

**“MAKE ME NOD MY HEAD IN REVERENCE”:
PASSION, PAIN AND POLITICS IN HIP-HOP POETRY**

by
Tara Henley
B.A. Hon, Simon Fraser University, 2000

THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

Department
of
English

© Tara Henley 2003
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
August 2003

All rights reserved. This work may not be
reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy
or other means, without permission of the author.

APPROVAL

Name: Tara Henley
Degree: Master of Arts
Title of Thesis: "Make Me Nod My Head in Reverence":
Passion, Pain and Politics in Hip-Hop Poetry

Examining Committee:

Chair: Dr. Tom Grieve
Assistant Professor

Dr. Sheila Delany
Senior Supervisor
Professor

Dr. Paul Budra
Supervisor
Associate Professor

Crawford Killian
External Examiner
Instructor and Department Head
Department of Communications
Capilano College

Date Approved:

AUG. 14 / 2003

PARTIAL COPYRIGHT LICENCE

I hereby grant to Simon Fraser University the right to lend my thesis, project or extended essay (the title of which is shown below) to users of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users. I further agree that permission for multiple copying of this work for scholarly purposes may be granted by me or the Dean of Graduate Studies. It is understood that copying or publication of this work for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Title of Thesis:

**“Make Me Nod My Head In Reverence”:
Passion, Pain, and Politics in Hip-Hop Poetry**

Author:

(Signature)

AUG. 14 / 2003

(Date Signed)

ABSTRACT

Hip-hop is an art form that originated in New York's South Bronx neighborhood in the late 1970's that involves rapping, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti art. In the press, hip-hop is routinely attacked for being sexist, homophobic, and violent. In academic circles, hip-hop tends to be uncritically celebrated as the cutting edge of radical resistance. Both views are overly simplistic. This project calls for a more thorough, balanced analysis of what has become a highly complex, constantly shifting global youth culture. It examines the unique positions that arise in American rap lyrics as sites of intersecting, and often contradictory, historical, cultural, and political influences.

The study begins with a preliminary chapter that provides background information on hip-hop, including its social and economic context, and its major stylistic movements. The project moves on to four main areas of concentration. Chapter Two considers the independent entrepreneurial ethic in hip-hop, arguing that this is an attempt to subvert the dominant power structure by seizing wealth, power, and opportunity—but that it remains an individual solution to collective problems. Chapter Three surveys Islamic hip-hop, tracing the history of Islam in Black America, and examining the unique set of tensions that has arisen during the post-9/11 era, as both anti-Islamic sentiment and the influence of Islam have steadily increased in America. Chapter Four takes on the issue of sexual politics in rap. While it acknowledges the regressive misogyny and homophobia that pervade hip-hop lyrics, it also explores why feminist critiques of the music have proved so explosive by detailing the racist history of first, second, and third wave feminism. Chapter Five engages with the debate over cultural appropriation that has

emerged following Eminem's spectacular crossover success. The work presents the possibility that white rap represents both cultural theft and an avenue for youth to unite across racial lines, while arguing that white consumption and production of hip-hop carries a responsibility to confront the social conditions that are addressed in the music.

To Rob Henley
(a.k.a. Big Rowd of Fourth World Occupants),
my brother, my best friend, and the inspiration for this project

and

To the poets of this generation—the courageous MCs
who pour their souls onto the page, especially:
Tupac Shakur (R.I.P.), Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Dead Prez,
J-Live, The Coup, Jay-Z, and Nas.
Much respect.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my brother Rob Henley (a.k.a. Big Rowd), whose insight and criticism definitively shaped this project. I would also like to thank my mother Dr. Joy James for all of her love and support. I want to thank to my wonderful supervisor, Dr. Sheila Delany, who believed in this project from its inception, whose suggestions directed much of my research, who encouraged me to try my hand at journalism, and who left a steady stream of newspaper clippings in my mailbox, many of which made their way into this thesis. I would like to thank *The Georgia Straight* for giving me the opportunity to work out my ideas in print, especially news editor Charlie Smith (who jump-started my journalism career) and music editor Mike Usinger (who helped me with my writing immensely). I want to thank Mutang Tuo and the Penan tribe in Borneo for their example of spirited collective struggle. As well: Arden Henley and Mary Kean for their encouragement (“the best thesis is a finished thesis”), Calabria Café for allowing me to stay and write for hours, Geneva “Baker” Biggers for all of our inspiring conversations about politics, Morgan Shapero and roommates for providing me with somewhere to stay while doing research in New York, Ruby Fanning for her unwavering support, Nicole Ricci for urging me to go to graduate school, Christine Gough for reading all of my work, and fellow grad students Alison McDonald and Stefania Forlini for their friendship and feedback. Last but not least, special thanks go to Smiles for his support and for getting me stop work and have fun at exactly the times when I most needed it.

I would also like to thank the following hip-hop artists who expressed ideas—either in conversation or in interviews—that contributed to my understanding of hip-hop culture: Abstract Rude, Angel Duss, Big Rowd (Fourth World Occupants), Deena Barnwell, Choclair, Crescent Moon (Oddjobs), David Hilliard (Black Panther Party/Black Panther Records), Dave Jolicoeur (De La Soul), Dolo (Ghetto Concept), El-P, Emotions (Fourth World Occupants), Flipout (A.M.P.), Grandmaster Flash, J-Live, Jelleestone, Jamiel Hassan (Black Panther Fugitives), K-OS, Kia Kadiri, Madchild (Swollen Members), Manik, Medusa, Moka Only (Swollen Members), Nate Sabine (Manager/ Promoter), Ndidi Cascade, Nomi (Oddjobs), DJ Nu-Mark (Jurassic 5), Os12, Plus One, Prevail (Swollen Members), DJ Shortfuse, Sol Guy, Stic-man (dead prez), Sweatshop Union, Tajai (Souls of Mischie), and Take5.

Shout-outs: Big Rowd, Deps Numonic, Emotions, Fourth World Occupants, Battleaxe Records, Kevin Kocher, Kyle Kraft, Sean Lalla, Deena Barnwell, Smiles, De La Soul, Swollen Members, Prevail (first interview ever!), Nate Sabine, Cheryl Cuddie and Keiron McConnell, Divina Westmore, Ndidi Cascade, Emmanuel, Julie Brand and Cody Jones, Fritz the Cat, Jen Stewart, Kia Kadiri, Sweatshop Union, Manik, Os 12, Martin Turenne, Charlie Demers, Janet Smith, Gail Johnson, Joanna Ferraro, Rebecca Blissett, Bill and Vicki James, Sandra James, Andrew Buczewski, Catherine Rachey, Denise Vanderwolf, F.W.U.H., Topanga Café, Jennifer Forhan, 7 Heads Entertainment, DJ Shortfuse, DJ Needle Kineval, DJ Flipout, 94.5 The Beat, The Commodore, Shine, Tyson Jamal Stockton, Simone Jolie Biggers, Lynn Coady, Wayde Compton, Baba Brinkman, Plus 1, Take 5, Dect, Gman & Rizk, Rick Threat, Jennifer Jang, Judy McLean and John Nugent.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Table of Contents	vii
Introduction	1
Hip-Hop: A Love Story	
Chapter One	18
From the Sovereign State of the Have-nots—A Brief History of Hip-Hop	
Chapter Two	33
Pimpin' the System: Street Hustlers, Reparations, and the New Black Bourgeoisie	
Chapter Three	58
In the Belly of the Beast—Islamic Hip-Hop in America	
Chapter Four	80
Bitches and Sistas—Sexual Politics In Da Club	
Chapter Five	125
The White Nigga—Multiracial Unity or Cultural Theft?	
Conclusion	147
Hip-Hop and Hope	
Bibliography	157
Discography	167

INTRODUCTION

HIP-HOP: A LOVE STORY

I know a few understand what I'm talkin' about
It was love for the thing that made me wanna stay out
It was love for the thing that made me stay in the house
Spendin' time, writin' rhymes
Tryin' to find words to describe the vibe
That's inside the space
When you close yo' eyes and screw yo' face
Is this the pain of too much tenderness?
To make me nod my head in reverence
Should I visit this place in remembrance?
Or build landmarks here as evidence
Nighttime spirit shook my temperament
To write rhymes that portray this sentiment
We live the now for the promise of the infinite
We live the now for the promise of the infinite
And we believe in the promise (love, love)
Yes, yes, y'all, and we don't stop...

- Mos Def¹

The story of my love affair with hip-hop begins fourteen years ago, when everything I knew about hip-hop came from an old Run-DMC cassette and a dubbed Eric B. and Rakim video tape. I was a young teenager from what I thought was a stable family. In the space of several months, my grandmother died and my parents' marriage ended abruptly. My entire world was shattered. My father's subsequent absence left a gaping hole—a steady, aching sorrow, a daily logistical struggle, and ongoing financial chaos. My mother, my brother, and I were as broke as we were broken. Everyone in my family dealt with the stress in different ways. My mother worked around the clock—at jobs (secretary,

¹ From the song "Love," from the album *Black on Both Sides*, Rawkus Records, 1999.

house cleaner, department store clerk), and later, at higher education (B.A., M.A., Ph.D.). I took all of the feelings of despair, uncertainty, and inferiority that I had and channeled them into dance. For over a decade, I retreated daily to the studio and attacked my anguish with all of the determination and athleticism that I could muster. My brother found hip-hop.

Although he is a white male from Canada, far removed from hip-hop's cultural origins, I could see that my brother related to many of its core themes (although obviously not to its main tenet: the experience of racism)—the resentment toward missing fathers, the loyalty and admiration for single mothers, the humiliation and strain that surround poverty, and the feelings of deep rage towards authorities like school and the police. For years I watched my brother and his friends—the majority of whom are rappers, DJs, graffiti artists, promoters and producers—transform their feelings of powerlessness into art. Throughout my adolescence, I attended countless shows, watched aspiring MCs hone their skills, read their rhyme books over coffee, and was privy to endless living room debates on hip-hop. I was impressed by my brother and his friends; I saw hip-hop as an artistically innovative, intellectually stimulating, politically engaged, and spiritually satisfying community.

My own attraction to hip-hop was purely aesthetic. I was a dancer, and hip-hop music—with its rhythmic, bass-heavy beats and aggressive, vital energy—constituted the ideal soundtrack for the pleasure and abandon that I achieved through dance. Like many white hip-hop fans, I loved hip-hop music, but I didn't engage with hip-hop culture. I had a lot of hip-hop tapes, but I knew nothing about either the artists or the historical forces that informed their work.

Many years later, in the fall of 2000, I started graduate school. I had already been dealt my first devastating blow—I had been in a car accident and was no longer able to dance. I responded by becoming increasingly involved in academia. I studied Nineteenth Century British literature, a subject that I chose for its engagement with questions of class and gender, and excelled at school (thank you, Canada, for affordable tuition and government student loans). I was planning to become an English professor.

In the second week of graduate school I was diagnosed with colon cancer. Needless to say, the news turned my world upside down. At the age of twenty-four, I was forced to face my own mortality. Everything that I had taken for granted—my confidence, my energy, my body, my life's potential, my belief in possibility, my choices, even my ability to bathe, feed, and care for myself—evaporated. Reality shifted, and my life was reduced to a daily struggle for physical and psychic survival. I had to confront my terror of death, cope with other people's staggering grief, and come to terms with the sense that I hadn't accomplished anything in my short life. The only thing that was clear to me was that I desperately wanted to live.

I took a leave of absence from school, and underwent an invasive and life-threatening operation that removed a section of my colon and successfully eradicated the cancer (thank you, Canada, for free medical coverage). When I was told that I was cured, I was at a complete loss. I knew that I could not go back to who I was before the cancer, but I had no idea how to move forward. Who was this new person that I had become? I lapsed into a state of deep contemplation. I stayed in bed for weeks, thinking: what am I here for? What is my life's purpose? What do I stand for? Why have I been allowed to live? And, eventually: how can I be of use to this world?

Everything that had been important to me was no longer important. I didn't care about academic ambitions, about accumulating wealth or possessions, about striving to fit into a society that I had always felt alienated from. I felt an unquenchable yearning for something greater, for a reality other than the empty materialism and individualism of North American life, for deep and meaningful connections to people.

An experience from my early adolescence slowly resurfaced. When I was fifteen, I had worked in the environmental movement on a campaign to protest the logging of the rainforest in the Malaysian state of Sarawak in Borneo. One of the tribes in Sarawak, the Penan, sent two young men on a world tour to generate money and support for the campaign. I met one of these tribesmen, Mutang, and we grew very close. I promised him that someday I would come to visit him. After the cancer, that promise was all I had left. I sold everything that I owned and bought a plane ticket to Asia.

My travels in Asia lasted three months and are the subject of another book. But, in short, I did get to see my friend Mutang. I traveled by airplane, propeller plane, and then riverboat deep into the jungle and I found his village. I stayed with him and his family, slept on the floor with them, shared meals with them, explored the forests with them, sang celebration songs with them, and listened to their stories from the logging blockades. The experience of being transported, however briefly, into another realm of existence changed my life forever. The Penan are a devastated people—the destruction of the rainforests has robbed them of their homeland, their food source, their medicine, their culture, their spirituality, and—as a result of human rights violations associated with the repression of dissent—their safety.² They now live in government longhouses, battling

² For a good overview of the Penan's plight, see Davis, Wade, McKenzie, Ian and Kennedy, Shane. Nomads of the Dawn—The Penan of the Borneo Rainforest. Berkeley: Pomegranate, 1995.

poverty, disease and hopelessness. And yet, they continue to resist the logging and to welcome anyone who wants to join their struggle. They are the most generous, spirited, courageous people I have ever met. They taught me about humanity; about what it means to be committed to a life-affirming, collective struggle; about what side I want to be on, about what kind of person I want to be. One of the last things that Mutang said to me was, “you go home, and you write about this.”

After I left Borneo, I traveled alone for several months. Lack of money caused me to veer off the well-worn tourist track; I used local transportation, I stayed in cheap guesthouses, and I ate my meals from street vendors. I didn't like what I saw. I saw poverty and suffering everywhere, human beings unable to get access to food, water, and health care. And, on the other side of the spectrum, I saw people—tourists, rich nationals, North American expatriates, and foreign investors—who had allowed greed to isolate them from their own humanity, and to trample on the humanity of others.

I tried to escape all of it—I traveled to the remotest places that I could find. But I learned that even in the smallest villages in the most faraway corners of the planet, the forces of greed were there, sucking the life from the land and the people, and leaving behind grinding poverty, fear, and repression. And yet, the resilience of the human spirit continued to materialize. Everywhere I traveled, I met people who somehow managed to cope with immense suffering, and to lead lives filled with dignity, hope and love. They extended themselves to me—a representative of both the West and the European race, powers that had ravaged them—time and time again, with acts of generosity that regularly reduced me to tears.

In that time of gentle solitude, I became a writer. I had always been a voracious reader, and growing up I had written numerous short stories and poems, and filled endless journals. But when I was alone in Asia, writing became my salvation. Writing helped me to bridge the gap between who I was and who I wanted to be.

When I came back to North America, I had no idea how to incorporate these experiences into my day-to-day life. I had been radically transformed, but I had nowhere to go with this experience. I sat in graduate school classes and felt completely alone. Weren't intellectuals supposed to be the watchdogs of society? Didn't my classmates recognize that we had a responsibility? Shouldn't we be trying to use the privilege of our education in a way that benefited others?

