned woman, he becomes, like the woman and the tiger, a target of white America’s medieval, racial, and colonial desires.

Pabst’s ad campaign was an immediate success. By 1980, Olde English ‘800’ was the second bestselling malt liquor in the country, and the company’s annual report to its shareholders boasts that ‘[i]n many markets, the “It is the power” radio theme music is as popular as some hit recordings.’47 Pabst leveraged this corporate information to further promote Olde English. In the fall of 1980, African American newspapers in New York, Pittsburgh, and Norfolk, Virginia, ran a photo of three singers in a recording studio, announcing that the ‘It Is the Power’ jingle had been ‘expanded and modified’48 into a ‘full length recording’49 available to disc jockeys and jukebox operators. Disguised as news, the photo advertisement celebrates the campaign and thereby encourages black consumers to purchase and drink more Olde English ‘800.’ While African Americans living in the northeast may have been privy to the music of Olde English ‘800,’ the brand began to build a significant presence in LA minority communities.50 Articles and advertisements from the Los Angeles Sentinel, a newspaper that enjoyed wide circulation in the South Central, Inglewood, and Compton neighborhoods, document the rise of Olde English ‘800’ as a major philanthropist and corporate

47 Pabst Brewing Company Annual Report (1980), 5 (sourced from ProQuest’s Historical Annual Reports).
50 This statement is not meant to elide the post-industrial conditions of poor areas in New York City, particularly the Bronx, where hip-hop culture and rap music were born. See Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 27–61.
sponsor of events in these urban communities. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Olde English lent its name, charitable contributions, and sponsorship to golf tournaments, minority scholarship drives, music and comedy talent showcases, a drum festival, hip-hop ‘jams,’ and a Martin Luther King, Jr. march followed by a prayer breakfast. All of these events were held in L.A.’s predominantly African American neighborhoods, and all were presented under the ‘It Is the Power’ slogan.

As Maria Luisa Alaniz and Chris Wilkes write, ‘it is critical to consider the historical context of alcohol in ethnic minority communities…as a form of social control,’ and David Grant of the Institute on Black Chemical Abuse connects alcohol advertising to racism, stating that the people ‘who are being hit the hardest by the high octave beverages are the very market for which these products are intended.’ This rings true for Pabst’s ‘It Is the Power’ ad campaign, which fully exploits the expression ‘Black Power’ and the politics of Black Power by promising access to both by drinking high-alcohol content malt liquor. Through its marketing campaign and corporate philanthropy, Pabst also refigured Black Power in Anglo-Saxonist terms such that, in drinking Olde English, African American consumers

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53 Grant, quoted in ibid., 465–66.
imbibe — materially and metaphorically — a fantasy of empowerment that is wholly disempowering.

That these advertisements span the late 1970s through the early 1990s, and that they come to target African American neighborhoods in Los Angeles, is a critical point. These decades were, as Patricia Hill Collins writes, ‘a period of initial promise, profound change, and for far too many, heart-wrenching disappointment.’

In many cities, particularly in Los Angeles, the closure or relocation of blue collar manufacturing jobs from central to suburban LA devastated African American communities living in South Central, Watts, and Compton. Compounding this problem was the deleterious effect of LA’s freeway system, which, by the 1970s, had circumscribed and carved up these neighborhoods, ‘reinforc[ing] patterns of segregation and marking physical boundaries’ that ‘cu[t] African Americans off from other parts of the city.’

‘[F]or those without automobiles,’ especially blue collar workers who had been laid off and could not travel to plants that had opened in the suburbs, ‘the freeways and inadequate public transit system make movement across Los Angeles’s vast expanse difficult’ and same-sector reemployment a logistical problem. As Josh Sides writes, ‘[t]he personal consequences of industrial plant closures for black male employees could be frustrating at best and devastating at worst. . . . For an already disillusioned minority of these children, watching their parents lose hard-won jobs confirmed the fruitlessness of playing by the rules.’ Amid rapidly rising unemployment, the ‘It Is the Power’ campaign promised physical and sexual power in a bottle, and Olde English ‘800’ became a community partner. From its availability at corner store markets to its con-

57 Sides, L.A. City Limits, 181.
stant participation in minority events, Olde English embedded itself within LA’s urban communities, functioning as a powerful double agent that claimed African American empowerment but maintained Anglo-Saxonist ‘social control.’ While it offered cheap and easy access to the promise of Black Power and supported educational and career opportunities for LA’s black communities, Olde English ‘800’ was nevertheless a major force of social disempowerment among African American men.\(^{58}\)

While the Bengal tiger and ‘It Is the Power’ slogan became integral parts of the brand’s official product logo, the women of Pabst’s campaign changed during the 1980s. The light-skinned woman of a Roots-inspired African fantasy was replaced with darker-skinned women, who were sometimes dressed in lingerie and other times holding pool sticks. In these ads, they advertise a larger 40oz bottle and reference Olde English ‘800’ as an ‘8-Ball,’ slang for an eighth-ounce of crack cocaine,\(^ {59}\) encouraging consumers to drink more Olde English and to associate its ‘power’ with illegal drugs. While Olde English advertising has always conscripted the bodies of black women in the service of pathologizing blackness in relation to race, sex, and alcohol consumption, these new ads used the women of Olde English in order to criminalize blackness. These posters, which were distributed to corner store and liquor mart owners, asked black men to find ‘power’ in the rampant alcoholism and drug ad-

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\(^{58}\) Olde English acts as a litmus test for Denise Herd’s extensive study of cirrhosis mortality among African American men, which finds that ‘among blacks, frequent heavy drinking is more common in men over 30, suggesting that it is a stable pattern of mid-life’ (‘Migration, Cultural Transformation and the Rise of Black Liver Cirrhosis Mortality,’ *British Journal of Addiction* 80, no. 4 [1985]: 398). Herd finds that by 1955, non-white deaths had surpassed white deaths; from 1960–70, cirrhosis deaths among non-whites had doubled; and between 1950 and 1973, this rate increased 242 percent (398, 399). Olde English likewise serves as a case study for Herd’s linking of Prohibition Era stereotypes of black men as ‘sensual, exotic primitives’ to late twentieth-century alcohol advertisements that ‘promot[e]…drinking, sexuality and violence’ (‘Contesting Culture,’ 753).

diction of LA’s inner city neighborhoods and thereby become subject to Reagan-era policies of trickle-down economics and the War on Drugs.

