



Despite the rap group Public Enemy's militant style, its members grew up not on inner-city streets but in suburban Long Island towns.

white audiences. But promoters found a more noxious formula for putting rap on the map. The music's roots are in "toasting," a Jamaican style of music that was born in the mid-1960s. A decade later, lower-class blacks in New York pioneered rap, speaking whimsical lyrics over the heavy beat of "hip-hop" dance music, and it soon spread to other cities. Then, starting in the early 1980s, Samuels says, "a tightly knit group of mostly young, middle-class, black New Yorkers, in close concert with white record producers, executives, and publicists, [began] making rap music for an audience . . . primarily composed of white suburban males."

Rap's chief impresario, according to Samuels, is Rick Rubin, "a Jewish punk rocker from suburban Long Island" who

masterminded rap's first million-selling album, *Licensed to Ill* (1983), by the Beastie Boys, a white punk rock band that Rubin transformed into a rap group.

But Samuels writes that Rubin and others soon found that "the more rappers were packaged as violent black criminals, the bigger their white audiences became . . . Rap's appeal to whites rested in its evocation of an age-old image of blackness: a foreign, sexually charged, and criminal underworld against which the norms of white society are defined, and, by extension, through which they may be defied." So Rubin served up Public Enemy, one of a number of groups now offering "a highly charged theater of race in which white listeners became guilty eavesdroppers on the putative private conversation of the inner city." Putative because Public Enemy's members are actually the sons of black middle-class professionals who grew up in New York's Long Island suburbs.

"A lot of what you see in rap," says Harvard's Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "is the guilt of the black middle class about its economic success, its inability to put forth a culture of its own. Instead they do the worst possible thing, falling back on fantasies of street life. In turn, white college students . . . buy nasty sex lyrics under the cover of getting at some kind of authentic black experience."

Already, Samuels believes, rap's popularity among inner-city blacks is waning. But the hit machine grinds on, churning out vastly popular songs and videos that glorify misogyny, anti-Semitism, and racist stereotypes of black criminality—a corrupt commerce in which blacks and whites are both complicit.

## Argentina's 'Southern' Writer

Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), whose luminous *ficciones* combine playful metaphysical musings with tight plots, considered "perhaps my best story" to be "The South." It can be read as a straightforward narrative, he said, and also "in another

"The Journey to the South: Poe, Borges, and Faulkner" by John T. Irwin, in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Summer 1991), One West Range, Charlottesville, Va. 22903.

way"—which he did not reveal. Irwin, a professor of humanities at Johns Hopkins, suggests that the story offers a figurative account of the Argentinian's own career as a writer.

In "The South," the main character,

Juan Dahlmann, after an accidental brush with death and his discharge from a sanitarium, heads for a ranch he has inherited in the south of Argentina. Along the way, he gets into a confrontation with three drunken toughs. An old gaucho—"in whom Dahlmann saw a summary and cipher of the South (his South)—threw him a naked dagger, which landed at his feet. It was as if the South had resolved that Dahlmann should accept the duel," one he is fated to lose.

The "South" of the story obviously is much more than just the pampas of Argentina. And just as the fictional Dahlmann, upon recovering from his accident, journeyed to that symbolic region, so Borges on his recovery from a similar accident in 1938 embarked on his career as a writer of fiction. In this parallel journey, Irwin says, Borges's sense of himself as a "southerner" seeking to move into the realm of North American literature was very important.

At the time, the bookish Borges, who had been educated in Europe, looked to Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) as "a model of how one could achieve literary self-definition through a kind of antithetical regional identification." Although Poe was born in Boston, he was raised in Virginia and came to consider himself "a Southern gentleman, even something of an aristocrat." This distinguished Poe, in his own mind, from "the largely Northern literary establishment in which he moved."

Borges, as he immersed himself in North American literature, felt a strong kinship with Poe for other reasons as well. Like Poe (and like the imaginary Dahlmann), Borges had a grandfather who was a military hero, and like Poe, he was early drawn to the military life (although that was impossible for the nearsighted and rather frail Argentinian). The American South has a strong military tradition, Irwin notes, and there was in the Civil War an image of the southerner "as the aristocrat who is both soldier and poet."

The first story Borges wrote in 1939, after his near death from blood poisoning, was "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Qui-*

*xote*." In it, a minor French poet and essayist sets out to produce a new *Don Quixote*. Just as Menard was seeking to "double" the work of Cervantes (like Poe, a former soldier), so the then-minor poet and essayist Borges was trying at the time to "double" several of Poe's detective stories.

Poe's influence, probably reinforced by the work of another eminent writer from the American South whom Borges admired, William Faulkner, sharpened Borges's "sense of his own southernness," Irwin says. By making the most of that, Borges was able to achieve the originality that made him one of the century's great fiction writers.

### *Articles We Never Finished Reading . . .*

*As postmodern ethnography de-familiarizes the genre of life-writing into a voracious apparatus of textualized selfhood, the underlying cultural function of biography, at least as a Western genre, can be seen to insinuate and extend what James Clifford has called "the myth of coherent personality." That is, by means of a massive life-writing consuming and producing selves from George Washington to Cary Grant and Alice James, the primary function of biography is to disseminate a plethora of selves who might instantiate this integrity of selfhood as achieved against a more or less recessive social background, what Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Althusser have theorized (less blithely) as the overdeterminations of mythic structures, libidinal codes, and economic base. Hence, in contracting to document and amass the thematics of such a particularized self, the biographer enters the terms of a genre in which he or she contracts to deliver the individual as a tormented journey toward coherent unity, striking personality, and expressive selfhood . . .*

—From "Producing American Selves: The Form of American Biography" by Rob Wilson, in *boundary 2* (Summer 1991). Wilson is an English professor at the University of Hawaii.