I became obsessed with politics and read everything that I could get my hands on about movements for social change—Malcolm X, Paulo Freire, Che Guevara, Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky, Vladimir Lenin. I wanted to understand how oppression and resistance worked; I wanted to probe their polar, intricate webs. I began to explore the rich tradition of resistance in Black America.³ I studied works by Fredrick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Huey P. Newton, bell hooks, and Mumia Abu Jamal. What I learned from these writers overwhelmed me and frightened me and made me desperately sad. The sickness of our society incapacitated me for a time. But a feeling of urgency dogged me. What if I got sick again before I had a chance to do something?

³ I choose to use the term “Black” throughout the thesis for reasons best articulated by legal scholar Cheryl Harris: “The use of the upper case and lower case in reference to racial identity has a particular political history. Although “white” and “Black” have been defined oppositionally, they are not functional opposites. “White” has incorporated Black subordination; “Black” is not based on domination... “Black” is naming that is part of counterhegemonic practice.” See Harris, Cheryl. “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review*, No. 107, 1993, pg. 1710.

Somewhere during this time, hip-hop culture slipped back onto my radar screen. I don't know what happened. Possibly I got tired of all of the hours of angst and introspection. Or maybe my brother suggested that I lighten up and start coming out to shows. Or perhaps my study of Black history slowly evolved into an interest in Black culture. To be honest, I don't really know what happened. But somewhere during that time, I turned to hip-hop culture and I found that it gave me solace—it provided a retreat into the beauty of poetry and music, and a refuge from my private pain and my increasing loneliness.

Hip-hop culture was exciting on so many different levels. It was aesthetically engaging, and intellectually stimulating. And it was political. Hip-hop addressed the state of the world in open and honest terms, but not without hope. And it was fun. People in hip-hop were passionate about their art; they stayed out all night painting giant, extravagant murals on concrete walls; they wrote rhymes in basements across the city, and then performed them on street corners; they treasured crates of old vinyl, and played obscure records from every musical genre of the century; they danced with a rigor and abandon that I instantly appreciated. And they talked about the things that I was thinking about: what kind of world we lived in, and what kind of world we wanted to live in.

As I became more involved in hip-hop culture, it became clear to me that that this reading was far from typical. To most, hip-hop music was synonymous with violence, sexism, homophobia, and musical mediocrity. I became increasingly frustrated with this reductive view. The final straw came when I was taking part in a graduate seminar on Marxist theory and criticism of the arts. My classmates and I were discussing working-

class art, and I proposed hip-hop as an example. A fellow classmate, who was otherwise intelligent and articulate, turned to me and asked: “But isn’t that just gang music?”

I was furious that hip-hop could be so easily dismissed by people who knew nothing about it. I decided to write a Master’s thesis on the culture and began research in earnest. The deeper I got into my studies, the more respect I had for hip-hop.

My research confirmed what my instincts had told me. I discovered that the media reflected, and often contributed to, the general public bias against hip-hop. With the exception of journalists like Harry Allen,⁴ Nelson George,⁵ and Greg Tate,⁶ and marginalized music magazines like *The Source*, *Vibe*, and *XXL*, the coverage that I encountered revealed a strong contempt for the art form, and consistently attacked rappers for being both misogynistic and violent. While neither of these allegations is entirely without substance, I am convinced that a critique of rap’s violence and misogyny is both unethical and counterproductive if it is de-contextualized from the violence and misogyny that are inherent to contemporary capitalist culture. Hip-hop has become the locus of censorship debates that ostensibly attack regressive behaviors, but, in my view, also function to de-legitimize a powerful method of Black and working-class expression and resistance.

When I turned my attention to the growing library of academic texts on hip-hop, I was disappointed by their lack of engagement with hip-hop as a complex, constantly

⁴ Harry Allen is a freelance music journalist and a contributor to *Vibe* magazine. He wrote for the *Village Voice* in the early eighties, and provided much of the early coverage of hip-hop culture. He is now known as Harry Allen, Media Assassin, and is well respected in hip-hop circles.

⁵ Nelson George is a music journalist and a contributor to *Vibe*. Since the mid-eighties, he has written for all of the top American music magazines. He is the author of Hip-Hop America, Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of Motown Sound and Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, & Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture, among many other books.

⁶ Greg Tate is a staff writer for the *Village Voice* and a regular contributor to *Vibe*. He has recently edited a book titled Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black Culture, which will be discussed later in this thesis.

shifting, multi-layered subculture. Just as hip-hop tends to be dismissed as violent and misogynistic by the press, it is often uncritically celebrated as an enclave of radical resistance by left-leaning intellectuals. On the whole, academics have spent an enormous amount of time on the worthwhile effort to legitimize hip-hop as an art form. However, in doing so, they have often portrayed hip-hop as a homogeneous practice. Scholar Robin D.G. Kelley has drawn attention to this trend, and consciously resists it in his own scholarship. He writes in the introduction to Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!, that his project "is not the sort of defense that turns the discourse on its head, 'flipping the script' in order to paint a noble, unblemished portrait of the black urban poor." Rather, he maintains that his work functions "as a defense of black people's humanity and a condemnation of scholars and policy makers for their inability to see complexity"(4). I have tried to follow Kelley's example, and to resist the impulse to romanticize, and thus simplify, a complex and nuanced subculture and art form.

My work has centered around a void in hip-hop studies: To date, not a single scholar has critically analyzed the unique political positions that arise in hip-hop lyrics, and thought through the implications of these positions to the current generation of American youth, to the American political discourse, and to global movements for social change.

As I have already mentioned, most hip-hop academics gloss over hip-hop's contradictions, ignore its constant evolutions, and fail to make connections between hip-hop and American history in general, and African-American history in particular. The exception to this trend are writers like Tricia Rose,⁷ David Toop,⁸ Brian Cross,⁹ S.H.

⁷ See Rose, Tricia. Black Noise - Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

Fernando,¹⁰ Michael Eric Dyson,¹¹ and Bakari Kitwana,¹² who have invested much time, energy, and heart in cultivating relationships in the hip-hop community, and conducting extensive interviews to better understand its unique world-view (or, in the case of Bakari Kitwana, write directly from the hip-hop community).

In an attempt to align myself with these writers—and out of an interest in generating dialogue with the artists whose work I admired and respected—I began interviewing members of the Vancouver hip-hop community. I modeled my approach after the work of post-colonial theorist and educator Paulo Freire, and, in particular after one of his famous statements: “I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely individual character of the process of knowing”(17).

Unlike the majority of the music press, I was not asking the artists who they were sleeping with, what their favorite color was, or how they felt about being a celebrity. I was questioning them on their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about hip-hop culture. What role did it play in their lives? How did it inform and shape the way that they looked at the world? How did it influence their opinions in the political arena? How did they feel about the public perception of hip-hop? What did they think of the treatment it received in the press? Did they view hip-hop as a social movement? If so, what did they think its potential was to create political awareness and achieve social change?

⁸ See Toop, David. The Rap Attack: American Jive to New York Hip-Hop. London: Pluto, 1984.

⁹ See Cross, Brian. It's Not About a Salary: Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles. London; New York: Verso, 1993.

¹⁰ See Fernando, S.H. Jr. The New Beats: Exploring the Music, Culture, and Attitudes of Hip-Hop. New York: Payback, 1994.

¹¹ See Dyson, Michael Eric. Holler if You Hear Me—Searching for Tupac Shakur. New York: Basic Civitas, 2001.

¹² See Kitwana, Bakari. The Hip-Hop Generation—The Crisis in African American Culture. New York: Basic Civitas, 2002.

I interviewed scores of Vancouver artists, with encouraging results. The interviews proved to be extraordinarily useful exercises; the artists continually challenged me to re-evaluate the assumptions that I held about the art form—as well as about race, class, gender, and social change. But the more involved I became with Vancouver hip-hop artists, the more I realized the limitations of using this city's scene as a framework for my analysis.

I came to understand that hip-hop music is, among many other things, a global cultural product—endlessly commodified and widely distributed by multinational record labels. As a result, hip-hop culture has been transplanted into thousands of radically different geographical locations and host cultures. While these new subcultures appropriate initially African-American forms of expression, they adapt them to local contexts. The original political realities of the art form resonate with the emerging subcultures, but do not necessarily define them. Rather, the politics of urban Black America mingle with the regional concerns of the hosting subcultures—and particularly with local political climates—to create new and distinct cultural spaces.

Vancouver's hip-hop community can be viewed as a cultural hybrid—or what hybridity theorist Nikos Papastergiadis would call an “energy field of different forces”—involving the collision of American and Canadian cultures, the mingling of people from African, European, Asian, First Nations, and mixed descent, the representation of radically different economic backgrounds, and the articulation of a wide range of political perspectives (170). Thus, although Vancouver was a fascinating example of a local subculture adapting African-American cultural forms, it didn't get me any closer to

understanding the original assemblages of history, experience, thought, feeling, and belief that were being disseminated globally.

I started trying to get interviews with American artists, but discovered immediately that I couldn't get anywhere without press credentials. Requests for interviews with recording artists are channeled through the publicity departments of record labels, which are uniformly uninterested in supporting academic inquiries that reach a limited audience and have a negligible effect on record sales. So I began writing press articles. I started out writing for my university paper and then became a regular contributor to *The Georgia Straight*, Canada's largest urban weekly.

Working in the media opened up a whole new arena of experience. Through my participation in the music industry, I gained an understanding of the extent to which the major record labels oppress hip-hop artists, who are mostly young, Black, uneducated, and poor. Many contemporary artists refer to the labels as "the plantation" and recording contracts as a modern day form of indentured slavery.¹³ Rapper Mos Def has called the industry "a better built cell block."¹⁴ These are not exaggerated analogies. I have been continually shocked by the ways in which major labels conduct business.

The constant negotiation between academia and the media has given me a unique perspective on both. I have become increasingly committed to translating the privilege that we have in academia—the access to new paradigms of thought and the time and space in our lives to reflect on them—out into the world and into concrete political contexts. This has become the aim of my work: to harness academic theory and research

¹³ Dead Prez and DMX are examples of artists who express that point of view.

¹⁴ From "Hip-Hop," from the album *Black on Both Sides*, Rawkus Records, 1999.

to create spaces in popular media that question the current modes of distributing wealth, power, and opportunity.

In this project, I will discuss hip-hop music—its origins, its stylistic movements, and a broad range of political positions that its lyrics represent—in order to acknowledge hip-hop as an innovative and influential cultural movement that warrants serious consideration and debate. I will argue that hip-hop music is an art form that has been stereotyped in both the media (as violent, sexist, and homophobic) and academia (as the cutting edge of radical resistance), but is instead a complex genre that brings together multiple, often contradictory influences and attitudes and deserves a more thorough, balanced analysis.

But for all of the divergent positions that arise in hip-hop lyrics, one key theme recurs—the hypocrisies of postindustrial, post-civil rights America. African-Americans are coping with an economic and social crisis of extreme proportions. Journalist and cultural critic Bakari Kitwana has documented this crisis, detailing the shocking rates of imprisonment, unemployment, homelessness, suicide, addiction, police brutality, and violence that face the current generation of Black youth.¹⁵

Hip-hop artists constantly acknowledge the gap between the rhetoric of wealth, freedom, and democracy that defines America and the reality of poverty, repression, and exclusion for young urban people of color. Paulo Freire calls this process *conscientização*, or “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality”(35). This critical consciousness allows oppressed peoples to enter the historical process as subjects with

¹⁵ See Kitwana, Bakari. The Hip-Hop Generation—Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002.

agency. This critique is an ongoing process. It takes many shapes and forms, and continually assembles and re-assembles artistic, political, and intellectual influences in moments of pleasure and resistance.

All of the positions that I discuss address the crisis in America and engage *conscientização*, albeit in radically different ways. The first stance that I explore is that of the entrepreneur. Many hip-hop artists cope with racial and economic oppression through independent entrepreneurialism. This approach identifies racism as the main problem facing Blacks, and posits financial success as a way to subvert power relations in America. For a second group of rappers, spirituality is the solution to the current crisis. These rappers offer spiritual leadership; they advocate honorable conduct, critical thinking, national consciousness, and education as a means of empowering the Black community and uplifting humanity as a whole. This group is heavily influenced by African-American Islam. A third group are Black feminists. The thrust of this phenomenon is best described as Womanist, as many Black female rappers do not identify with white, middle-class feminism. The Womanists attack misogyny within Black culture, but often defend sexist rappers in the media as a way of expressing Black solidarity. The fourth stance that I explore has recently become a hot topic within hip-hop. Many associate white rappers with Norman Mailer's "white negro"¹⁶ and accuse them of cultural appropriation. Others believe that hip-hop's cross-racial appeal has the potential to unify the current generation across class and race lines. I will explore the potential for white rappers to signify both white appropriation of Black culture *and* the prospect of Black and white working-class collectivity.

¹⁶ See Mailer, Norman. "The White Negro." *Advertisements for Myself*. New York: Putnam, 1959.

The positions that I have identified are not meant to be exclusive. The artists that I discuss are chosen because they are good illustrations of the unique streams of thought that these positions represent—not because they occupy such positions at all times. Rappers are human beings and should be afforded a full, complex humanity. The framework that I propose should not be taken in any definitive way. It provides one way of looking at the politics of American hip-hop culture; it is one among many. As hip-hop writer William Upski Wimsatt insists, “Hip-hop’s moral center isn’t a magical truth out there waiting to be discovered and clutched tightly. It is the understanding that there are many kinds of truth, none of them magic, and all of them competing with each other in the real world” (Bomb 109).

Above all else, it is my hope that this project will allow for complexity; that it will acknowledge hip-hop as a site of pleasure and play, as well as the point of intersection for multiple subject positions, and a wide range of often contradictory cultural, religious, political and intellectual influences. Robin D.G. Kelley has cautioned academics that

By not acknowledging the deep visceral pleasures black youth derive from making and consuming culture, the stylistic and aesthetic conventions that render the form and performance more attractive than the message, these authors reduce expressive culture to a political text to be read like a less sophisticated version of *The Nation* or *Radical America*. (Yo Mama 37)

This is not my intention here, and throughout the process I have remained aware of the dangers of reducing art and culture to purely political dimensions. Hip-hop is, has been, and always will be party music. The artists themselves remind me of this continually.

One of my fondest memories from this process is of interviewing one of hip-hop’s founding fathers, DJ Grandmaster Flash. We sat down in July of 2002 when he was in

Vancouver. I presented him with a series of political questions, and he countered that hip-hop was originally about having fun. “People from tiny tots to grandmothers would come out,” he said. “People would come from all over to rock from eleven o’clock in the morning until nine o’clock at night. They were called block parties.” He stressed: “It was just having a party. There was no agenda. It was just playing this music that radio wouldn’t adhere to.”¹⁷

After the interview, I attended his show and experienced the delight of dancing for hours to a seamless medley of hip-hop hits past and present; the Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,”¹⁸ Naughty by Nature’s “Hip-Hop Hooray,”¹⁹ Notorious B.I.G.’s “Hypnotize,”²⁰ and Nelly’s “Hot in Herre.”²¹ Flash demanded that the audience let go of their inhibitions and surrender themselves to the beat. He opened the show by saying: “Everyone who has a sore back, everyone here who has got a sore throat, who has to get up early in the morning, who is too cool to dance—it is time for you to leave the building.” The dance floor remained packed for the entire three-hour set, with people of all ages and races ecstatically sweating, twisting, jumping, bumping, grooving, and grinding together.

Flash supplemented his brilliance on the wheels of steel with cutting commentary: “I want you to take all of the ideas that you have about what hip-hop is and erase them,” he said. After a particularly eclectic segment that spanned soul, funk, and jazz, Flash joked: “Hey! That’s not hip-hop!” At another point, he got on the mike and said: “Hip-

¹⁷ From an interview in Vancouver, B.C. on July 5, 2002.