In the context of Pabst’s philanthropic relationship with LA’s minority neighborhoods and their ‘It Is the Power’ campaign of the 1980s, Compton-based rap group, N.W.A., summons the Anglo-Saxonist ‘powers’ of Olde English. The cover art from their 1987 single, ‘Panic Zone,’ which re-appears on their first LP, N.W.A. and the Posse (see Fig. 7), positions Olde English ‘800’ as

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60 Note that N.W.A. is not the only LA-based group to name-check Olde English ‘800.’ On his 1989 album, No One Can Do It Better, the DOC claims, ‘I gotta take one o’ them long-ass 8-Ball pisses — take me to a commercial’ (DOC, No One Can Do It Better [Los Angeles: Ruthless, 1989]).
a de facto signifier for the group’s most famous members: Eazy-E stands on two empty 40-ounce bottles of Olde English, while Ice Cube leans back with another in his hand, and an empty bottle and can are positioned in front of Dr. Dre. Other people in the photo hold open Olde English cans and bottles, while empty containers are strewn on the ground and perched on the building ledge. Large clocks, which hang around the necks of some members of the group, are set to 11:25, marking Olde English as a mid-morning brew. In many ways, the N.W.A. photograph is an ad hoc poster for Olde English and Pabst’s ‘It Is the Power’ campaign, yet the only sign of a woman is figured in the two white pumps on the ground in front of the men. Now that N.W.A. and its posse have entered the advertising frame of Olde English, all that is left of the woman who once stood there are these remnants of a physical or sexual encounter.

Track 2 of this album is titled ‘8-Ball.’ It refracts the cover art’s visual message and is an underground hit on Panic Zone and N.W.A. and the Posse. It is then re-mixed for Straight Outta Compton, the group’s 1988 triple-platinum follow-up album. Eazy-E’s day-long adventures with an 8-Ball include pulling a gun out on a liquor store operator, pushing around some ‘sissy ass punk’ in the neighborhood, and calling his girlfriend a ‘bitch.’ In addition to these encounters with Compton residents, Eazy-E’s other statements about his 8-Ball are interleaved within a vignette that describes his narrow escape from the cops:

Police on my drawers, I have to pause
40 ounce in my lap and it’s freezin my balls
I hook a right turn and let the boys go past
then I say to myself, ‘They can kiss my ass!’

…

Olde English 800 cause that’s my brand
Take it in a bottle, 40, quart, or can
Drink it like a madman, yes I do
Funk the police and a 502. 61

Olde English ‘800’ is the ‘brand’ that permits Eazy-E to say to himself (but not to the cops), ‘kiss my ass’ and ‘fuck the police.’ In other words, it is the ‘brand’ by which he articulates his resistance to, yet conscription within, a system of American racism that, in the 1980s criminalized blackness through new socio-economic and legal policies that are enforced by the LAPD’s paramilitary presence in Compton. 62 In ‘8-Ball,’ Eazy-E’s engagements with Compton residents and the LA police refract the decades-long presence of Olde English ‘800’ in Los Angeles’s minority neighborhoods. Consequently, ‘8-Ball’ is the signifying means by which Eazy-E expresses a presumed position of hyper-masculinity and hyper-sexuality in relation to the liquor store operator, some neighborhood ‘sissy,’ and the sissy’s girlfriend. And it is the brand by which Eazy-E lyricizes what hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose has called a ‘counterhegemonic’ resistance to the cops, the real and present Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Saxonist figures of institutional racism who operate within Compton. 63 With a 40-ounce bottle of Olde English in his lap, Eazy-E plays the part of the intoxicated black man in order to become a force of lyrically intoxicating resistance to this racist myth about black men. Put another way, Eazy-E drinks Olde English, then speaks ‘Olde English’; he is brought under the sway of the ideological ‘powers’ of Anglo-Saxonism, then reclaims these powers for the African American ‘gangsta.’

When Eithne Quinn assesses the sociocultural relationships between malt liquor and rap music, she writes, ‘forty-ounce

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61 N.W.A., ‘8-Ball (Remix),’ Straight Outta Compton (Los Angeles: Ruthless, 1988). The original lyrics of ‘8-Ball,’ recorded on N.W.A. and the Posse (Los Angeles: Macola, 1987) are slightly different: ‘Police on my tail, I don’t like jail / 40 ounce in my lap and it’s cold as hell’ — and reflect the group’s original, less ‘gangsta’ persona.

62 N.W.A. explores this theme visually in ‘Straight Outta Compton’ (music video), directed by Rupert Wainwright, 1989. See also Kajikawa, Sounding Race in Rap Songs, 96–99.

63 Rose, Black Noise, 102.
bottles...became iconic accessories of gangsta rap, homologous with the focal concerns, activities, and collective self-image of the working-class subculture from which the music sprang.64 The ‘40,’ Quinn further explains, acted as an ‘objec[t]’ that ‘held and reflected’ the values of the ‘gangsta’: ‘it stands, just as gangsta does, in opposition to respectable or acquired bourgeois tastes.’65 Over a decade later, Quinn’s assessment holds true of Olde English, which continues to appear frequently in rap songs and videos as an ‘accessory’ that signifies ‘gangsta… tastes.’ However, the use of Olde English ‘800’ by N.W.A. and Eazy-E exceeds Quinn’s assessment. Their album cover art and ‘8-Ball’ lyrics explore Olde English not merely as an ‘object’ but also as a consumable object that ‘is the power,’ not only for their posse but, moreover, for their musical sound, lyrics, and identity politics. Eazy-E drinks his ‘40;’ then spits a rhyme of empowering rage and political energy, exposing Olde English not simply as a prop for the ‘gangsta’ but more importantly as an object of conspicuous consumption that draws its power from the brand’s long-standing reference to the Old English language and the Anglo-Saxonist meta-discursive regime of masculinity, virility, and strength that surrounds it. As an ‘8-Ball junkie,’ Eazy-E imbibes — incorporates — Olde English, transforming it into a substance which lends a subversive pedigree to the sound of N.W.A., to Eazy-E’s voice, and to the lyricized frustrations of an urban youth that has been ghettoized and criminalized by Anglo-Saxon(ist) America. N.W.A. and Eazy-E are possessed by Olde English in order to take musical possession of it, expanding its semantic limits from a brand of malt liquor to a genre of music — so-called ‘gangsta rap’ — that coordinates the ‘old-est’ language of English with African American English, and a Grimmian rhetoric of Anglo-Saxonism with the group’s articu-