¹⁸ “Rapper’s Delight” was released as a 12” by Sugar Hill Records in 1979. It was the second ever rap record, the first commercially successful one, and the highest selling 12” in the history of music to that point.

¹⁹ From the album *19 Naughty III*, Tommy Boy Records, 1993

²⁰ From the posthumous album *Life After Death*, Bad Boy/Arista 1997

²¹ From the album *Nellyville*, Universal Records, 2002. The top rap dance single for that year.

hip-hop does not have to be violent. Hip-hop does not have to disrespect women.” He continued: “Hip-hop is about unity. Hip-hop is about *love*.”

I learned more from that one night than I did from months of research. The experience informed my work in ways that I couldn’t have anticipated—it reminded me of the physical pleasure that is tied up with the art form; it recalled for me what I had felt all those years ago in the dance studio. Flash’s show drove my interest in hip-hop from my head to my heart—from an intellectual obsession to an intoxicating, deeply satisfying, visceral experience. It made me grateful to be alive, and it made me want to give something back.

So, while the focus of this project will be on contemporary rap lyrics and the historical, cultural, and political streams of thought that they express, it is important to understand that hip-hop is not solely protest music. Politics is a huge element of hip-hop music—but so is joy. Hip-hop is an energy that is profoundly life affirming and that continues to be a sustaining force in oppressed communities. Hip-hop is a way to “fight the power” and “a song to make the strong survive,”²² but it is also, for many, as it has become for me, “the love of [our] li[ves].”²³

²² “Fight the Power” is a track from the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, Def Jam Records, 1990; “a song to make the strong survive” is a lyric from the track “Raise the Roof” from *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, Def Jam Records, 1987.

²³ This is a common sentiment in hip-hop culture. The most famous personification of Hip-Hop is Common’s track “I Used to Love H.E.R.” from the 1994 album *Resurrection* (Ruthless Records). Since then, many artists have expressed this sentiment on wax, and a major motion picture *Brown Sugar* was based on this theme. “Love of My Life” is a song from Eryka Badu, which appears on the film’s 2002 soundtrack. The Roots also have a song of a similar song titled “Act Too (The Love of My Life),” from the album *Things Fall Apart*, MCA Records, 1998, in which front man Black Thought raps: “Sometimes I wouldn’t a made it if it wasn’t for you/Hip-Hop, you the love of my life and that’s true/When I was handlin’ the shit I had to do/It was all for you, from the door for you/Speak through you, getting’ paper on tour for you/From the start, Thought was down by law for you/Used to hit up every corner store wall for you/We ripped shit, and kept it hardcore for you/I remember late nights, steady rockin’ the mic/Hip-Hop, you the love of my life.”

CHAPTER ONE
FROM THE SOVEREIGN STATE OF THE HAVE-NOTS:¹
A BRIEF HISTORY OF HIP-HOP

It's just the beginning, the first inning
Battle for America's soul, the devil's winning
The President is Bush, the Vice President's a Dick
So a whole lot of fuckin' is what we gon' get
They don't wanna raise the babies, so the election is fixed
That's why we don't be fuckin' with politics
They bet on that, parents fought and got wet for that
Hosed down, bit by dogs, and got Blacks into the House for that
It's all good, except for that—we still poor
And money, power, respect is what we kill for

- Talib Kweli²

It does not matter to many of us that our ancestors were physically emancipated over one hundred years ago, or that our parents' generation won some legislative victories during the 1960s. What matters to us is that we post-civil rights, post-integration children, who were and are born into America's ghettos, don't have much to look forward to from the moment we are born—except an early death.

- Kevin Powell³

One of the most visible cultural debates within the last several years of mainstream American discourse has been over the influential role that hip-hop plays for the current generation of youth. As I will discuss later in this text, an army of right-wing pundits from the baby boomer generation have consistently attacked rap music, claiming that it has led American youth astray with its penchant for exploring themes of sexuality,

¹ From Mos Def's song "Hip-Hop," from the album *Black on Both Sides*, Rawkus, 1999.

² From the track "The Proud," from *Quality*, Rawkus/ MCA, 2002.

³ Powell, Kevin. *Keepin' It Real: Post-MTV Reflections on Race, Sex, and Politics*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1997, pg. 71.

violence, and poverty. On the other hand, a group of academics and writers who have a better understanding of hip-hop culture, and who are more sympathetic to it, have announced that hip-hop constitutes the defining social and cultural movement for the current generation. Bakari Kitwana dedicates an entire volume to this thesis, and explores in great depth the social, economic, and political challenges that face this generation of Black youth, and the unique grassroots movements and distinct agendas that have emerged as a response to these challenges.⁴ Todd Boyd expands on this, examining the predominance of hip-hop music, fashion, language, and attitude in popular culture, and arguing that hip-hop is “an unrivaled social force; a way of being,” and “a new way of seeing the world and a collective movement that has dethroned civil rights”(13).

The debate over the role that hip-hop plays in contemporary culture will resonate throughout this text. In order to contemplate the extent to which hip-hop defines the current generation’s political perspective—for whites and people of color, urban and suburban, in North America and abroad—it will be necessary to have an understanding of what hip-hop is, where it came from, and what cultural styles and ideological movements have shaped it over the last twenty-five years. A brief overview of hip-hop will prove useful to readers that are unfamiliar with the culture.

Hip-hop involves several main elements (music, graffiti art, and breakdancing) and several more peripheral elements, including beatboxing (making percussive sounds with one’s mouth), street fashion, street language, and street entrepreneurialism. Hip-hop music, otherwise known as rap, involves rhymed lyrics spoken over background beats. The rapper (or MC, a designation that has multiple meanings, including master of

⁴ See Kitwana, Bakari. The Hip-Hop Generation—Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002.

ceremonies, microphone controller, and move the crowd) works in conjunction with the DJ (or disc jockey), who mixes the most dance-friendly segments of popular records with percussive drum sections (called break beats) on two turntables.

Hip-hop lyrics can be seen as a form of contemporary urban poetry that has evolved out of the African-American tradition of spoken word poetry, which includes figures ranging from street poets Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets, to the raps on bebop records, to the rhymes of boxer Mohammad Ali. As an art form, hip-hop has renewed young people's interest in poetry and has inspired a generation of youth to memorize lyrics and fill notebooks with their own rhymes.

Hip-hop is now a global phenomenon⁵—with thriving subcultures in Cuba,⁶ Australia,⁷ Italy,⁸ France,⁹ South Africa,¹⁰ and Canada—but it originated in a distinct social and political context. Hip-hop emerged in New York's South Bronx district in the late 1970's. The economic and political climate in the Bronx at that time was extremely volatile: the period saw a mass exodus of the middle-class and white people to the suburbs, disastrous urban renewal initiatives,¹¹ the increased automation of industry

⁵ See Mitchell, Tony. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the U.S.A.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

⁶ See Olavarria, Margot. "Rap and Revolution: Hip-Hop Comes to Cuba." *NACLA Report on the Americas*. May/June 2002, pgs. 28-30.

⁷ See Maxwell, Ian. "True to the Music: Authenticity, Articulation and Authorship in Sydney," *Social Semiotics*, Vol.4, No. 1-2, 1994, pgs. 117-37.

⁸ See Wright, Steve. "A Love Born of Hate: Autonomist Rap in Italy," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2000, pgs. 117-35.

⁹ See Prevos, Andre. "Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in France During the 1980s and the 1990s: Developments and Reactions," *The European Studies Journal*, Vol.XV, No.2, 1998, pgs. 1-33.

¹⁰ See Haupt, Adam. "Stifled Noise in the South African Music Box: Prophets of da City and the Struggle for Public Space," *SATJ*, Vol. 10, No. 2, September 1996, pgs. 51-61.

¹¹ I am thinking specifically of the work of New York City urban planner Robert Moses, who initiated the Cross-Bronx Expressway, among many other projects. The freeway divided the borough down the center, forced 60,000 residents to relocate, drove businesses out of the area, and imposed a decade of construction on the district. The result was, as former resident and writer Marshall Berman documents, that the Bronx became "an international code word for our epoch's accumulated urban nightmares: drugs, gangs, arson, murder, terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, neighborhoods transformed into garbage- and brick-strewn wilderness." For a thorough discussion on the Cross-Bronx Expressway and Robert Moses, see

causing massive layoffs, and sweeping closures of urban factories in favor of contracting out manufacturing to under-developed countries and to plants in the suburbs.¹² During the 1970s, an estimated 32 to 38 million American jobs were lost,¹³ and between 1983 and 1988, 9.7 million American jobs disappeared.¹⁴

The factory closures caused a dramatic shift in the job market from unionized production labor to part-time, service-sector employment.¹⁵ As scholar Clarence Lusane has pointed out, manufacturing jobs were replaced by “subminimal wage jobs,” which are “disproportionately held by African-Americans,” including “retail sales, food service, janitorial, housekeeping, and low-level health delivery”(10).

These changes in employment opportunities were accompanied by neo-liberal policies that included individual and corporate tax breaks and major cuts to social services and education. The implementation of these cutbacks disproportionately affected working-class people of color, and particularly inner-city African-Americans, throwing many into unemployment and forcing them to rely on a dwindling social assistance or on the drug and sex trades in order to survive. At the same time, the inner cities of America were flooded with crack cocaine, which quickly destroyed families and communities.

Berman, Marshall. “In the Forest of Symbols: Some Notes on Modernism in New York.” All That is Solid Melts Into Air—The Experience of Modernity. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982.

¹² Clarence Lusane details, “In 1950, one-third of all U.S. jobs were in manufacturing. By the mid-1980s, only 20 percent were employed in manufacturing, and by 1990 that had dropped off to 10-14 percent; it is projected that by 2005, the number will drop to between 2.5 and 5 percent.” See Kamel, Rachel. The Global Factory: Analysis and Action for a New Economic Era. Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1990, pg. 15, quoted in Lusane, Clarence. Race in the Global Era—African-Americans at the Millennium. Boston: South End Press, 1997, pg. 10.

¹³ Kamel, pg. 20, quoted in Lusane, pg. 9.

¹⁴ Barnet, Richard and Cavanagh, John. Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, pg. 292, quoted in Lusane, pg. 9.

¹⁵ Between 1980-87, half of all new jobs went to temporary, part-time workers. Barnet and Cavanagh, pg. 293, quoted in Lusane, pg. 10.

Many have argued that the CIA was complicit in this.¹⁶ Shortly after, the American government launched the War on Drugs, an initiative that has increasingly militarized the policing of Black communities¹⁷ and has more than doubled the incarceration rates for Black men.¹⁸ It is within this context—essentially the nightmarish flip side to the so-called American Dream—that hip-hop began.

During the late 1970's, youth in the Bronx lacked athletic and artistic outlets. Their solution was to create a new art form with almost no resources. Pioneering artists like Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, and Kool DJ Herc pirated electricity from city light posts and held street and park parties. Breakdancing groups such as the Rock Steady Crew set up on street corners and performed acrobatic dance moves on cardboard platforms. Graffiti crews roamed the city after dark, painting walls and subway cars with giant murals. As a subculture, hip-hop gave voice to those who have been traditionally marginalized in American culture: poor people, 'criminals,' uneducated people, unemployed people, and people of color. As a result, hip-hop culture registers a legacy of racial oppression, economic inequality and political repression.

Hip-hop is a cultural form that has been historically politicized; hip-hop calls up a powerful stigma and involves a resistant set of actions. Hip-hop's elements can constitute a subversive practice of resistance that maps the politics of race and class in ways that no

¹⁶ See Cox, Christopher. Chasing the Dragon: Into the Heart of the Golden Triangle. New York: Henry Holt, 1997, and McCoy, Alfred W. The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade. Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003 and Lusane, Clarence. "How Cracked is the CIA-Contra Drug Connection?" Race in the Global Era—African-Americans at the Millennium. Boston: South End Press, 1997, pgs. 117-134.

¹⁷ See Kitwana, Bakari. "Race War—Policing, Incarceration, and the Containment of Black Youth." The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture. New York: Basic Civitas, 2002, pgs. 51-83.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Between 1965 and 2002, the prison population in the United States grew from 200,000 to nearly 2 million. According to Kitwana, who references the U.S. Bureau of Justice, 50% of federal and state prisoners are African-Americans. Approximately 1 million black men are currently under some type of correctional supervision.

other current musical form or subculture does. Hip-hop culture can be seen to contest state and corporate control of physical, cultural and psychic space on several different levels. Hip-hop attacks the notion of a hegemonic, repressive status quo from all sides: legally (through DJs and producers pirating samples and violating intellectual property laws), spatially (through breakdancers, graffiti artists, and MCs reclaiming public space for art, music, and dance), and ideologically (by offering the perspective of those who have not benefited from advanced capitalism).¹⁹

The most well known element of hip-hop is MCing, or rapping. Rap is solidly rooted in the historical continuum of Black music. Music writer and hip-hop historian David Toop claims that rap's roots are "the deepest of all contemporary Afro-American music." He explains:

Rap's forebears stretch back through disco, street funk, radio DJs, Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, the tap dancers and comics, The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Muhammad Ali, acappella and do-wop groups, ring games, skip-rope rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, signifying²⁰ and the dozens,²¹ all the way to the griots of Nigeria and the Gambia. (19)

Rapping, as a cultural form, is inseparable from (although certainly not limited to) the social reality of oppression. As Tricia Rose has argued, it is important to recognize that young people of color in the United States, and particularly young Black men, are routinely subjected to police surveillance, harassment, and brutality. These conflicts manifest in hip-hop culture in governmental, police, and citizen-based censorship of

¹⁹ See Rose, Tricia. Black Noise - Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

²⁰ For a thorough explanation of signifying, see Gates, Henry Louis. The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

²¹ For a discussion on the role of "playing the dozens" in Black culture, see Kelley, Robin D.G. Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

songs, denial of insurance coverage for events, limited access to performance venues, and the implementation of harsh and humiliating security measures at concerts.²² Public performance of hip-hop music often takes place in spite of extraordinary external pressures to contain it. Thus, the act of rapping becomes a rebellion against state control—a reclaiming of public space as a forum for the disenfranchised. The delivery of the hip-hop music functions as an insistence of the experience of oppression, with all of the political commentary that this necessarily entails.

In addition to issues of race, hip-hop artists consistently address the issue of class. Rappers are overwhelmingly from America's poorest neighborhoods. They rap about what they know, and their experience speaks to the level of desperation in their communities. Whether intentional or inadvertent, their stories function as political acts that shatter the perception of America as an affluent, free, and democratic nation. As radio personality DJ Deena Barnwell explained to me:

There was no other creative art form for black kids in the inner-city at that time that they had any access to. So they started having these parties...and of course they were going to talk about what was going on in their neighborhood, which happened to be political because they lived in the poorest neighborhood in the country [the South Bronx]. I don't think that hip-hop started as a political entity—the politics just fell in there because these motherfuckers were poor.²³

In this way, hip-hop's lyrics resist the notion that all Americans have access to wealth and opportunity. As cultural critic Russell Potter has recognized, "hip-hop demonstrates

²² See Rose, Tricia. "Hidden Politics: Discursive and Institutional Policing of Rap Music." Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

²³ Comments from a phone interview on July 15, 2001. Originally published in my article "Why Is Sarah Jones Speaking Up?" *The Peak*, No. 13, Vol. 108, July 30, 2001.

the wide-spread disaffection from the machinery of capitalism at a time when the free market is widely hailed as the great economic savior”(10).