65 Ibid., 14–15.
lations of what it means to be an African American man who lives in inner-city L.A.  

Three years after ‘8-Ball’ appeared on Straight Outta Compton, malt liquor advertising drew widespread, national controversy. A June 17, 1991 article in the the Wall Street Journal discussed Heileman Brewing Company’s plan to launch a new malt liquor called PowerMaster, a beverage that contained 5.9% alcohol—31% more alcohol than Colt 45, the company’s bestselling brand. PowerMaster was expressly targeted at ‘inner-city blacks,’ and its ad campaign ‘played to this group with posters and billboards using black male models’ which ‘assured consumers that PowerMaster was “Bold Not Harsh”.’ PowerMaster’s alcohol content and its advertisements were in no way unique from other malt liquors. In addition to Olde English ‘800,’ brands such as Schlitz, Hurricane, King Cobra, and St.

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66 The extent to which Olde English played a role in N.W.A.’s group identity can be tracked in relation to the break-up of the group. Although N.W.A. had been a de-facto advertiser for Olde English ‘800’ since their first album, when business tensions between Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and Dr. Dre resulted in the departure of the latter two members from the group, malt liquor played a visible role in the public feud that ensued. While Eazy continued his open loyalty to Olde English, Ice Cube and Dre shifted their allegiances to competitor St. Ides. Ice Cube, who wrote the lyrics for N.W.A.’s ‘8-Ball,’ starred in a 1990 St. Ides commercial, in which he ‘took’ part in a “Pepsi challenge” of malt liquor brands…a clear rebuke to chief competitor Olde English 800, known as “8-Ball”’ (Quinn, Ain’t Nuthin’ But a ‘G’ Thang, 2). In his 1991 single, ‘Steady Mobbin,’ Ice Cube raps, ‘Told all my friends: don’t drink 8-Ball, cos St. Ides is giving ends’ (‘Steady Mobbin,’ Death Certificate [Los Angeles: Priority/EMI, 1991]). Shortly after Ice Cube left N.W.A. and signed on with St. Ides, Dr. Dre did the same, rapping in a 1993 commercial for the brand with his new partner, Snoop Dogg. Remaining N.W.A. member Eazy-E responded to these business and brand ‘betrayals’ in the cover art of his 1993 EP, It’s On (Dr. Dre) 187um Killa (Torrance: Audio Achievements), which not only strikes out ‘Dr. Dre’ in the title but also depicts Eazy-E pouring out a 40-ounce bottle of Olde English ‘800,’ an action that acknowledges the death of a friend or relative and references a scene from Ice Cube’s 1991 film Boyz in the Hood (dir. John Singleton [Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1991]).


68 Ibid.
Old/e English Poetics and ‘Afro-Saxon’ Intimacies

Ides contain 6 to 8 percent alcohol (compared to less than 5% in other beers); they are targeted at poor and disenfranchised inner city black communities; and their brand names, slogans, and ad imagery link malt liquor to physical and sexual prowess.\(^69\) A ‘nationwide coalition of African American public health activists’ quickly began to form around the PowerMaster ad campaign,\(^70\) and censure mounted against an industry that had, for decades, targeted low-income and high-risk racialized communities. The PowerMaster controversy resulted in a July 1991 citation by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), which changed the advertising regulations not just for PowerMaster but for all malt liquor brews,\(^71\) including Pabst’s Olde English ‘800.’ Despite the controversy, sales soared as many rap artists, including N.W.A. members Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and Dr. Dre, had become de facto and paid spokesmen for a variety of malt liquor brands.

In the wake of the PowerMaster controversy and BATF ruling, Dr. Dre, who had just filmed a commercial for St. Ides — the primary rival to Olde English — with his protege, Snoop Dogg, released ‘Ain’t Nuthin’ but a G Thang,’ the first single from his debut studio album, *The Chronic.* It takes as it subject the ‘gangsta,’ transforming him from a figure of counterhegemonic resistance

\(^{69}\) For a recent, general discussion of alcohol in African American communities, including the PowerMaster controversy, see Nicholas Freudenberg, *Lethal but Legal: Corporations, Consumption, and Protecting Public Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 192–96. Freudenberg cites also the 40-ounce container size, inexpensive price (malt liquor is often less than $2 a bottle), and high-sugar content (calories and carbohydrates that contribute to diseases such as diabetes) of malt liquors (193–94).


\(^{71}\) Public health activists argued that PowerMaster’s marketing ‘not only preyed immorally on communities at risk but also violated the Federal Alcohol Administration Act’s prohibition of beer advertising that promotes potency,’ and in 1991, the BATF ‘revok[ed] label approval for PowerMaster based on the potency rule’ (ibid., 32). The following year, ‘BATF extended the ruling to require changes in seven advertising campaigns by other malt liquor brands to be found in violation of the potency rule’ (ibid.).
to the LAPD to an apolitical character whose lifestyle of parties, women, drugs, and, above all, malt liquor is characterized by ‘G-Funk,’ a sound produced explicitly for southern California car culture. When ‘Ain’t Nuthin’ but a G Thang’ appeared on MTV in 1993, it did more than introduce America to the visual world of Dr. Dre’s ‘gangsta’ lifestyle and G-Funk beats. The video likewise contemplated the impact that malt liquor had on intergenerational relationships between fathers and sons in LA’s black communities, and it drew attention to the impact that malt liquor’s myths about black men had on their relationships with black women.