The MC is not the only artist in hip-hop who inherits highly politicized cultural forms. The hip-hop DJ—in which category for the sake of brevity I will also include hip-hop producers—also attacks the status quo. Hip-hop production, in the studio or in performance, is an example of culture jamming par excellence. The artist pirates samples from albums, from interviews, from television shows, from the news media—and spins them into a unified background of ‘beats.’ (S)he effectively hijacks commercial culture and appropriates its voices for his/her own message. DJs and producers insert an aggressive counter-voice into mainstream consumer culture. The potential to challenge authority is immense—both in the form of political satire and in the form of resistance to sampling laws. DJs occasionally sample sound bites from the media or pop culture, positioning these samples in ways that mock the original message. DJs also recycle samples from old albums. While commercial producers pay for these samples, underground producers cannot afford to employ a sample-clearing agent (and DJs would certainly not bother to for the purposes of performance), and so will often violate the sanctity of copyright law by using samples without permission or payment. The underground DJ in particular pillages mass media and popular culture and subverts the medium into a new message. As Potter has observed: “by taking these musical sounds, packaged for consumption, and remaking them into new sounds through scratching, cutting, and sampling, what had been consumption was transformed into production”(36). The result is a profound inter-textuality—a cultural conversation that insists simultaneously on both shared points of reference and autonomy from societal control.

Hip-hop's graffiti artists engage with society on similarly tense terms. Street art can be seen as a reaction to advertising's saturation of physical, cultural, and psychic space. Graffiti writers fight back the corporate colonization of public space, forcing local artists and community culture to the forefront. They forge a cultural conversation in which the writer rejects the authority of private ownership of public space and reinscribes the relationships of power by asserting his/her own name or 'tag'.²⁴ Many graffiti artists articulate this motivation. For instance, Take 5, who is an internationally known, Vancouver-based graffiti artist, states this position directly:

We have public space—we all have to live here—and it is basically monopolized by corporations and private-property owners. What the taggers [graffiti artists] are doing is reclaiming a piece of that. We have images being cranked down our throats like Coca-Cola and McDonald's and the Gap. The public has no say in what we see. The kids are saying: 'I'm here too. I have a voice. You can't shut me up. You can't paint over me. I'm going to be here whether you like it or not.'²⁵

Graffiti, as Toop has noted, forces the expression of cultural alienation into a public space where it cannot be ignored. He explains:

Since nobody in New York City, America or the rest of the world wanted to know about the black so-called ghettos—the unmentionable areas of extreme urban deprivation—the style was allowed to flourish as a genuine street movement whose presence was felt through the prominence of one aspect of the culture—graffiti. White New Yorkers might never have to visit the black or Hispanic parts of town; in that sense graffiti was a visitation upon them. (14)

²⁴ A "tag" is a writer's signature, written in felt marker or spray-paint in seconds, a "throw-up" is a large, one- or two-colored work of letters that can be painted in minutes, and a "piece" is a wall-sized, multi-colored painting that would anywhere from hours to days to paint. See Rahn, Janice. Painting Without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture. Westport: Greenwood, 2002, pg. 14.

²⁵ Comments from an interview with Take 5 on July 29, 2002. Published in my article "Curbing Urban Art," which appeared in *The Georgia Straight* on August 15, 2002.

With graffiti, the challenge is not only put to society as a whole, it is also directed internally to the hip-hop community. A tag' does not only constitute an act of rebellion; it also enacts an invitation to engage in playful dialogue. Other writers in the city respond with affirmation or criticism, all on the city's public walls, storefronts, bus stops, buses and trains. The very location of this graffiti reveals the class of its practitioners. The fact that the conversation between writers occurs on buses and trains demonstrates that this community is one which frequents buses and trains; these are not individuals who exist in the insulated world of individual automobiles.

It is important to note that however moderate a writer's politics may be, (s)he participates in an illegal act against private property. Whether (s)he is fully aware of the impact or not, (s)he enacts a decidedly anti-capitalist sentiment, and can be seen to participate in a global movement which anti-globalization journalist Naomi Klein has described as culture jamming, or "aggressively reclaiming space from the corporate world, 'unbranding it,' guerrilla-style"(81). L.A. rapper Abstract Rude articulates this sentiment when he raps: "graffiti ain't a crime/it's a way to paint back."²⁶ Brooklyn MC Mos Def expresses a similar view: if hip-hoppers don't like the way things are, "there's a city full of walls you can pose complaints at."²⁷

Breakdancing constitutes another method of reclaiming public space. From the early 1970's to the present, dancers have set up on busy street corners and disrupted foot traffic with loud, bass-heavy music and flamboyant, aggressive dance competitions. In an

²⁶ From the track "A Coat of P.A.I.N.T." from album *P.A.I.N.T.*, Battleaxe Records, 2001.

²⁷ From the track "Speed Law" from the album *Black on Both Sides*, Rawkus Records, 1999.

interview with David Toop, KK Rockwell of the Funky Four Plus One More²⁸ recalls breakdancing's early era:

An uptown group would battle a downtown group. What I mean by battle is that they could come and they would say, "Okay. Us four are better than you four," and we would go at it. We would pick one and we would dance against each other. We'd do a move and see if the crowd liked it. That's where the competition came in. This is before records, before any money was made. This was from our hearts. (71)

This type of exchange channeled youth's combative spirit into constructive competitions, and away from the blood-shed of gang warfare that had dominated New York's streets during the late 60's and early 70's.

Moving from form to content, I would like to discuss the major stylistic movements within hip-hop music. This history is by no means comprehensive, rather it is intended to provide a brief overview for those readers who are not well acquainted with the music.

From the mid to late 70's hip-hop was underground, intensely competitive, and remarkably creative. This is the period of shows in the parks, in school gymnasiums, in community centers, and on the streets. This era is generally referred to as the Old School. The icons from this phase include hip-hop's founding fathers Afrika Bambaata, Grandmaster Flash, and DJ Kool Herc, as well as slightly less well-known figures like DJ Hollywood, Kurtis Blow, The Funky Four Plus One More, the Cold Crush Brothers, Sha Rock, and the Mercedes Ladies.

This period was disrupted by the commercial discovery of rap; the transition was marked by the Sugar Hill Gangs' 1979 smash record "Rapper's Delight." This record was

²⁸ The Funky Four Plus One More was one of the first rap groups.

simultaneously the first commercially successful rap record and the first occasion that the music industry exploited the hip-hop community. Sylvia Robinson of Sugar Hill Records signed unknown, inexperienced, and mediocre rappers instead of recruiting the already established groups, and “Rapper’s Delight” is said to have stolen lyrics from Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers.²⁹

After the commercial explosion of rap, many groups began to gain nation-wide visibility. The top group, Run-DMC, merged rock and rap aesthetics. In doing so, they generated an enormous crossover audience for rap, and dramatically increased its acceptability to the broader pop culture.

The late eighties and early nineties were characterized by three key styles. The Black Nationalist style was influenced by the Nation of Islam, the Nation of Gods and Earths (an offshoot group from the NOI that is popularly referred to as the Five Percenters that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3), the Black Power movement, and Pan-African thought. Black Nationalist rap groups included X-Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers, Public Enemy, and Big Daddy Kane. At the same time as Black Nationalist rap was gaining support, two other important styles emerged.

The first was Gangsta Rap, which was pioneered by the group N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitudes) and sprung up on the West Coast. The genre involved bass-heavy beats, extensive sampling of funk music, and gritty, street-based narratives. Gangsta Rap was notorious for its violent, misogynistic, homophobic and drug-oriented content. The genre’s most famous tracks—N.W.A.’s “Fuck Tha Police” and Ice-T’s “Cop Killer”³⁰—

²⁹ See Toop, David. *The Rap Attack—African Jive to New York Hip Hop*. London: Pluto Press, 1984.

³⁰ “Fuck tha Police” is a track from the N.W.A. LP *Straight Outta Compton*, 1988; “Cop Killer” was recorded for 1992 self-titled album of a rock/rap group called Body Count that Ice-T was the front man for. The song includes references to the Rodney King beating and was played in concert for the year following

triggered censorship attempts from the F.B.I. and from police departments across the country, as well as outraged commentary from conservative political figures such as former Vice President Al Gore's wife Tipper Gore and Black women rights activist C. Delores Tucker. These debates coincided with the 1992 Los Angeles riots and increased militarization in the policing of black communities.³¹ The artists and groups involved include Compton's Most Wanted, South Central Cartel, W.C., MAAD Circle, Snoop Doggy Dog, Too Short, and Kid Frost.

The Native Tongues style was the third aesthetic movement to emerge during this period. It included groups like De La Soul, Jungle Brothers, and A Tribe Called Quest, and is characterized by light-hearted, intellectual lyrics, a highly innovative sound, and the propensity to poke fun at the more macho streams of rap.

Moving into the mid-nineties, gangsta influences erupted in a bitter West Coast/East Coast rivalry. The feud lasted several years and climaxed with the shooting deaths of rappers Tupac Shakur (of Suge Knight's Death Row Records) and Biggie Smalls of (P. Diddy's Bad Boy Records).³² There is some evidence to suggest that the feud was provoked by irresponsible and inflammatory media coverage, and was egged on by F.B.I. undercover agents who spread false rumors in the prisons that B.I.G. had set-up Tupac in an earlier shooting.³³

the album's release. After the 1992 L.A. uprising, a Dallas police group called for a boycott of the album. Warner Brothers caved to the pressure and removed the song from the album. The next year, the company dropped both the band and Ice-T from their roster.

³¹ See Kelley, Robin. "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics—'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles." Race Rebels—Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class. New York: Free Press, 1994.

³² See Sullivan, Randall. Labrinth—A Detective Investigates the Murders of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G., the Implication of Death Row Records' Suge Knight, and the Origins of the Los Angeles Police Scandal. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2002.

³³ Documentary film *Biggie & Tupac: The Story Behind the Murder of Rap's Biggest Superstars*, directed by Nicholas Broomfield, 2002.

Following this stage in hip-hop, a new era was ushered in. This most recent stage (starting in the mid 1990's) is popularly referred to as the "bling bling" phase, a slang term referring to the shine generated from platinum, diamond-encrusted jewelry in particular, and more generally to a style that involves simplistic lyrics that boast about money, alcohol, and women, and that often overtly references commercial products.³⁴ The genre was pioneered by Sean "P. Diddy" Combs,³⁵ a popular rapper, music mogul, and fashion icon. The sound is characterized by its pop influences; the formula generally involves 4 bars of lyrics, followed by an R&B chorus, or hook. Many contemporary rap artists have songs that fall into this camp, including Nelly, Master P, and Jay-Z.

But there is also an alternative movement afoot in hip-hop, which is popularly referred to as "backpack." The backpack style involves intellectual commentary, and complex, poetic rhymes. This group is more inclined toward musical experimentation, and tends to incorporate other genres of music. The rappers in this sect include Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Common, The Roots, Blackalicious, and Jurassic 5. However, it should be noted that the media has continually tried to divide hip-hop music into categories, and the backpack/bling-bling dichotomy is becoming increasingly frustrating to rap artists. Rappers resist this media tendency by collaborating with artists from the opposite end of the spectrum and by refusing to be stereotyped. For instance, Mos Def recently commented in an interview, "You could tell when people come up to me on that bullshit. I don't have time for that shit. The media try to do that shit. They ask me how I feel about

³⁴ The best examples of this trend are Nelly's song "Air Force One," which pays homage to a Nike shoe, and P. Diddy and Busta Rhymes "Pass the Courvoisier," which praises a brand of cognac.

³⁵ See Ro, Ronin. Bad Boy—The Influence of Sean "Puffy" Combs on the Music Industry. New York: Pocket Books, 2001.

Puffy for the last six years like I go out with this dude, like we share an apartment or something. How do I feel about Puffy? He's a smart motherfucker."³⁶

The preceding discussion represents a brief overview of the major styles and artists of the past twenty-five years. There are many less influential elements that have not been explored for the sake of brevity. In addition, it should be noted that mainstream hip-hop is continually shadowed by an extensive underground (transmitted through independent mix-tapes and grassroots, word-of-mouth and internet marketing) that functions as a watchdog for the culture as whole, provides a forceful critique on hip-hop, and works to keep its extremes in check. The underground develops new styles, provides required street credibility to artists, and exists as an alternative arena to test aesthetics, style, and performance techniques. For the most part, rappers are expected to prove their skill in underground circles before breaking commercial records—there is a long tradition of this, with several of the most recent examples being Eminem and 50 Cent.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that although the media tends to focus on hip-hop's most regressive elements and academia generally emphasizes hip-hop's most progressive tendencies, there is actually a broad range of political positions present in any given era of rap. The remainder of the thesis will be dedicated to detailing the political positions that exist within the current era of hip-hop, from the late 1990s to present.

³⁶ From an interview in *EM Magazine*, Vol.2, No.10, 2002, available on line. (<http://www.evilmonto.com/Spr10/mosdef/mosdef2.htm>) June 9, 2003.

CHAPTER TWO
PIMPIN' THE SYSTEM:
STREET HUSTLERS, REPARATIONS,
AND THE NEW BLACK BOURGEOISIE

Pay us like you owe us for all the years you that hoed us
We can talk, but money talks, so talk mo' bucks

- Jay-Z¹

If white boy is doin' it, well, it's success
When I start doin' it, well, it's suspect
Don't hate me, my folks is poor, I just got money
America's five centuries deep in cotton money
You see a lot of brothers caked up,² yo, straight up
It's new—y'all livin' off of slave trader's paper³
But I'm a live though, yo I'm a live though
I'm puttin' up the big swing for my kids, yo
Got my mom the fat water-front crib,⁴ yo
I'm a get her them pretty bay windows
I'm a cop a nice home to provide in
A safe environment for seeds⁵ to reside in
A fresh whip⁶ for my whole family to ride in
And if I'm still Mr. Nigga, I won't find it surprisin'

- Mos Def⁷

¹ From the song "H to the Izzo," off the album *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-fella/ Def Jam, 2001. A note: the title "H to the Izzo" is utilizing a type of street slang that was observed by David Toop. In an interview with Toop, The Kangol Kid (one half of the group UTFO) explains: "Another new thing is Z rap. It'd be like a code language. I would talk to him and his name's Doctor Ice. I would say, 'Dizoctor Izice. Yizo Hizo bizoy wizon't youza kizoy mesover hezer?'—that's just saying, 'Yo, homeboy, why don't you come over here?' and what I did was make a rap out of that language." Toop, David. *The Rap Attack- African Jive to New York Hip Hop*. London: Pluto Press, 1984, p. 122. In this case, the chorus to the song ("H to the Izzo, V to the Izzay" signifies Jay-Z's nickname Hova. According to *rap.about.com*, Hova is a reference to a God, but I have been unable to find any information on this topic.

² "Cake" is a slang term for wealth.

³ "Paper" is a slang term for money.

⁴ "Crib" is a slang term for home.

⁵ "Seed" is a slang term for a child.

⁶ "Whip" is a slang term for vehicle.

⁷ From the song "Mr. Nigga," off the album *Black on Both Sides*, Rawkus, 1999.

Every job I ever had I had to get
On the first day I found out how to pimp the system
Two steps ahead of the manager
Gettin' over on the regular
Tax-free money out the register
When I'm workin' late night stockin' boxes
I'm creepin' their merchandise
And don't put me on dishes
I'm droppin' them bitches
And takin' all day long to mop the kitchen
Shit, we ain't gettin' paid commission
Minimum wage, modern-day slave conditions
Got me flippin' burgers with no power
Can't even buy one off what I make in an hour
I'm not the one to kiss ass for the top position
I take mine off the top like a politician
Where I'm from, doin' dirt is a part of livin'
I've got mouths to feed, dawg, I got to get it

- Dead Prez⁸

In his classic study The Black Bourgeoisie, historian E. Franklin Frazier traces social and economic influences on wealthy African-Americans back to the days of slavery. Frazier claims that elite Blacks are descendents of house slaves who received preferential treatment in relation to field slaves, adopted the Puritanical values of their masters, and tended to be racially mixed as a result of miscegenation (occasionally consensual, but more often forced). The intimacy with the slave masters that came about through sharing a home occasionally resulted in slave masters granting freedom to their slaves or to racially mixed descendents. A class of free, light-skinned slaves—the ancestors to the current day property-owning Blacks—began to accumulate wealth well before the Civil

⁸ From the song "Hell Yeah," from the album *2 Fast, 2 Furious Soundtrack*, Island Def Jam Music, 2003.