As the video opens, Dr. Dre parks his 1964 Chevrolet Impala — the same ‘6 four’ that Eazy-E drives while drinking his 8-Ball, and the vehicle that is transformed into the ‘I’ of St. Ides in Dre and Snoop’s recent commercial — in front of Snoop Dogg’s Long Beach house. As the Impala travels across Los Angeles, against a backdrop of competing brands of malt liquor, it carries Dr. Dre ‘straight outta Compton,’ a place and a professional past from which he became, in the mind’s eye of America, a ‘gangsta rapper.’ Now an Original Gangsta, Dr. Dre is about to brook a new, paternalistic collaboration with the young Snoop Dogg that will refigure the style and sound of gangsta rap. Yet, before the first musical bars of ‘The Chronic’ are played, Dr. Dre crosses a landscape that narrativizes a story of ‘black power’ and the role malt liquor has played in shaping it. Once Dre steps out of his Impala, he walks towards the front door of a house, passing a man who holds the chain on a barking Rottweiler as two others shout encouragements at a man who attempts to bench press 180 pounds. The sounds and sights that accompany these performances of physical strength and virility in the front yard appear in high contrast to scenes inside the house. Here, Dr. Dre encounters a middle-aged man in an undershirt, who sits on a couch and watches TV with a 40-ounce bottle in his hand, while a woman in a housecoat and curlers moves busily around

the room. Unlike the men outside, his physical potency is spent, and his entire, shiftless being broadcasts the long-term effects that plant closures, unemployment, and malt liquor consumption has had on a generation of black men in urban Los Angeles. As a video directed by Dr. Dre himself, who grew up in inner city LA during 1970s and 1980s, the visual prelude to ‘G Thang’ introduces us to an image he knows well: a Janus-faced figure of ‘black power’ that strives, in public, to actualize itself, yet in the domestic sphere, has become sedentary under the influence of malt liquor.

Although Dr. Dre’s presence tracks this visual narrative as one that unfolds across space, as his own youth in Compton attests, it is a story that has likewise been written across time. Dr. Dre, however, bears no likeness to any of the men he encounters at the beginning of the music video. As a former N.W.A. member, he has drunk Olde English for many years, incorporated its ‘Anglo-Saxonist’ mode, and now harbors a smooth, laidback, gangsta style that forces the representations of black power on display at Snoop Dogg’s house to the visual margins. As Dr. Dre walks across the yard and then through the house, the men at the bench press and the man with the Rottweiler appear partially, and only for a split second, at the corners of the screen, having been banished to the conceptual borders of the ‘G Thang’ video. Yet Dr. Dre’s arrival within the house causes the man on the couch to challenge the comfort with which Dre passes through these landscapes. While this man is, at first, marginalized by the camera, the movements of the woman inside the house bring his presence into focus. As he holds his ‘40’ in one hand, the

73 Kajikawa puts this another way, writing, ‘Dr. Dre portrays himself as a gangster of stature. He asserts on The Chronic’s “Let Me Ride” that he can “make a phone call” to dispose of any unwarranted adversaries. In other words, Dre has the ability to have someone killed on demand from afar. In a sense, this statement evidences the shift from his relatively powerless position with N.W.A. to his role as an established hit maker and business partner in Death Row Records. Rather than having to scrap for his daily bread, he now occupies a comfortable seat at the table’ (Sounding Race in Rap Songs, 102).
man points a finger, accusingly, at Dr. Dre, stating, ‘Hope you’re pickin’ him [Snoop Dogg] up to find a job.’ To which, Dr. Dre retorts, ‘Yeah. We’re goin’ to work, so we can grow up and be just like you.’

Suddenly, ‘G Thang’s’ video narrative about black power becomes generational. This delinquent ‘father’ abdicates his responsibilities of paternal guidance to his ‘son’ Snoop Dogg, calling Dr. Dre to step into the breach and take Snoop job hunting. Yet the 40-ounce-drinking man attempts to refigure father-son relationships from within the framework of a gangsta rap video, wherein Dr. Dre is not a father, but an O.G., and Snoop is not a son, but a gangsta protege. Consequently, Dr. Dre walks away from this proposition. He declines to accept the fatherly role that has been thrust upon him and insists, instead, that neither he nor Snoop Dogg have ‘grow[n] up’ yet. In this moment, the long-term effects of unemployment and alcoholism in L.A’s African American neighborhoods reveal themselves as problems that threaten another generation of black men. And Dr. Dre is forced to ask himself (as director) and be asked (as actor) what role he plays in an ongoing narrative of black power that is partly sustained via the valorization of malt liquor in his community and in his professional career.

Just as Dr. Dre’s spatio-temporal movements track an intergenerational narrative of malt liquor use among black men in L.A, the musical rhythms of the ‘G Thang’ prelude parallel his gangsta storyline. Dr. Dre’s beat-making on The Chronic elaborates and builds upon the production style he developed while a member of N.W.A. By layering a breakbeat, drum machine, and sampled performances of live studio musicians, Dre ‘create[d] a thick and intense sound’ for the group, which filled the ‘sonic space…to capacity.’

In The Chronic, Dr. Dre continues to layer beats, but ‘G Thang’ is composed of ‘multilayered leisurely loops…characterized by deep bass, prominent keyboards, and

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74 Dr. Dre, ‘Ain’t Nuthin’ but a G Thang.’
75 Kajikawa, Sounding Race in Rap Songs, 95.
samples of George Clinton’s P-funk classics.’’

Although ‘every register of sonic space is filled,’ gangsta cool is coordinated with ‘a laid-back, sensual soundscape,’ where the absence of acoustical conflict permits ‘a promise of [African American] transcendence.’ Thus, as Dr. Dre exits his Impala and makes his way across the yard, the ‘leisurely loop’ of a whiny synthesizer follows the path of its composer. As he moves past men in the yard and the house, the sonic fluidity of Dr. Dre’s G-Funk loop underscores ‘gangsta’ as a powerful aesthetic that has become smooth and effortless. It produces a musical counternarrative to the grunts and cheers of weight-lifting men, the barks of a Rottweiler, and the background noises of a domestic environment which Dre passed by and through at the beginning of the video. Dr. Dre’s established and authoritative gangsta presence accompanies the first, tentative bars of his G-Funk sound as it makes its way across a field of ‘black power’ that has been interpellated within Anglo-Saxonist socioeconomics, police control, and malt liquor. In ‘G Thang,’ this coordination between Dr. Dre’s physical body and the sonic body of his music enables the video to query the extent to which ‘gangsta’ operates in tandem with this generation of LA ‘fathers,’ whose misguided faith in 40-ounce culture has dissipated their agency. Does ‘G Thang’ destine LA’s ‘sons’ for a cycle of dissipation, or, like Dr. Dre, does it offer them physical movement past it and sonic ‘transcendence’ from this cycle?