War (1865-1877). Although first law and then custom has stood in the way of significant economic progress, this group has managed over time to eke out a comfortable, middle-class existence.⁹ Frazier points to the cultural gulf between house and field slaves, and claims that this history has led the Black bourgeoisie to separate themselves from the Black masses with considerable animosity. He explains:

As the result of the break with its cultural past, the black bourgeoisie is without cultural roots in either the Negro world with which it refuses to identify, or the white world which refuses to permit the black bourgeoisie to share its life. (24)

Frazier believes that the Black bourgeoisie experience a double-bind of exclusion; they do not identify with most Blacks and yet are not accepted by most whites. In response to feelings of alienation, they have created a distinct culture characterized by the Puritan ethos of frugality, respectability, and hard work, a strong denial of solidarity with the larger Black community, and an equally strong refusal to acknowledge ongoing rejection from whites. According to Frazier, these denials manifest in several social practices. To begin with, the Black bourgeoisie place extreme emphasis on society and status. They tend to exaggerate African-American accomplishments and to live beyond their economic means. Secondly, and most importantly for this study, the group perpetuates an ideology that Frazier calls the “myth of Negro business.” He explains:

One of the most striking indications of the unreality of the social world which the black bourgeoisie created is its faith in the importance of “Negro business,” i.e. the business enterprises owned and operated by

⁹ It is important to note that since 1957, the black bourgeoisie has made significant economic gains. However, the condition of the black masses has steadily worsened. For a good overview of the current situation for working-class and unemployed African-Americans, see Kitwana, Bakari. The Hip-Hop Generation—Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002.

Negroes and catering to Negro customers. Although these enterprises have little significance either from the standpoint of the American economy or the economic life of the Negro, a social myth has been created that they provide a solution to the Negro's economic problems. (25)¹⁰

This ideology has had its spokespeople throughout American history. One of the most prominent is Booker T. Washington, who preached this philosophy at the turn of the century. He argued that the solution to the Blacks' problems in America lay with personal responsibility, industrial education, and segregation from whites. In the famous "Atlanta Compromise" address, he asserted: "In all things purely social, we can be as separate as five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress"(Du Bois 26). In another well-known lecture, he argued that whenever he had seen a Black man "who was succeeding in business, who was a taxpayer, and who possessed intelligence and high character," that man "was treated with the highest respect by the members of the white race"(Frazier 156). Clearly, this is a highly unrealistic view of race relations in the United States, for racial discrimination is not likely to take into account the personal merit of its target. As Frazier argues, "despite [the Black bourgeoisie's] attempt to escape real identification with the masses of Negroes, they cannot escape the mark of oppression any more than their less favored kinsmen"(213). Or, as Malcolm X put it:

No matter how much education he has, everyday things keep reminding him...Makes no difference what he is or how great he is. If he is a physicist, he is a *Negro* physicist. If he is a baseball player, he is a *Negro* baseball payer. It's the same if he is in Massachusetts or Mississippi, he can't escape the stigma the white man has saddled him with. (Lincoln 32)

¹⁰ Note: Although Black-owned businesses have grown in size relative to the U.S. economy, the notion that these businesses will solve the economic racism that is regularly directed at African-Americans is still highly contestable.

The writer and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois was among Washington's chief critics. Du Bois advocated political power, civil rights, and higher education for Black youth. He questioned: "Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meager chance for developing their exceptional men? If history and reason give any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic *No*"(31). He pointed out that "[Washington's] doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs"(35).

Despite such powerful calls for a collective response to racial and economic oppression, the notion that individual respectability and enterprise can solve racial issues has continually resurfaced throughout the twentieth century. The Nation of Islam (NOI), for instance, has espoused this line of thinking since its inception in the 1930s, interspersing a call for self-sufficiency with a radical Black Nationalist agenda. In Yo Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America, scholar Robin Kelley reflects on the similarities between Washington's doctrine and that of the NOI, whose outlook he believes "combines black enterprise, social conservatism, and racial militancy"(85). He explains:

Ideally, the Washingtonian vision of self-help meant building black enterprise on the presumption that black business can employ black people and provide them with consumer goods. However, self-help was more than an economic strategy to combat Jim Crow. Rather, its proponents believed that the failings of the black poor could be attributed to moral

deficiencies such as lack of work ethic, frugality, and thrift. Self-help was as much about moral uplift and instilling the virtues of hard work as it was about “buying black.” (85)

The current NOI leader, Louis Farrakhan, has continued to advance the self-help agenda, calling for “personal responsibility” with his Million Man March,¹¹ as opposed to demanding better education, health care, housing, or employment opportunities for African-Americans. However, as Kelley points out, there are limits to Farrakhan’s conservatism, as demonstrated by his defense of civil rights gains and affirmative action programs.

A new generation of Black neo-conservatives has appropriated the Washingtonian ideal to argue against such progressive gains. Economists like Thomas Sowell and Glen Loury attack equal opportunity legislation and social services as policies that anachronistically foreground the issue of race and keep Blacks dependent on the government. Critics of these Black neoconservatives, such as Kelley, urge this group not forget that “government policies, not black people’s moral failings, are largely responsible for the current crisis”(81).

Cornel West argues along similar lines in his landmark text, Race Matters. He stakes out a middle ground between the Black liberals, who he believes tend to ignore the psychic and moral collapse of Black America—a situation he calls the “nihilistic threat,” and the Black conservatives, who “talk about values and attitudes as if political and economic structures hardly exist”(13). He elaborates:

What is particularly naïve and particularly vicious about the conservative behavioral outlook is that it tends to deny the lingering effect of black history—a history inseparable from though not reducible to victimization.

¹¹ The Million Man March occurred in October 1995 in Washington, D.C.

In this way, crucial and indispensable themes of self-help and personal responsibility are wrenched out of historical context and contemporary circumstances—as if it is all a matter of personal will. (14)

The neoconservative, bourgeois position that personal responsibility will solve the crisis in Black America is vehemently rejected by hip-hop. For the most part, rappers come from communities that have little access to quality education, affordable housing, and job opportunities. As a group, rappers share a profound disgust for the racism of white America, which they hold responsible for their racial and economic oppression. But rap music also voices the historic complaints of the Black working poor and unemployed against the rich Black elite; complaints of snobbery that surfaced as early as Frazier's 1957 study, and continue to surface today. For example, TV personality and hip-hop journalist Kevin Powell, who was raised in a New Jersey ghetto, addresses this sentiment in Keepin' It Real: Post-MTV Reflections on Race, Sex, and Politics. He laments wealthy Blacks "labeling every perceived negative thing a black person does as 'ghetto,'" such as "talking loud in public, or being late for an appointment, or being a disorganized person or organization or business." He continues:

[I] have been in enough bourgie black and upper-crust white circles to know that none of those attributes are the exclusive property of the ghetto. But, instead of admitting that, many blacks would much rather pass off the uninhibited, down-home behavior as lower class, or 'ghetto,' or as somehow beneath their standards. Whatever man! (24)

This animosity toward the Black bourgeoisie appears again and again in rap music, from Sir Mix-a-Lot's direct address: "To the bourgeoisie: fuck all y'all"¹² to Ice T's

¹² A lyric from the track "I Check My Bank," from the album *Music From the Motion Picture Trespass*, Warner Brothers, 1992. Quoted in Potter, Russell A. Spectacular Vernaculars—Hip Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 138.

complaints of “bourgeois blacks [who] keep on doggin’ me”¹³ to Dead Prez’s more humorous approach: “Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey/Hit me, hit me/Michael Jackson, Bobby Whitney/Hit me, hit me/Magic Johnson, we need ‘bout fifty thousand/Hit me, hit me/Dr. Huxtable, help us build a hospital.”¹⁴

One of the most biting critiques of the Black bourgeoisie to date has come from the socialist hip-hop group The Coup, on their track “Busterismology.” Busterismology is a term that refers to the study of “Busters,” defined by The Coup’s DJ Pam the Funkstress as “motherfucker[s] who will sell you out for a glass of water when it’s raining.”¹⁵ The song attacks managers of service sector jobs and rich Black celebrities. The latter group is scorned for offenses such as “abusing rhetoric” (paying lip service to Black liberation while remaining apathetic to the struggles of the Black underclass), and “cruisin’ the networks” (shameless self-promotion). Boots charges: “If you ain’t talkin’ bout endin’ exploitation/Then you just another Sambo in syndication/Always sayin’ words that’s gon’ bring about elation/Never doin’ shit, that’s gon’ bring us vindication.” Boots admits that many Black people have respect for such public figures, but he bemoans their superficiality. He arrive at this view by “do[ing] the math”—or, in other words, by performing an economic analysis.

His analysis leads to the same critique that Kelley and West advance—a focus on structural policies that oppress Blacks. The last section of the verse highlights the limitations of the self-help stance: “And while we gettin’ strangled by the slave-wage grippers/You wanna do the same, and say we should put you in business?” This couplet

¹³ A lyric from “This One’s For Me,” from the album *The Iceberg/ Freedom of Speech...Just Watch What You Say*, Sire Records, 1989. Quoted in Potter, p. 138.

¹⁴ From the song “Hit Me, Hit Me,” from the album *Turn Off the Radio*, Holla Black Records, 2002.

¹⁵ From “Busterismology,” from The Coup’s *Steal This Album*, Polemic Records, 1997.

identifies entrepreneurialism as a powerful trope in the Black community, one that views Black commerce as a means of achieving Black economic well-being and Black community self-determination. Boots illustrates the hypocrisy of this stance by juxtaposing the images of a “raised Black fist,” a symbol of collective struggle, and a “pocket fulla scrilla,”¹⁶ a symbol of individual opportunism.

The problem with the Black neo-conservative line of thinking, according to Boots (as well as Kelley and West), is that it denies the impact of government policies that limit opportunity for Blacks and effectively re-distribute wealth to the top echelon of American society, whether white or Black. This approach speaks of the uplift of the Black race in the same breath as it supports conservative policies (such as welfare reform, tax cuts, and cuts to social services) that are profoundly counter-productive to that aim. Boots calls attention to the conservative ideology of the Black bourgeoisie in order to mock it, and to replace it with a call for materialist analysis and socialist revolution.

What complicates this discussion is the fact that the most recent and most visible addition to the Black bourgeoisie has been rappers. Urban music has become a five billion dollar a year industry¹⁷ that employs many young Blacks as rappers, dancers, producers, DJs, songwriters, musicians, street teams, promoters, and road managers. It should be noted that it employs significantly fewer Blacks as record label CEOs, A&R representatives,¹⁸ editors, journalists and marketing managers. However, despite the unequal distribution of labor and profits, hip-hop still generates enormous wealth for young African-Americans. Hip-hop record sales have been at all-time high in 2002, with

¹⁶ “Scrilla” is slang for money.

¹⁷ See Clark, Antoine. “Stranger Among us: Hip-hop’s interest among the boys in blue has increased,” *The Source*, No. 162, March 2003, p. 130-31.

¹⁸ “A&R” stands for artist and recording, and is a position at record labels that involves recruiting and signing artists.

rap singles dominating radio charts and MTV play lists. In cinema, the year saw the release of numerous hip-hop movies such as *Brown Sugar*, *Barbershop*, and *8 Mile*; Hollywood recruited rappers like Eve, Snoop Dogg, Ja Rule, and DMX as actors. In fashion, brands like Russell Simmons' Phat Farm, P. Diddy's Sean John label, and Jay-Z's Rocawear line have reaped huge profits. *Rolling Stone* reported in an annual top earner's list that in 2002 Eminem netted 28.9 million, Jay-Z came in at 22.7 million, Dr. Dre earned 10.6 million, the hip-hop production team The Neptunes pulled in 8.9 million, and Nelly brought in 6.6 million.¹⁹

Clearly, there is enormous wealth in the hip-hop community. But this wealth does not come without a historically distinct set of tensions. Cultural studies professor Todd Boyd argues in his recent book The New H.N.I.C.(Head Nigga In Charge)—The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip-Hop that the financial success of rappers points to a reversal of oppressive power relations in the United States. However, he immediately contradicts this thesis by charging that white America is unwilling to accept, let alone embrace, successful young Black men. There is substantial evidence to support the latter claim; Boyd may well be right when he says that "the threat once posed by the Black male/White female scenario has been replaced by the newly emergent image of the Black millionaire, and the hatred around these figures has escalated as the images become more visible"(67). This emerging cultural dynamic is not lost on rappers.

Indeed, many rappers recognize that they are the focus of white hatred. Rappers who have achieved fame and fortune have quickly discovered that their social status does not preclude them from racist harassment. To the contrary, it seems to attract racist

¹⁹ See La Franco, Robert. "The 2nd Annual *Rolling Stone* Money Report: Rock's 50 Richest." *Rolling Stone*, issue 919, April 3, 2003, p. 57-61.

attacks. Whether it is in the form of wide-spread censorship attempts—which will be discussed further in Chapter 4—or the New York Police Department’s Rap Task Force,²⁰ hip-hop’s top earners face increasing pressure from mainstream America that seeks to contain, discredit, harass, and police them. This situation is illustrated by the treatment that Jay-Z has received.

Jay-Z is a Grammy award-winning, multi-platinum-selling rap artist, and the founder and CEO of Roc-a-fella Records. He was raised by a single mother in Brooklyn’s Marcy projects, an experience that he describes in many songs, including “H to the Izzo”: “I was raised in the projects, roaches and rats/Smokers out back, sellin’ they mama’s sofa/Lookouts on the corner, focused on the Ave/Ladies in the window, focused on they kinfolk.”²¹ In the song “Renegade,” which appears to be a direct address to white America, he says: “I’m influenced by the ghetto you ruined/the same dudes you gave nothin’ to, I made something doin’/what I do, through and through, I give you the news/with a twist, it’s just his ghetto point-of-view.” He identifies himself as the “renegade, you’ve been afraid [of];” or the outcast who “penetrate[s] pop culture” and “bring[s] ‘em a lot closer to the block.”²²

It is true that Jay-Z has a past that includes drug-dealing and violence. But despite overcoming enormous obstacles and moving on to a successful career, he has been

²⁰ This unit works with the FBI to monitor suspected criminal activity in the hip-hop community. The task force has compiled a computerized database of information on rap artists that includes photographs, car license plate numbers, addresses, telephone and pager numbers, record label affiliation, favorite clubs, and names of personal and business associates. Targets of this unit have included Jay-Z and Irv Gotti’s Murder Inc. label. The unit is compiling a report titled “Crime Trends in the Rap Music Industry.” See Clark, Antoine. “Stranger Among us: Hip-hop’s interest among the boys in blue has increased,” *The Source*, No. 162, March 2003, p. 130-31. and Winslow, Mike. “The NYPD is Targeting Rappers,” *allhiphop.com* April 4, 2001. and Century, Douglas. “Hip-Hop Cops: Is the NYPD at war with Hip-hop?” *MTV.com*, February 5, 2003. Despite wide-spread press coverage, the NYPD denies the existence of this unit.