After Dr. Dre leaves the house with the young Snoop Dogg in his 1964 Impala, they drive to a picnic, where the camera focuses, casually, on scantily clad women and armed men. Unlike Eazy-E’s lyrics, which coordinate the 8-Ball in his lap with acts of sexual and physical assault that enable him to vocalize his rage at the LAPD, malt liquor and law enforcement are kept at the visual margins of these scenes. By screening both from

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77 Kajikawa, Sounding Race in Rap Songs, 103, 105, 109.
direct view, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg present sex and violence, passively, as the organic elements of a laid-back gangsta lifestyle and its G-Funk sound.\textsuperscript{78} At the end of the day, the central role that malt liquor plays in this lifestyle is finally brought into direct view at a house party, where the ‘sons’ drink the same booze as their ‘father.’ At the house, a young, black man reaches into a refrigerator full of 40-ounce malt liquor bottles. As the camera lingers over this shot, Snoop raps, ‘Pimping hoes and clocking a grip, like my name was Dolemite / Yeah, and it don’t quit / I think they in the mood for some mothafuckin’ G shit.’\textsuperscript{79} A refrigerator full of ‘40’s comes into focus when Snoop suggests that we are ‘in the mood for some mothafuckin’ G shit,’ and the moments that follow express precisely what this ‘G shit’ is. A new scene opens in which Snoop tells Dre, ‘we gotta give ‘em what they want,’ and Dre responds, ‘what’s that, G?’ The camera then moves to a young, light-skinned black woman — a figure seen many times before in Olde English advertising — dressed in a tank top and miniskirt who makes her way through the crowded house party. Her dress and manner indicate that she is not from Compton or Long Beach, and upon rebuffing the sexual advances that are made towards her, two men corner the woman and spray her with 40-ounce bottles of malt liquor, an act that echoes the ‘It Is the Power’ TV advertisement from the 1970s. As they enact physical and sexual assault by symbolic malt liquor proxy, revelers dance. The party scene fades, and Dre’s car rolls up to Snoop’s house at dawn. As Snoop gets out of the car and stumbles up the driveway, drunk, one assumes from malt liquor, this ‘son’ returns to his ‘father’s’ house. Although

\textsuperscript{78} When a caravan of lowrider convertibles playing ‘G Thang’ from their sound systems pass a single motorcycle cop, the cop waves them past, and the camera relegates him to the corner of the screen. The visual ‘cornering’ of elements that would politicize the ‘gangsta’ figure or create conflict for him should be considered in relation to its film date. ‘G Thang’ was shot just after the 1991 PowerMaster controversy and BATF ruling (which happened in the same months as the Rodney King beating) and the 1992 L.A. Riots.

\textsuperscript{79} Dr. Dre, ‘Ain’t Nuthin’ but a G Thang.’
Dr. Dre no longer makes music with N.W.A., his solo career is launched by a video in which he continues to query whether the lifestyle and sound of gangsta rap simply ‘loops’ LA’s inner-city black men into a narrative of black power — crafted by Pabst’s ‘It Is the Power’ campaign — that tethers race and sex to alcoholism. Or whether the new, laid-back sounds of G-Funk offer its African American listeners ‘transcendence’ by marginalizing its most troubling elements.

Many critics have voiced their concern regarding Dr. Dre’s G-Funk’s aesthetic and its apolitical refiguring of ‘gangsta rap.’ Yet the ambivalence with which ‘G Thang’ navigates the history of malt liquor among LA’s African American men can be understood, to borrow the language of Loren Kajikawa, as ‘a cool and cynical accommodation with the realities of the neoliberal era. Sociopathic easy-listening indeed.’ In other words, ‘G Thang’ visually and musically performs what Eithne Quinn calls the ‘analytic of ambivalence’ that ‘characterize[s] the gangsta mode.’ Such ‘ambivalence,’ Geoffrey Baker explains, accounts for rap’s ‘most powerful transformative energies,’ which ‘may reside where they are least examined and never taken seriously, in lyrics that shun realistic portrayal of the effects of centuries of violent colonization and that commit their violence against the reigning order at the level of language and culture itself.’

The literary ‘ambivalence’ and ‘deep tension’ that N.W.A. and its members associate with Olde English render it a site of ‘transformative energ[y];’ and while songs such as ‘8-Ball’ and ‘G Thang’ do not loosen Olde English from its function as a brand of malt liquor, contemporaries of N.W.A. begin to leverage the ambivalent position Olde English has begun to occupy in rap music. A generation of rappers who are active in the 1990s and

80 For a very recent summary of these debates from the 1990s, see Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*, 116.
81 Ibid., 117.
82 Quinn, *Ain't Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang*, 33, 34.
early 2000s reframe ‘Olde English’ as a signifier that references the language and poetry of rap music. These rappers slowly recode ‘Olde English’ such that becomes an expression that represents certain sociolinguistic aspects of Black English.

For example, as LL Cool J raps on ‘Mama Said Knock You Out,’ ‘Olde English filled my mind / And I came up with a funky rhyme,’ a statement that acknowledges the intoxicating function of Olde English but also aligns it with word play. Likewise, Tash from The Alkaholiks invokes the ‘power’ of Olde English as a language that generates creative lyricism:

While I’m leavin’ niggas puzzled like I said my shit in French
But it’s all Olde English that I’m bringin’ from beneath
Try to bite my style on wax and watch these lyrics crack your teeth
Cause I make words Connect like West Side when I test glide
My drunken lyrical hanglider

Tash braces ‘Olde English’ against ‘French,’ a standard language. Upon claiming that he is ‘bringin’ Olde English, Tash follows with an entire line (save one word) that, on account of his oral delivery, is comprised of strong, stressed mono-syllables:

Try to bite my style on wax and watch these lyrics crack your teeth.

Tash displays his ‘flow’ and ‘slang’ in this staccatoed challenge to other emcees. He continues, ‘Cause I make words Connect like

84 LL Cool J, ‘Mama Said Knock You Out,’ *Mama Said Knock You Out* (New York: Def Jam, 1991). Note that LL Cool J is from New York, and, while beyond the scope of this chapter, the influence of Olde English’s ‘It Is the Power’ campaign was not limited to the minority neighborhoods of Los Angeles.
86 Try to bite [steal] his style on wax [a track], and his lyrics [complex flow] will break your teeth.
West Side when I test glide / My drunken lyrical hanglider, a statement that transforms the name of another L.A. group, Westside Connection, into the materials by which he ‘test glides’ (not test drives) ‘my drunken lyrical hanglider.’ Intoxicated by Olde English malt liquor, Tash raps in what he calls ‘Olde English,’ a language of rhythm, wordplay, flow, and slang that bests other emcees, yet confirms his participation in L.A.’s rap community.

Aware of the destructive history of Olde English alcohol consumption in urban African American communities, these rappers leverage this brand of beer to ‘Signify’: to recognize and create a space for ‘the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and meaning...to say one thing but to mean quite another.’ Signifying is one of many sociolinguistic aspects of Black English that ‘has allowed blacks to create a culture of survival in an alien land.’ As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explains, it ‘disrupt[s] the nature of the signifier/signified equation,’ ‘critiques’ the nature of a word’s meaning, and ‘supplant[s]’ standard English associations and white conventions of a signifier. By transforming signs and sign systems, they become expressions that are both ‘decolonized’ and ‘double-voiced.’ As Gates remarks, ‘hip-hop took signifying to a new and electrifyingly original level.’ Thus, while LL Cool J recognizes Olde English as alcohol, he Signifies it as generative of a ‘funky rhyme.’ And when Tash compares Olde English to French, he exceeds its conventional definition as a malt liquor brand and suggests it as a standard language. As these rappers Signify Olde English, they extend its semantic range from a brand of alcohol towards a poetic category, turning it into a sign that stands in for a whole system of rhetorical strategies that align with what Samy Alim calls ‘Hip Hop Nation Language’

87 Gates, The Signifying Monkey, 89.
89 Gates, The Signifying Monkey, 51, 52.
90 Ibid., 55.
91 Ibid., xxx.
(HHNL), a ‘linguistic culture’ situated ‘in the broader context of Black American speech.’\textsuperscript{92} Alim continues:

[HHNL] refers not only to the syntactic constructions of the language but also to the many discursive and communicative practices, the attitudes towards language, understanding the role of language in both binding/bonding community and seizing/smothering linguistic opponents, and language as concept (meaning…body movements…and overall communication…).\textsuperscript{93}

Tash’s wordplay is therefore not just limited to his meter and rhyme. It is, moreover, an ‘attitude towards language; and he uses the expression ‘Olde English’ to represent and introduce a variety of poetic strategies that simultaneously ‘seize/smother’ his opponents and ‘bind/bond’ himself to LA’s rap community. Likewise, Tash’s ‘drunken lyrical hanglider’ underscores his ‘language as [a] concept’ that is expressed in his ‘body movements’ and ‘overall communication,’ which claim to be under the double influence of alcohol and hip hop. For Tash, Signifying Olde English (as a sociolinguistic strategy of Black English and a linguistic category of HHNL) is an act that not only transforms a reference to malt liquor into rap but also figures the language of Olde English as spoken lyrics and oral performance that, in this instance, transform alcoholic intoxication into an ‘Alkaholik’ display. As Tash Signifies Olde English, he disrupts, critiques, and supplants all previous associations that American brewers have sought to generate for this brand of malt liquor and thereby ‘flips the script.’\textsuperscript{94} That is to say, Tash ‘revers[es] the power of the dominant culture’ and ‘free[s] [his rhymes] from linguistic colonization’\textsuperscript{95} by ‘positioning speakers of “standard English” as

\textsuperscript{92} Alim, \textit{Roc the Mic Right}, 70.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 71.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
“limited” and the speakers of “Black Language” as “limitless”.

By flipping the script on Olde English, Tash ‘frees’ it from its sedimented relationship to a ‘limited’ Anglo-Saxonist metadiscursive regime and reclaims it as a ‘limitless’ signifier descriptive of African American rhetorical arts, Black English, and HHNL that can be doubled and (re)doubled, sustained and altered in its form.

As Olde English continues to appear in the rap lyrics of other artists, its limitless signifying capacity shuttles it towards a postcolonial form. For example, as RZA rhymes:

Right eye squinted; I speak brok-len english
Stumble off the cold four-oh of Olde English Wu brew.

As Ol’ Dirty Bastard claims:

You know me
My mouth is sugar, sweet as a honey bee
Taste like a forty, stinkin like Old-E
But I drink Ol’ English so I speak Ol’ English

And as J-Ro from the Alkaholiks boasts:

It’s the Olde English, linguist, distinguished genius

As Olde English, Old-E, and Ol’ English are rearticulated by RZA, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, and J-Ro, the phrase reveals its transformative energies. Not only does the sign itself become multiple, redoubled, and transformed by their language games, but

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as these rappers alter the sound and spelling of Olde English, they claim it as a linguistic signifier that responds to critics’ derisive claims that rap is the provenance of ‘semi-literate’ youth by transforming Olde English into a postcolonial sign that acknowledges rap lyrics and rhymes as sites of linguistic virtuosity. RZA’s use of ‘Olde English’ references an English that appears, on the surface, to be ‘brok-len,’ yet this ‘multilayered’ statement simultaneously signifies his Brooklyn dialect even as it signifies on a white, ‘dominant discourse’ that fails to recognize a tradition of African American rhetoric at work in his rhyme. Just as RZA claims Olde English as his own Brooklyn accent, Ol’ Dirty Bastard manipulates it as a referent for his notable style of free-associative rhymes and partially sung, partially rapped, delivery, which he describes via the conceptual triptych of Ol’ Dirty Bastard, Ol’ English malt liquor, and Ol’ English speech. ODB’s famed capacity as a rapper to distort sound and sense enables him to bend the representative contours of a linguistic sign so that it aligns with his stage name. In transforming ‘Olde’ into ‘Ol’, English becomes, like the rapper himself and the song title in which this lyric appears, ‘dirty and stinkin.’ It no longer participates in an Anglo-Saxonist metadiscursive regime and belongs instead to Alim’s HHNL. RZA and Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s solo projects were released at the turn of the millennium, and a decade later, when J-Ro from the Alkaholiks returns to the expression, he expresses the decolonizing after-effects of these lyrics in the line, ‘Olde English, linguist, distinguished genius.’

100 H. Samy Alim, ‘Global Ill-literacies: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Literacy,’ Review of Research in Education 35 (2011): 122. Alim locates rap within the larger sociolinguistic category of ‘ill-literacy,’ a term that ‘highlight[s] the irony of youth described by educational institutions as “semi-literate”’ and takes this perception to task by ‘draw[ing] attention to the multiple, textual interpretations made possible by Hip Hop’s use of coded language or “counterlanguage,” which is often used as a means to critique dominant discourse’ (ibid.). In other words, ill-literacy ‘deliberately creat[es] multilayered, subtextual understandings for participants while at the same time producing potential confusion for non-participants’ (ibid.).