²¹ “H to the Izzo” from the album *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-Fella/ Def Jam, 2001. The “blueprint” is an allusion to an earlier album of legendary MC KRS-One titled *The Blueprint of Hip-Hop*.

²² From “Renegade,” from the album *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-Fella/ Def Jam, 2001.

dogged by attacks from all directions. Most notably, he was targeted for surveillance by the Rap Task Force, and was arrested, but not convicted, on weapon possession charges.²³ Late in 2002, he was unable to purchase a Manhattan penthouse apartment because of protest from white neighbors.²⁴ Jay-Z wrote a biographical essay that addressed this experience in *Vibe* magazine:

Here's something to think about. I enter a building in lower Manhattan last spring to look at a 10,000 square-foot apartment. I'm still in shock that I can even look at an apartment that is selling for \$7.5 million. I go myself, no security, no entourage, no bullshit. The next day, it's all over the New York daily papers: Thug rapper is not wanted by the neighbors, he came with 30 armed black militants with guns—blah, blah, blah. Can you believe people still have a problem with successful black folk? Granted, I got in trouble once, but so have Winona Ryder and Martha Stewart. It's funny, like 'Pac and Big, I didn't have major legal problems until I got in the music business. What's frustrating is how the media can affect my real (estate) life choices. No one on the board of that building had ever even met me. (82)

These attacks are rendered all the more blatantly racist in light of Jay-Z's record of contributing to the community. Not only has he donated funds to a wide range of social programs in his old neighborhood, but he also donated money to the Columbine High School fund for relatives of the massacre, and to the World Trade Center relief fund (which included donations to the NYPD) following the September 11th tragedy.

Despite his good will toward New York, Jay-Z was recently named, along with rival Nas, as one of the '50 Most Hated New Yorkers.' "These endlessly feuding rappers should be merged to form one, giant, illiterate organism called Notorious S.U.C.K.," the *New York Press* stated. "Either that, or they should stop pretending and jump into bed together already. In a naked attempt to recapture the marketing magic of the Tupac-

²³ See Winston, Dallas. "Jay-Z's Gun Trial Delayed," *allhiphop.com/*, June 11, 2001

²⁴ See Remsburg, Charlie. "Tenants Don't Want Jay-Z," *allhiphop.com/*, May 3, 2002

Biggie war²⁵—only minus the crowd-pleasing deaths of the principals—the two lackluster rappers spent years trading various asinine threats and insults.”²⁶

Such comments epitomize the racist media coverage that surrounds rap music in general, and Jay-Z’s career in particular. The article constructs the feud between Jay-Z and Nas as a self-serving marketing ploy, and the rappers themselves as violent, illiterate, untalented, and homosexual. Aside from their obvious cruelty, such comments reveal a profound ignorance of hip-hop culture; they deny both the long-standing tradition of competition and verbal battle in hip-hop (and in Black oral culture in general) and the fact that the Nas/Jay-Z beef has thankfully not erupted in “crowd-pleasing” violence. In addition, this view ignores the lyrical genius of the two MCs—a fact that has never been contested in the hip-hop community. These are exactly the kind of incidents that lead Jay-Z to exclaim in frustration on the track “The Heart of the City (Ain’t No Love)”: “Can I live?”²⁷

Jay-Z’s latest album *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse*²⁸ meets these issues head on. The first track on the album, “A Dream,” invokes the ghost of Notorious B.I.G., a friend of Jay-Z’s and the author of the famous track “Mo’ Money, Mo’ Problems.” Jay-Z sits with his late friend and explains that: “my one-of-a-kind self/get stoned every day like Jesus did.”²⁹ The response: “What he said, I said, has been said before/ Just keep doin’ your thing, he said—say no more.” In “Diamonds Forever,” Jay-Z continues to ruminate on this theme:

²⁵ This phrase refers to the mid-nineties West Coast/East Coast feud that left Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. dead.

²⁶ See Bulger, Adam; Callan, Matt; Koyen, Jeff; Taibbi, Matt; Taylor, J.R.; Zaitchik, Alexander. “The 50 Most Loathsome New Yorkers.” *New York Press*, Volume 6, Issue 13, March 26, 2003. (<http://www.nypress.com/16/13/news&columns/feature.cfm>) April 26, 2003.

²⁷ From “The Heart of the City (Ain’t No Love)” from *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-fella/ Def-Jam, 2001.

²⁸ Jay-Z, *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse*, Rock-A-Fella/ Def Jam, 2002.

²⁹ From “A Dream,” from *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse*, Rock-A-Fella/ Def Jam, 2002.

It's true high society don't want me to move
 Into the penthouse building with spectacular views
 They're like, "uhh, he's a menace, he could never be a tenant"
 I'm like, "ooh, what's a young nigga to do?"
 I bring the brothers to the building, give a feeling that I don't give a fuck
 We just chillin', watchin' chandelier ceilings, high as fuck
 Oh lady, don't blow my high
 Especially if you don't know my life
 Don't make me bring Sharpton³⁰ in it cause I'm dark-skinned
 Or the dude with the 'fro from the Rainbow Coalition³¹
 I'm a victim of a single parent household,
 Born in a mouse hole, mousetrap
 Niggaz wanna know
 How so? How Jay get up out that?
 Yeah, I snatched purses, I persevered³²

The conflict between persecution and perseverance dominates the entire double album, and culminates with the powerful anthem "I Did it My Way." Referring again to the penthouse fiasco, Jay says: "Grandma's favorite, she could not understand/how there's people in this world who wouldn't want me as a neighbor/have to explain to her, 'you think these folks want me in the penthouse/as a reminder that I make top paper'?"³³ He continues: "black entrepreneur, nobody did us no favors/nobody gave a shit, we made us."³⁴ Despite the clear indications that Jay-Z has struggled emotionally in the last several years, the last lines of the song project a triumphant sentiment: "Here's a quote from Jay: 'Nigga, I did it my way.'"³⁵

³⁰ Al Sharpton is a preacher, author, and Black activist from New York. He formed the National Action Network in 1991, an organization whose mandate is to fight for more humane domestic policies, to educate and register voters, to provide economic support to small community businesses, and to confront corporate racism. Reverend Sharpton is running for President on a Democrat ticket in the 2004 federal election.

³¹ The National Rainbow/PUSH Coalition (RPC) is a multiracial, multi-issue, international membership organization, founded by Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. and with offices in Chicago, New York, Washington, and Los Angeles.

³² From "Diamonds Forever," *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse*, Rock-A-Fella/ Def Jam, 2002.

³³ "Paper" is slang for money.

³⁴ From "I Did it My Way," *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse*, Rock-A-Fella/ Def Jam, 2002.

It would be easy for some to attribute the source of such harassment to Jay-Z's unsavory history. However, the treatment that he has received can be shown to extend to even the most palatable of rap artists. Mos Def is a Brooklyn rapper who does not have associations with violence or criminality. He has achieved success in both the music and film industries. He is generally perceived to belong to the "backpack" movement of conscious, political, intellectual rappers. And yet, the exact sentiments on the pitfalls of success that Jay-Z expresses in 2002 are anticipated in Mos Def's 1999 song "Mr. Nigga."³⁵

In "Mr. Nigga," Mos Def explores the pressures that he faces as a successful young Black man. He describes his newfound wealth, detailing the luxuries that it affords him. He is able to eat at the best restaurants, live in the best buildings, drive the nicest cars, wear the flashiest clothes, and travel the world. However, the hosts at the restaurants won't seat him without long delays, the neighbors in the high-rise don't want him to move in, and white policemen feel free to harass him on the road. He quips: "Is there a problem officer?/Damn straight it's called race!" He gets mistaken for clerks when shopping in expensive clothing stores, and is consistently interrogated at borders and on airplanes ("Some folks get on a plane and go where they please/But I go overseas and I get over-SEIZED," and "they think that illegal's a synonym for Negro"). As Mos Def puts it: "they say they want you successful, but then they make it stressful/you start keepin' pace, they start changin' up the tempo."

It is precisely these tensions that have generated a new attitude among wealthy young Black rappers; the hip-hop generation represents a break with the historical continuum of the Black bourgeoisie. They deviate from the traditional culture of the

³⁵ From the album *Black on Both Sides*, Rawkus Records 1999.

Black bourgeoisie in three key ways: they refuse to deny the economic and social oppression that Blacks face in America; they refuse to disassociate themselves from the Black underclass from which they came; and their entrepreneurial ethic—though still a powerful ideology of uplift—remains skeptical of the ability to achieve social justice through Black enterprise alone.

It is significant that, unlike past generations, the new Black wealthy class that hip-hop represents is constituted mainly of people from the Black underclass. These rappers refuse to gloss over the race issues in America. They place race and class at the forefront of the American consciousness, and are extremely vocal about inequality.

In addition, once rappers achieve material success, they do not conform to middle-class values, attitudes, or behaviors. Although they are extremely hard-working, they view their own work ethic as the rule for young Blacks and not the exception, and they do not denounce fellow Blacks who are in less fortunate positions. They maintain close ties with friends and family from their neighborhoods, and in some cases don't move away from these areas. Many rappers provide material support to the communities they come from, in the form of donations and sponsorships, through the mentoring of up-and-coming rappers, and by reaffirming community pride in three ways.

First, rappers frequently give verbal “shout-outs,” or acknowledgements to the communities that raised them. It is not uncommon for rappers to name their neighborhoods in songs, in videos, and in interviews. Liner notes to albums illustrate this trend; rappers often provide extensive lists that acknowledge friends and family from their block. Rap artists often see themselves as representing their neighborhoods, the most famous of which are the South Bronx, the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, the

Queensbridge projects in Queens, the Jamaica neighborhood in Queens, the South Central district of Los Angeles, and the Cabrini Green projects in Chicago—not coincidentally, some of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in America. On the national stage, rappers often represent entire geographical regions, such as the East Coast, the West Coast, or the so-called ‘Dirty South.’

Secondly, rappers always maintain close ties with their ‘crews’—neighborhood or artistic networks, not to be confused with street gangs—after getting rich and famous. There is a long tradition of this in rap, with the most recent examples being Nelly introducing his group the St. Lunatics to the music industry, Ludacris releasing an album with his friends from Disturbing the Peace, and 50 Cent hyping his G-Unit crew. Rappers tend to tour, record, and hang out with the same friends that they grew up with.

Third, due to the high incarceration rates for young Black men, most rappers have friends or family members in prison that they remain in close contact with. This solidarity is expressed both on record and off. For instance, Nelly wears a white band-aid on his cheek at every public appearance to demonstrate support for his brother who is currently serving time. Rappers have also actively supported Black political prisoners with benefit concerts and albums. Prominent figures that rappers have spoken out for have included Mumia Abu Jamal, the former Black Panther and community journalist who was framed for the death of a white police officer,³⁶ and Assata Shakur, the former Black Panther

³⁶ See Abu-Jamal, Mumia. *Live From Death Row*. New York: Avon Books, 1995. Mumia has had a lot of support from the hip-hop community, including numerous benefit concerts and countless shout-outs in songs. Most notably, a group of hip-hop artists (including Pharoah Monch, Black Thought, Aceyalone, and Chuck D) released a record titled “Mumia 911” for the benefit album titled *Unbound*, Ground Control Records, 2000.

who was also framed for the death of a white police officer, and who now lives as a political exile in Cuba.³⁷

On wax, rappers frequently express support for those in prison and those on the streets. Talib Kweli, for instance, addresses those in prison directly on the track “Get By”:

Yo, I activism—attackin’ the system, the Blacks and Latins in prison
Numbers in prison, they victims, black in the vision
Shit, and all they got is rappin’ to listen to
I let them know: “we missin’ you, the love is unconditional
Even when the condition is critical, when the livin’ is miserable
Your position is pivotal, I ain’t bullshittin’ you
Now, why would I lie? Just to get by?”³⁸

In the track “The Ruler’s Back,” Jay-Z articulates this same bond: “Yo, gather round hustlers, that’s if you still livin’/And get on down, to that ol’ Jig³⁹ rhythm/Here’s a couple of jewels to help you get through your bid in prison/A ribbon in the sky, keep your head high/I, Young ‘Vito, voice of the young people/Mouthpiece for hustlers, I’m back motherfucker.”⁴⁰ Again, Jay-Z: “How you rate music that thugs with nothing relate to?/I help them see their way through it—not you/Can’t step in my pants, can’t walk in my shoes.”⁴¹ This stance should not be confused, as it so often is by rap critics, with a glorification of crime and violence. As Jay-Z says on “H to the Izzo,” his narratives are “life stories told through rap.” To his critics, he says defiantly: “Niggas actin’ like I sold

³⁷ See Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Laurence Hill Books, 1987.

³⁸ From the song “Get By,” from the album *Quality*, Rawkus Records, 2003.

³⁹ One of Jay-Z’s nicknames is The Jigga.

⁴⁰ From “The Ruler’s Back,” from *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-fella/ Def Jam, 2001.

⁴¹ From “Renegade,” from *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-fella/ Def Jam, 2001.

you crack/Like I told you 'sell drugs'—No/Hove did that, so hopefully you won't have to go through that."⁴²

In addition to maintaining ties to the Black underclass, many rappers continue to enact their mannerisms. As opposed to adopting the respectability of the Black bourgeoisie, rappers' personal style post-fame and fortune continues to be aggressive and in-your-face. Dr. Dre expresses this sentiment on his track "Still Dre": "Still puffin' my leafs, still fuck with the beats/Still not lovin' police/Still rock my khakis with a cuff and a crease/Still got love for the streets, reppin' 213 fo life."⁴³ Dre emphasizes that he has stayed true to his original values (solidarity with the Black masses and an anti-police stance) as well as maintaining his street behavior (smoking grass, dressing in casual street clothes, and listening to hardcore rap).

Rap mogul Russell Simmons defines this distinctly hip-hop attitude in his memoir Life and Def:

They say: "I'm gonna get flack for being young and street. But I'm still gonna take a bite out of American culture. I'm gonna do it my way and I'm gonna buy everything at Bloomingdale's. I'm not into rebelling for the sake of rebelling. My rebellion has a goal—self-improvement, the ability to acquire all the things normally denied me or to change the way the world speaks, moves, dresses and thinks."⁽⁴⁾

As Simmons intimates, for rappers, conspicuous consumption constitutes a form of resistance. For people who were systematically denied economic access to the American Dream, and are now treated with scorn and suspicion when they get access to it—conspicuous consumerism becomes a means to assert their rights. Rappers rebel by refusing to conform to white and middle-class social mores, and by loudly invading high-

⁴² From "H to the Izzo," from *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-fella/ Def Jam, 2001.

⁴³ From "Still Dre," from *The Chronic 2001*, Interscope, 1999. 213 is the telephone area code for Los Angeles.

end stores, restaurants, hotels, clubs, and social circles. Simmons epitomizes the hip-hop stance when he says: “We don’t change’ for you; you adapt to us”(6). Kevin Powell puts it another way:

Hip-hop culture let’s us say to society: “If y’all don’t like us or the way we talk or act, we don’t really care. And we’ll even tell you how we feel about you, your rules, and our circumstances in this nation, right on wax. And we’ll make money off our sentiments by selling it to your children. So how ya like us now?” (Keepin’ 210)

Rappers also break from the traditional Black bourgeoisie in that they do not entertain fantasies that their personal financial success will solve the problems that face Black America. Instead, their relationship to wealth is enacted through a new ethos of radical entrepreneurialism that can be best described as “pimpin’ the system.”

This mode of operation grows out a profound skepticism of capitalism, and utilizes street hustling techniques (both legal and illegal) to remedy economic inequality. Writer Tariq “K-Flex” Nasheed articulates the underlying premise of this ideology in an unrelated book on Mackin’, or using one’s charm and intellect to gain access to wealth, women, and sex. He explains:

In the system of capitalism, a person has to capitalize off the work of others. The very definition of “capitalize” means to “profit from” or “to exploit”...if a person puts in 40 hours a week at a regular job, making their boss richer and richer, technically, they are also being “exploited.” In any employment situation, you are going to be a pimp or you are going to be a ho. (79)

This perspective recognizes the racial and economic inequality that is rampant in America and sees the attainment of wealth by any means necessary as a payback to themselves, their families, and their communities. These rappers have a tenuous relationship to capitalism—they will pimp the system, but they will not sing its praises.

Not surprisingly, the issue of reparations to Blacks for slavery is at the forefront of this thrust toward independent entrepreneurialism. The reparations argument focuses on three key areas: the deaths of ten to twenty-five million Africans on the way to America, the physical and psychological torture of African-Americans during slavery, and the economic profits that African-Americans generate for whites during two and a half centuries of unpaid labor.⁴⁴ Randall Robinson articulates all three arguments in The Debt—What America Owes to Blacks. He refers to slavery as a “crime against humanity” and the “American holocaust”(33). He articulates the widespread sentiment that “until America’s white ruling class accepts the fact that the book never closes on massive unaddressed social wrongs, America can have no future as one people” (208).

The form that reparations should take is currently being debated in the hip-hop community, as well as in academic circles.⁴⁵ Cultural critic Bakari Kitwana included this issue on his list of the most important issues to the Hip-Hop generation.⁴⁶ He believes that “most hip-hop generationers do not expect reparations in the form of a cash payment or a partition of land that would essentially constitute a separate country within a country—things once advocated by civil rights/ Black power generationers.” He continues:

For us, it’s fundamentally a question of respect. Centuries of unpaid labor can be repaid in more creative ways. Young black voters would support reparations goals that don’t stigmatize Blacks and don’t take the form of hand-outs. Hip-hop generationers would support any reparations policy

⁴⁴ See Robinson, Randall. The Debt—What America Owes to Blacks. New York: Dutton, 2000

⁴⁵ See Bittker Boris I, and Morrison, Toni. The Case for Black Reparations. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003 and Winbush, Raymond A. Should America Pay?: Slavery and the Raging Debate on Reparations. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2003.

⁴⁶ Kitwana’s political agenda for the hip-hop generation includes the following issues: education, employment and workers’ rights, reparations, economic infrastructure in urban communities, youth poverty and disease, anti-youth legislation, and foreign policy. Kitwana, Bakari. The Hip-Hop Generation—Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002.

that includes the following: honoring the descendants of enslaved Africans and Black veterans; setting the historical record straight on slavery, teaching it in our schools, and commemorating it on our holidays; erecting monuments and museums that celebrate Black contributions to America. Goals like these would demonstrate that the country is committed to upholding its creed of self-evident truths. (179-80)

This fairly conservative set of goals is offset by a more radical approach from others like Russell Simmons, who is currently involved in an extensive reparations campaign.

Simmons' latest ads, placed in hip-hop magazines such as *The Source*, *XXL*, and *Vibe*, read: "Isn't it time for change? Economic justice now. The U.S. government owes: Equal, high quality education, stronger affirmative action, greater access to the new American dream. Reparations is not a racial issue. It's an American justice issue. Reparations now."⁴⁷

While most rappers support reparations efforts, they tend to see their own independent entrepreneurialism as an interim measure. There has been a steady movement in the last decade to establish independent record labels. This movement is influenced by numerous factors, not the least of which is the music industry's treatment of rappers. Since discovering hip-hop's commercial potential—which was made clear by the success of the Sugar Hill Gang's 1979 hit "Rapper's Delight"—the music industry has had a reputation for exploiting inexperienced rappers. Whether by obtaining publishing rights or generating enormous recoupable expense bills, major labels have often flexed their corporate muscles at the expense of unsuspecting artists. In response, hip-hop has produced a class of business-minded MCs who attempt to level the playing field by founding independent labels and negotiating profitable distribution deals. There is a strong tradition of rappers who fashion themselves as entrepreneurial icons—Easy E,

⁴⁷ From an advertisement in *XXL*, No. 47, May 2003, p. 57.

P. Diddy, and Master P are but a few examples—and Jay-Z is the current example of this trend.

An aggressive entrepreneurial ethic is articulated by many rappers; they see their entrepreneurialism as a way to escape being exploited, and the profits of their musical careers as a payback for racial and economic injustice. For instance, Jay-Z expresses this sentiment directly in the song “H to the Izzo”:

I do this for my culture
To let ‘em know what it looks like when a nigga in the roaster
Show ‘em how to move in a room full of vultures
Industry’s shady—it need to be taken over
Label owners hate me, I’m raising the status quo up
I’m overcharging niggas for what they did to the Cold Crush⁴⁸
Pay us like you owe us, for all the years you hoed us
We can talk, but money talks, so talk ‘mo bucks!⁴⁹

This sentiment is articulated time and time again. In “Robin Hood Theory,” Guru from Gang Starr says:

Now that we're gettin' somewhere, you know we got to give back
For the youth is the future, no doubt that's right and exact
Squeeze the juice out, of all the suckers with power
And pour some back out, so as to water the flowers
This world is ours, that's why the demons are leery
It's our inheritance; this is my Robin Hood Theory

....

If I wasn't kickin' rhymes I'd be kickin' down doors
Creatin' social change and defendin' the poor
The God's always been militant, and ready for war
We're gonna snatch up the ringleaders, send ‘em home in they drawers

⁴⁸ The Cold Crush Brothers were among hip-hop’s pioneers, but they have never achieved recognition outside of the hip-hop community. They are often referred to as a symbol of the music industry’s exploitation of hip-hop, as Grandmaster Caz’s rhymes were stolen by Sugar Hill Records for the smash hit “Rapper’s Delight.” The Cold Crush Brothers never released a full length album.

⁴⁹ From the album *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-fella/ Def Jam, 2001.

But first, where's the safe at? Let's make 'em show us
And tell 'em hurry up, give up the loot that they owe us
We bringin' it back, around the way to our peeps
'Cause times are way too deep, we know the code of the streets
Meet your defeat; this is my Robin Hood Theory⁵⁰

Dead Prez—who are shown on their latest album cover wearing t-shirts that read “pimp the system”—articulated this theme in a recent interview. Stic describes his perspective as a “slave’s perspective.” He says: “Everyone outside of our community owns the real resources of hip-hop: the production facilities, the manufacturing, the distribution, the legal ownership of the masters. That’s what we gotta get in our hands.” He adds: “Simply put: what you produce, you should own. That’s what freedom look like economically.” He elaborates:

Capitalism is not abstract. Capitalism is based off Black people in prison and Black people getting \$4.25 an hour. That’s what makes it work. Everywhere in the world, there is brown people being oppressed by that system. The minority of the people in the world, which are white people, are the wealthiest people in the world, because of capitalism. So, ain’t no Black person gonna take capitalism and make it work in his instance. As long as you using capitalist principles, if you makin’ a dollar, somebody white is makin’ ten dollars. That’s how it is set up. You gotta get your money, don’t get me wrong. But don’t confuse capitalism with self-determination.⁵¹

This is the ethos that underwrites the profound (and historically justified) distrust of the music industry—and in particular the media and the major labels—and encourages the focus on independent entrepreneurialism. The rappers of the current generation are striving to record, market, and distribute their own work, in order to reap more profit and allow more room for artistic freedom. For the most part, rappers eventually accept

⁵⁰ From “Robin Hood Theory,” From *Moment of Truth*, Noo Trybe Records, 1998.

⁵¹ From an interview on January 25, 2003 in New York. Published in my article “A New Game: Hip-hop Takes a Political Turn in New York,” in *The Georgia Straight*, March 6, 2003.

lucrative deals with major labels, but only after they have built up strong reputations in the underground. A strong reputation in the underground places them in a powerful position to negotiate with major labels that are notorious for their lack of savvy in the area of rap artist recruitment. The bottom line is that major labels still don't really understand rap. Rather than hire A&R reps that do, they have adopted a strategy of buying out smaller boutique labels once they have proved successful. This gives the indie-label owners a rare upper hand—and the rappers/ businessmen are prepared to milk this position for all it is worth. They aren't however, under any illusions that this transaction is going to solve the problems that face Black America.

What has been represented in the media as crass materialism and in academia as Black capitalism is actually neither. The “pimpin’ the system” stance is a reaction to and critique of advanced capitalism. The independent entrepreneurial movement insists on the redistribution of resources and advocates seizing wealth through alternative tactics, both legal and illegal. In this context, conspicuous consumerism becomes a form of protest and resistance in and of itself. The story of hip-hop’s entrepreneurialism is, as Deena Barnwell explained to me in an interview, about “people on the bottom trying to get to the top.”⁵²

⁵² Comments from a phone interview on July 15, 2001. Originally published in my article “Why Is Sarah Jones Speaking Up?” *The Peak*, No. 13, Vol. 108, July 30, 2001.

CHAPTER THREE IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST¹: ISLAMIC HIP-HOP IN AMERICA

If you could only recognize the time and knowledge of yourself and your kind, the knowledge of others who are on the same planet rotating around the sun daily, you would know who you are. And you should know who you are...and remember at all times that you were brought here through our parents 400 years ago, and how our parents were mercilessly brought here against their will...To accept your own means yourself and your kind, your God who is of you and you are of him.

- Elijah Muhammad²

To hear my people been lost for over 400 years
And they tried this mystery God
All they got was hard times

- Brand Nubian³

Praises are due to Allah, that's me.

- Poor Righteous Teachers⁴

The current generation of African-American youth face shockingly high rates of suicide, imprisonment, unemployment, violence, and poverty. In The Hip Hop Generation—

¹ The phrase 'the belly of the beast' is a metaphor that Minister Louis Farrakhan, current leader of the NOI, uses to describe the experience of Blacks in America. From the NOI's newspaper *The Final Call*, April 15, 1988. Quoted in Pipes, Daniel. *Militant Islam Reaches America*. New York: Norton, 2002, p. 128.

² See Muhammad, Elijah. *Message to the Black Man*. Chicago: Muhammad Mosque of Islam, No. 2, 1965, pg. 41-42, quoted in Perkins, William Eric. "Nation of Islam Ideology in the Rap of Public Enemy," *Black Sacred Music*, Vol.5, No.1, Spring 1991, pg. 41.

³ From the song "Ain't No Mystery," from the album *In God We Trust*, Elektra, 1993, quoted in Swedenburg, Ted. "Islam in the Mix: Lessons of the Five Percent," presented at the Anthropology Colloquium, University of Arkansas, February 19, 1991.

⁴ From the song "Butt Naked Booty Bless," from the album *Holy Intellect*, Profile, 1990, quoted in Swedenburg.

Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture, hip-hop journalist Bakari

Kitwana details the extent of this social and economic crisis. The suicide rate for young Blacks (aged fifteen to nineteen) more than doubled between 1980 and 1995, and increased a staggering 146 percent for young Black males (21). Between 1965 and 2002, the prison population in the United States grew from 200,000 to nearly 2 million, with 50% of federal and state prisoners being African-Americans. Approximately 1 million Black men are currently under some type of correctional supervision (53). Between 1985 and 1995, the number of blacks incarcerated for drug offenses increased 707 percent. Approximately one third of Black males age twenty to twenty-nine are incarcerated, on parole, or on probation (53). Young Blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed as young whites (13); the rate of unemployment directly corresponds to the number of youth involved in the underground economy (20). Gun homicide, which increased 79 percent in the Black community between 1980 and 1990, is the leading cause of death of Black men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four (21). 60 percent of America's poor youth are Black (20).

This crisis, widely ignored by those in power, is currently being addressed by numerous Islamic organizations. According to an article by Middle East scholar Hisham Aidi in the Fall 2002 *Mid East Report*, American Islamic organizations have recently increased their efforts to serve both inner-city communities and the growing prison population.⁵ Such organizations meet the material needs of struggling Americans by providing basic services such as employment, health care, housing, and education to those in the inner-cities, and counseling, halfway houses, and mentorship programs to

⁵ See Aidi, Hisham. "Jihads in the Hood—Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror." *Middle East Report* 224, Fall 2002.

prison inmates. For instance, the Alianza Islamica of New York's South Bronx offers after-school tutorials, high school equivalency programs, marriage and substance abuse counseling, AIDS awareness campaigns, and sensitivity talks on Islam for the New York Police Department. The United Nation of Islam—a 1993 splinter group of the Nation of Islam—has opened health clinics, employment centers, restaurants, and grocery stores across the country. As a result of the efforts of organizations like these, the influence of Islam is spreading throughout America's most oppressed populations, and most dramatically within the prison population. Aidi notes that:

The rise of Islam and Islamism in American cities can be explained as a product of immigration and racial politics, deindustrialization and state withdrawal, and the interwoven cultural forces of black nationalism, Islamism and hip-hop that appeal strongly to disenfranchised black, Latino, Arab and South Asian youth. (3)

However, the increasing influence of Islam (which began well before September 11th) in urban America is accompanied by the escalating 'War on Terror.' Anti-Islamic propaganda is becoming increasingly rampant in mainstream America; Islam is being characterized in the media as violent, backward, hateful, and militant. Deviations from this representation are few and far between.

There is a long history of the West over-simplifying and stereotyping Islam. As Edward Said points out:

The term "Islam" as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing but is in fact part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam. In no really significant way is there a direct correspondence between the "Islam" in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800,000,000 people, its millions of square miles of territory

principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures. (1)

Said argues that Islam cannot be reduced to a single idea, concept, or practice. He proposes that it should be viewed as a tradition characterized by what he calls “communities of interpretation”(45).

This perspective is especially useful when studying African-American Islamic communities, who share much of the iconography and rhetoric of orthodox Islam, but hold many divergent beliefs and practices.⁶ In his recent study Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islam, Edward Curtis points out that “the history of Islam is in part a ‘discursive tradition’ that Muslims have constantly redefined and contested over time and space through an interaction with sacred texts and with the history of that interpretation”(5). Curtis proposes, “the mere fact that one has labeled oneself a Muslim indicates some sort of participation, however slight, in the process of Islamic history.” I will adopt Curtis’s definition of Islam for this discussion, as self-identification with Islam seems to be the most productive measure of affiliation. It may be useful at this point to turn to a brief discussion of the history of Islam in America.

The American Islamic tradition is fraught with conflicts between normative orthodox Islam and particularist interpretations.⁷ This conflict has been manifested in debates over authenticity between immigrant Muslim communities and various sects of Black Muslims. However, it should be noted that despite espousing highly controversial interpretations of Islam, all three of the most historically influential Black Muslim

⁶ I am grateful to my colleague Charles Demers for this distinction.

⁷ See Curtis, Edward E. Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islam. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

leaders—Elijah Mohammad, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan—have been accepted by the strict Saudi Arabian courts to undergo pilgrimages to Mecca.