101 Ibid.
No longer a dialect, an accent, or an expression of personal style, this triple rhyme Signifies ‘Olde English’ as a motivating, decolonizing sign. Its sound generates a rhyme that not only claims rap as a language but, moreover, boasts the linguistic virtuosity and exceptional creative powers of its rappers.

Olde English’s Signifying capacity is in conversation with another virtuosic element of rap: sampling. As Paul Miller (a.k.a. DJ Spooky) and Alisdair Pennycook explain, sampling a beat is ‘a new way of doing something that’s been with us for a long time: creating with found objects. The rotation gets thick. The constraints get thin. The mix breaks free of the old associations.’

In addition to the sample’s function as a sound that is both repetitive and different, Pennycook highlights the sample’s relationship to temporal flow: ‘repetition always entails difference, since no two moments, events, words can be the same. Once we make an understanding of the flow of time central to an understanding of difference, “any repeated event is necessarily different (even if different only to the extent that it has a predecessor)”’

Pennycook draws upon the work of Michael Taussig and Homi Bhabha to argue that such use of creative sampling — repetition or ‘mimicry’ — is key to postcoloniality, and he suggests that appropriating ‘the dominant powers, arts, and discourses unsettles those powers and creates a new relationship between colonized and colonizer.’

The statements of Miller and Pennycook provide a temporal lens through which to assess the function of Olde English as both a Signifying form and an ‘object’ found and sampled by emcees like RZA, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, and J-Ro of the Alkaholiks. It transforms and is transformed as these rap artists drink, lyricize, and repeat across several decades of rap music. By way of creative repetition, Olde English moves from

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104 Ibid., 586.
a colonial signifier to an ambivalent prosodics, from a Signifying term of Black English and ḤHNL to a postcolonial language politics. Through repetition, not only does the rotation get thick but the fantastic ‘flow of time’ also bends Olde English from its function as a marker of Old English linguistic iconography and Anglo-Saxonist ideology — academic and popular lenses that are grounded in looking back into the past — towards a postcolonial linguistic ‘now.’ This ‘now’ is not the present but, as Michelle Wright writes, is an ‘epiphenomenal’ spacetime that coordinates with ‘the Blackness of the Black Atlantic and the African Diaspora…in which the present and future are conflated and as many past and present moments exist as we can currently discuss, actively linked to Blackness.’ As a spacetime that is embodied and experienced rather than historicized, the ‘now’ of Olde English ‘is always in process’ and therefore stands in contrast to the linear progress narratives of Western civilization and the colonial and racial politics that attend them. Likewise, it is an epiphenomenal language that attends to a new aesthetics of place, race, and rules of linguistic use.

As if to signal its arrival as a postcolonial expression and object of epiphenomenal spacetime, LA rap group Dilated Peoples’s 2006 track, ‘Olde English,’ opens with the statement, ‘this ain’t the new, it’s the old from way back,’ then follows with the hook,

Four by four, eight by eight
Twenty by twenty bars, I demonstrate
Four by four, eight by eight
Twenty by twenty bars, I demonstrate

As in much popular music, rap is organized in four-measure cycles and groupings divisible by four lines per stanza. However, as Evidence and Rakaa ‘demonstrate,’ each of their stanzas

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105 Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015), 60.
106 Ibid., 41, 60.
107 Ibid., 41.
is twenty ‘bars,’ or lines, long. While the hook seems to claim the
duo’s lengthy lyricism as evidentiary of the ‘way back’ style of
‘Olde English,’ Rakaa expounds upon this claim in a later verse,
which begins:

Richard Pryor, Bruce Lee, Muhammad Ali
Bob Marley, Jimi Hendrix, Salvador Dali
Now we rap Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou
Out the disco Xanadu, hip-hop for the streets.
Now the beat swing numchuk style
I’m like Jim Kelly tellin sucker MC’s duck down
Heavy artillery with the heavenly spittery
And third strike energy  

Rakaa’s lyrics and his rhymes transform ‘Olde English’ from an
expression that references the track’s ‘way back’ style to a phrase
that acts as shorthand for the artistic work of a diverse group of
mostly African American figures whose art and politics span
the twentieth century. To Dilated Peoples, ‘Olde English’ is no
longer, as it was for Eazy E, a means of articulating resistance
to Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Saxonist ‘powers’ on the streets of
Compton. Nor is it an ambivalent signifier that enables Dr. Dre
to query the role of malt liquor in constructing an intergenera-
tional narrative of ‘black power’ that loops L.A.’s fathers and sons
into a cycle of unemployment and alcoholism. As that which
has been drunk materially, visually, and lyrically by genera-
tions of rap artists, ‘Olde English’ flows across times and spaces,
pasts and presents, realizing its function as an epiphenomenal
language of the ‘now’ that connotes the arts and politics — the
written words, oral expressions, and embodied experiences — of
visionary African Americans.

As rap artists continue to query the sociolinguistic stakes
of Olde English and further claim it as a signifier for African
American experience, the term shifts its spelling to ‘Old Eng-
lish,’ even as academics begin to query the relationship between

109 Ibid.
Rap music and Old English language arts. When Derek Attridge discusses Old English alliterative metre in his 1995 book, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction*, he takes a five-page detour into rap music. Attridge discusses rap’s ‘verse form, which bears many resemblances to Old English strong-stress meter,’ and he talks about rap lyrics, which ‘like Old English verse…are written to be performed to an accompaniment that emphasizes the metrical structure of the verse.’ The following year, Dana Giola’s essay, ‘Meter-Making Arguments,’ repeatedly positions rap in relation to Old English, remarking that the ‘four beat accentual [meter is the] line that English has favored from the *Beowulf* bard to the Beastie Boys.’ While specialists in Old English and Anglo-Saxon studies likewise have noted the metrical and performative similarities between Old English poetry and rap music, only Alta Cools Halama has recognized the ethical stakes of making these connections:

Such a genre comparison [between Old English and rap music], approaching the unknown from the known, could not only bring multi-culturalism into Old English studies but also move Old English study into multi-culturalism. When my students see *Beowulf* so carefully separate the superior Geats from the lesser Danes, I hope those students hear the words of Clarence Page: ‘Racism is the belief or practice that

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devalues other races as biologically and morally inferior…. It has been called America’s original sin. It is.113

In these lines, Halama argues that coordinating Old English and rap is not just an analogical or multicultural endeavor but is, in fact, a process of recognizing American racism and of mitigating against ‘America’s original sin.’

It has been 20 years since Halama’s article was published, yet little has changed regarding the position of Olde English to Old English. While hip-hop theorists trace the influences of rap to Signifying, the dozens, toasts, American blues, and the African diaspora, early medieval scholars continue to discuss Old English linguistics, poetic composition, and oral performance within the historical context of Anglo-Saxon England.114

113 Halama, ‘Flytes of Fancy,’ 92.

Hip-hop scholar Adam Bradley is among the few who consider the interrelatedness, as opposed to analogical relationship, between rap and Old English, and he argues that argues that ‘[w]hile rap may be new-school music, it is old-school poetry…. [R]ap bears a stronger affinity to some of poetry’s oldest forms, such as the strong-stress meter of Beowulf and the [thirteenth-century] ballad stanzas of the bardic past’ (Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop [New York: Basic Civitas, 2009], xv, 18).

Using Wonder Mike, a member of the Sugarhill Gang (whose 1979 ‘Rapper’s Delight’ introduced rap music to mainstream radio audiences) as an example, Bradley explains, writing: ‘Wonder Mike’s likely unwitting use of ballad stanzas underscores two essential facts about rap poetics. Rap was created by black Americans. Rap is a Western poetic form. These are not contradictory assertions’ (19).
It would seem that the unspoken rules of linear time, periodization, and language not only police the boundaries between Olde English and Old English but also regulate the boundaries we set on conversations between scholars of hip hop and of early medieval poetry. And yet Tha Alkaholiks, RZA, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, and Dilated Peoples, Attridge, Giola, and certainly Halama, are actually trying to have a conversation—a conversation that would create an epiphenomenal wormhole between medieval and modern languages, temporalities, and the meta-discursive regimes of racism and colonialism that sustain the conceptual infrastructure of old, middle, and modern Englishes and the historical periods to which they belong.

To return to the opening discussions of this chapter, a first step towards locating an epiphenomenal ‘now’ across languages and historical periods might be to recognize, as Makoni and Pennycook argue, that ‘languages…are inventions’ which occur simultaneously with the invention of the nineteenth-century nation and European colonialism; and to understand that linguistic invention occurs in ‘parallel’ with ‘metadiscursive regimes’: ‘representations of language…reinforced by the existence of grammars,’ ‘dictionaries,’ and ‘autonomous texts’ that reconstruct a past language and ‘invent[t]’ a ‘tradition…into which the present is inserted.’ Following Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, Makoni and Pennycook explain that these nineteenth-century linguistic projects anchor languages to historical, geographic, and racial territories, and they theorize that unmooring languages from these sites requires ‘strategies of dis-

Bradley credits not only Old English meter and the later-medieval ballad form but also the rhyming patterns of Emily Dickinson, Lord Byron, and Piers Plowman; the similes and puns of Shakespeare; and the kennings of Old English and Lewis Carroll as poetic materials with which rap is entangled. Yet Bradley explains that rap takes these poetic elements, which draw from the many sedimented layers of ‘Western poetic form,’ and stylizes them according to jazz and the blues, toasting and the dozens, personal and local experiences of artists and their neighborhoods.

115 Makoni and Pennycook, ‘Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages,’ 1, 2, 8.
116 Bauman and Briggs, Voices of Modernity.
invention and reconstruction,’ both in terms of the naming of languages and also with respect to the ways in which scholars conceptualize linguistic difference.\(^{117}\) ‘If anything,’ Makoni and Pennycook write, ‘we would like to argue that all languages are creoles, and that the slave and colonial history of creoles should serve as a model on which other languages are assessed. In other words, what is seen as marginal or exceptional…should be used to frame our understandings of language.’\(^{118}\) To refigure languages as creoles — even those that predate the advent of colonialism — allows for a ‘discontinuous’ linguistic history: an understanding of language that is not predicated upon linguistic continuity or stages, and provides ‘latitude for multiple temporalities’ and ‘overlapping, translingual language uses.’\(^{119}\)

As a linguistic ‘representatio[n]’ conceived in the heyday of Anglo-Saxonism,\(^{120}\) Old English and its pedagogical tools bear the semantic weight of this metadiscursive regime. Olde English, however, exposes the colonial and racial ideologies of ‘Old English’; it takes on the metadiscursive regime of Anglo-Saxonism that underwrites this term; and it uses the African American rhetorical trope of Signifying and the hip-hop art form of sampling in order to disinvent, decolonize, and reinvent Old English as a language of postcolonial subjectivity and epiphenomenal nowness. This work by African American artists asks scholars of Old English not only to recognize the Anglo-Saxonist regime embedded in our linguistic signifier but, moreover, to disinvent and reinvent Old English according to a ‘discontinuous’ history that provides ‘latitude for multiple temporalities’ and ‘overlapping, transtemporal uses.’ This is not a project for one person but for a discipline as a collectivity, and there are a few possible ways we might start trying to begin this process. One possible way is to rethink how we name, conceptualize, and teach the Englishes of historical linguistics. While old, middle, and mod-

\(^{117}\) Makoni and Pennycook, ‘Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages,’ 27.
\(^{118}\) Ibid., 21.
\(^{119}\) Ibid., 28.
\(^{120}\) Ibid., 2.
ern Englishes are standard nomenclatures, they presume a linear temporality that is always flowing from a specific past towards a specific future (all falsely assumed by many to be only ‘one thing;’ however difficult to pin down at times). If we disinvent the names we give to former instantiations of English—and with it, the illusion of linguistic unity—past morphologies and syntaxes of English might find a linguistic meeting space with those of the present tense. In addition, disinventing and thereby destabilizing Old English from the territory of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and/or ‘England’ might enable it to reinvent itself as a language that interacts with other languages and geographies in continental Europe, the Baltic region, the Mediterranean, and North Africa. Further still, disinventing West Saxon—the long-standing linguistic agent of King Alfred’s ‘Anglo-Saxon England’—as the dialectical standard by which Old English is taught, read, and edited might enable the field to reinvent itself as dialectically plural and non-hegemonic. And, finally, all of these disinventions and reinventions of historical linguistics might actually make inclusive room for the Old/e English of African American art forms and Hip Hop Nation Language.