The Nation of Islam (NOI) is currently the most prominent African-American Islamic sect. The NOI was founded in Detroit by W.D. Fard, a light-skinned immigrant whose ethnicity has remained somewhat of a mystery, despite numerous FBI probes into his background. The NOI taught that Fard was born in Mecca to an Arab father and a Russian Jewish mother. He grew up in Saudi Arabia, completed an undergraduate degree at Oxford and journeyed to America to complete a graduate degree at the University of California in Los Angeles. When he returned to Mecca to be groomed for a diplomatic position, he could not get the plight of the Black man in America out of his mind. He immigrated to America in the 1930s, with the goal of uplifting African-Americans with Islam. The FBI believes that Fard is actually a Pakistani-New Zealander named Wali Dodd Fard who arrived in Portland, Oregon in the early 1900s and worked for several decades at restaurants and as a minor criminal.⁸

What is undisputed is that Fard eventually settled in Detroit in the 1930s and became involved with the Moorish Science Temple. After a failed attempt to take control of the organization, Fard left the Moorish Science Temple and began teaching small groups of Blacks that they were of Asiatic origin, that Christianity was the oppressive tool of slave masters, and that Islam was the natural religion of Blacks. The movement grew under Fard to approximately eight thousand members. When he mysteriously disappeared, one of his chief aids, Elijah Mohammad, took leadership.

⁸ See Evanzz, Karl. The Messenger—The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

Elijah Mohammad was born on October 7, 1897 in Cordele, Georgia and was named after the biblical prophet who is prophesized to come and warn of the Apocalypse. He was born in the volatile period following Reconstruction, and racial tensions were high in the South. Muhammad lived under in constant terror and experienced the trauma of having one of his closest friends lynched. He came to believe that the white race was evil and doomed for destruction. Muhammad studied the Bible closely and felt that he would play a pivotal role in liberating his people. He married Clara Belle Evans on March 7, 1919 and the couple moved to Detroit in 1922 to escape racial hostility and to capitalize on the industrial boom that was taking place in the north. The couple had numerous children and lived a relatively stable life until Muhammad became an alcoholic. In an effort to cure himself, he joined both the Islamic Moorish Science Temple and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. When he met Fard in the early 30s, he became his follower and helped to build the Nation of Islam. Following Fard's disappearance, Muhammad took control of the organization and taught that Fard was Allah and that he himself was a prophet. The movement spread across America and at one point had as many as 100,000 followers. It generated enormous political influence in Black America under the direction of Malcolm X, but much of this influence was destroyed after allegations that Muhammad was having multiple adulterous affairs and that the NOI was corrupt. Following a very public split with Malcolm X, the NOI was implicated in his murder. Muhammad led the NOI until his death in 1975.⁹

As C. Eric Lincoln's seminal text The Black Muslims in America details, the NOI's ideology was influenced by two earlier Black Nationalist organizations. Both

⁹ See Evanzz, Karl. The Messenger—The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

groups date back to the volatile period after World War I, when Black soldiers returned home from combat to a revived Ku Klux-Klan, increased public lynchings, and widespread race riots. The Moorish Science Temple movement was founded by a southern Black man named Timothy Drew, also known as Noble Drew Ali or “The Prophet,” in Newark, New Jersey in 1913. The Moorish movement spread across America, growing to as many thirty thousand members. Drew claimed that Blacks were Asiatic peoples, or Moors, and he issued membership cards to his followers that were imprinted with the Islamic star and crescent symbol and the number seven.¹⁰ The Moors believed that the white race would soon be destroyed and that the Asiatics would gain control. Drew’s followers considered themselves Muslims, and they studied a text called the Holy Koran, which represented Drew’s interpretations of the Islamic Qur’an. The Moors adhered to strict moral codes and advocated a chauvinistic ideal of family life. The movement eventually deteriorated after Drew was mysteriously murdered.

West Indian Marcus Garvey’s international, New York-based Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) is another organization that influenced the NOI. The goals of UNIA were to unite all those of African ancestry, to promote racial pride, education, and self-determination, and to eventually establish an independent state in Africa for American Blacks. The movement published a newspaper, held conferences, agitated for political and judicial rights, and ran grocery stores, laundries, restaurants, and hotels. In early 1922, Garvey was convicted of mail fraud following political pressure from France and England (who wanted to stop Garvey’s movement from spreading to Africa), elements in the American government (who viewed him as a seditious radical),

¹⁰ Interestingly, this image of Islam’s star and crescent, accompanied by the number 7, has been adopted as the symbol for the Nation of Gods and Earths, which are a splinter group from the NOI that will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.

and the Black bourgeoisie (who felt that Garvey aggravated racial tensions and misrepresented Blacks). Garvey served two years in prison and was then deported to Jamaica. The organization fell apart after his departure.

While the NOI appropriated many of the beliefs that were advanced by the Moors and the Garveyites, it also significantly deviated from these earlier sects. Under the leadership of W.D. Fard, and later Elijah Muhammad, the NOI adopted the Moorish Science belief that the white race would be destroyed in a coming Apocalypse. In a new twist, they also taught that the white man was the “devil,” or the personification of evil, that had robbed the Black man of his freedom, his moral development, and his God.¹¹ The Black man, in contrast, was the “Original Man,” the primogenitor of all races and the rightful owner of the earth. The NOI’s followers believed Fard to be Allah. For the NOI, the concept of Allah has, as Lincoln has noted, broad implications. He explains:

Allah is not, however, a godhead complete in himself. All black men represent Allah, or at least participate in him, for all black men are divine...Allah is a black man, not a spirit or “spook.” He is the Supreme Being among a mighty nation of divine black men. (75)

Muhammad was believed to be Allah’s messenger, chosen to uplift the Black man with Islam.

As with the Moors, the NOI encouraged self-reliance, advocated high moral standards, and instilled Black pride. Black Muslims were encouraged to abstain from consuming pork and junk food, overeating, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, smoking cigarettes, fornicating outside of marriage, and having interracial relationships of any kind. NOI services were based on the Qur’an and the Bible, and followers observed the

¹¹ See Lincoln, C. Eric. The Black Muslims in America. U.S.A.: Beacon Press, 1961, 1973, p. 69.

traditional Muslim prayer ritual. NOI members discarded their last names, which they viewed as slave names, and took the letter X to signify their unknown ancestry. They were expected to maintain full-time work, to submit to white authority in the workplace, and not to start trouble with the white community. However, if they were attacked, they were encouraged to aggressively defend themselves, their families, and the Muslim community. Similar to the UNIA, the NOI advanced a vocal public critique of white America. And, like Booker T. Washington, the NOI supported racial segregation and Black economic self-sufficiency. Politically, the NOI's ten-point program called for freedom, legal justice, equal opportunity, a separate state for Blacks, clemency for Islamic prisoners, an end to police brutality and mob attacks, no taxation as long as Blacks were deprived of justice, equal education, and no interracial marriage.

At its peak (1960-1975), the NOI constituted a mass movement that drew thousands of followers, established temples in major cities across America, founded schools, accumulated capital and real estate, and ran restaurants, grocery stores, factories, and farms. The controversial history of the NOI is well known, including its heavy infiltration by the FBI's infamous COINTELPRO initiative.

After Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, his son Wallace D. Muhammad took over leadership of the NOI and promptly steered it away from racialized interpretations of Islam. He departed from the particularist tradition of the NOI by aligning it with Arab leaders, especially the Saudi family, and with Sunni Islam practices. He renamed the organization the World Community of al-Islam in the West. Muhammad denounced former NOI teachings and embraced U.S. patriotism. This position cost him the support of many NOI ministers. Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that Muhammad was

working closely with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) during this period. Many point to Muhammad's acceptance of a million dollar contract to package food for the U.S. military as a sign of cooperation with the FBI.¹²

Minister Louis Farrakhan was one of the dissenting ministers, and he left Wallace Muhammad in 1978 to establish a new NOI, which was modeled after Elijah Muhammad's teachings and which continues to be a strong religious and political influence in Black America. Farrakhan has consistently been charged with being racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic. While the current NOI's ideology maintains the messianic stream of thought that dominated Muhammad's teachings, it has very recently abandoned the segregationist approach. Farrakhan has actively participated in interracial and interfaith conferences and demonstrations, and has employed the rhetoric of universalism to call for social justice and peace. Toward the turn of the century, Wallace Muhammad and Farrakhan were able to resolve some of their differences. The Million Man March on October 16, 1995, followed by Farrakhan's 20-nation "World Friendship Tour," are his most well known achievements to date. As mentioned earlier, this demonstration emphasized the need for personal responsibility, and failed to address the crisis in American domestic policy that has created widespread unemployment, imprisonment, violence, and poverty in the Black community.

The current generation of Black youth is less influenced by the NOI than the baby boomer generation. This waning influence is reflected in rap music. Despite the NOI's visibility in American politics, the participation of rappers in the organization is limited

¹² See Curtis, Edward E. Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islam. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, p. 116.

to Ice Cube, Public Enemy, and Paris.¹³ In terms of orthodox Islam, several rappers, including Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest and Mos Def, are Sunni Muslims.

But by far the biggest Islamic influence on rappers is a NOI offshoot group called The Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE), popularly known as the Five Percenters. The sect received little attention until very recently, when the news media discovered that sniper suspect John Allen Mohammad and Taliban recruit John Walker Lindh counted NGE rappers among their political influences.¹⁴ Previously, the NGE had so escaped the radar of music critics and scholars that Russell Simmons was prompted to note in his autobiography:

Just like Hollywood has not been given its due in the history of hip-hop, I feel another smaller but more important influence has been overlooked—the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths...Slick, smooth-talking, crafty niggas gravitated to it because the membership was built on the ability of its members to articulate their devotion to a strict set of beliefs with as much flair as possible. A true Five Percenter could sit on a stoop or stand on a street corner and explain the tenants of the sect for hours—and be totally entertaining!... Listen to rappers from Brooklyn or the Queensbridge projects, like Nas, and you hear Five Percent-speak all in their rhymes. (38-39)

The Nation of Gods and Earths was formed by Clarence 13X, who was a member of Temple No. 7 in Harlem under Malcolm X, a lieutenant in the Fruit of Islam (the military wing of the NOI), and a youth minister. Clarence was expelled from the Nation of Islam in 1963 for teaching that the Black man collectively was God, rather than W.D.

¹³ For a thorough discussion of Public Enemy's espousal of NOI teachings, see William Eric. "Nation of Islam Ideology in the Rap of Public Enemy," *Black Sacred Music*, Vol.5, No.1, Spring 1991, pgs. 41-50.

¹⁴ See Aidi, Hisham. "Jihads in the Hood—Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror." *Middle East Report* 224, Fall 2002 and Swedenburg, Ted. "Snipers and the Panic Over Five Percent Islamic Hip-Hop," *Middle East Report*, November 10, 2002. For specific press coverage see Goldblatt, Mark. "Hip-Hop's Grim Undertones," *USA Today*, October 29, 2002, and Morano, Marc. "Homegrown Terrorists Incubate Behind Bars," *CNSNews.com*, November 14, 2002, and Rossi, C.T. "The Snipers: Do Islam and Hip-Hop Make a Deadly Mix?" *Free Congress Foundation*, November 8, 2002.

Fard being the Supreme Being. Following his 1964 split with the NOI, Clarence changed his name to Allah and preached on the streets of Harlem. He attracted many followers, until he was gunned down by unknown assailants in 1969. Since the late 1960's, the NGE has become a powerful force in African-American youth culture.

The NGE follows Clarence/Allah's teachings that humanity can be divided into three categories: 85% of people are ignorant, 10% of people have knowledge and use it to oppress the 85%, and 5% are the 'poor righteous teachers,' whose mission it is to liberate the 85%. Clarence/Allah's teachings combine mathematics, science, and numerology, and are heavily influenced by messianic streams of thought. According to many sources, Clarence/Allah taught that the Black man was God and the white man was the devil. This belief has carried into the present and has led to negative criticism of the NGE, from orthodox Muslims (who accuse the NGE of "shirk," the Arabic word meaning polytheism)¹⁵ and from non-Muslims (who accuse the NGE of racism). However, as anthropologist Ted Swedenburg points out, "the Nation's beliefs about black gods are more usefully understood not as a deviation from mainstream Islam but as a kind of heretical critique of white supremacy and of hegemonic Christian images of Jesus, the son of God, that depict him as a white man."¹⁶ He adds that

Nation beliefs in black man's divinity are about self-realization of the divine capacity within. Divinity is not about exerting control over others but about self-control. Being a God in the belief system of the Nation means adopting positive behaviors and giving up negative behaviors. One of the negative behaviors to be abandoned is violence—which is destructive of self and community.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Swedenburg, Ted. "Snipers and the Panic Over Five Percent Islamic Hip-Hop," *Middle East Report*, November 10, 2002.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The belief that whites are devils is not as easily explained. It is a sentiment that is repeated often in NGE rap music, but one that is rarely specifically defined. It appears to be an abstract concept, less a call to race war than a feeling along the lines of Malcolm X's post-Mecca position: "the white man is *not* inherently evil, but America's racist society influences him to act evilly"(Haley 378). NGE literature supports this interpretation; their website claims that the group is not "anti-white or pro-Black" but "anti-devilishment and pro-righteousness."¹⁸

The NGE defines Islam as a way of life, not a religion.¹⁹ This way of life emphasizes the importance of education—specifically Black history, science and mathematics. Adherents strive to obtain knowledge of self; an understanding of Black people's historic oppression and their mission to uplift humanity. The NGE community values critical thinking, nurturing the Black family as "the vital building block of the nation," and the pursuit of national consciousness, community control, and peace. A good number of mainstream rappers subscribe to NGE ideology or are influenced by it, including Busta Rhymes, Nas, Rakim, Boot Camp Clique, Brand Nubian, Pete Rock, C.L. Smooth, Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu, Guru from Gang Starr, Black Thought of The Roots, the Wu-Tang Clan, Mobb Deep, Sunz of Man, Buck Shot of Black Moon, Capone, Noriega, AZ, and J-Live.

NGE ideology is expressed through complex coded language, and both Swedenburg and Aidi have discussed this practice at length. The coding system refers to men as Gods, women as Earths, and mothers as Old Earths. There are numerous examples of this throughout rap. Nas, for instance, extensively uses the term God to refer

¹⁸ From the Five Percenter web site: <http://metalab.unc.edu/ngel/>, January 16, 2003.

¹⁹ See "Why We Are Not Muslims," <http://metalab.unc.edu/ngel/>, January 16, 2003.

to himself and other Black men. In the intro to the track “Smokin’,” he begins the song by giving a “shout-out,” or an acknowledgment, to the men and women in the audience: “to the Gods, to the Earths.”²⁰ J-Live also employs the terminology in the intro to his album *All of the Above*, saying “Peace! Ladies and gentlemen, Gods and Earths, brothers and sisters, Kings and Queens...”²¹ Busta Rhymes just released a song titled “Struttin’ Like a G.O.D.,” which is a tribute to Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Louis Farrakhan, and other Black male leaders.²² In “Robin Hood Theory,” Guru from Gang Starr identifies himself as a God that is “militant” and always “ready for war.”²³

NGE followers see Brooklyn as Medina,²⁴ Queens as the desert, and Manhattan (especially Harlem) as Mecca.²⁵ For instance, in an autobiographical track titled “Charmed Life,” J-Live refers to his geographical journey from his childhood home in Harlem, to college in Albany, to his present home in Brooklyn: “I went from Mecca to Albany, a student, and landed in Medina as a teacher.”²⁶ In the introduction track to the album *Stillmatic*, Nas speaks of the streets of his Queens neighborhood as a desert: “I know the streets thirst water like Moses/Walking through the hot desert searching to be free.”²⁷

Five Percenters also refer to racist whites as “devils” and racist propaganda as “tricknology,” terms that originate with the NOI. Black Thought of the Roots claims his

²⁰ The track “Smokin’” is from the album *Stillmatic*, Columbia Records, 2001.

²¹ From the intro to *All of the Above*, Coup D’Etat Records, 2002.

²² From the album *It Ain’t Safe No More*, J Records, 2003.

²³ From the Gang Starr album *Moment of Truth*, Virgin Records, 1998.

²⁴ Medina is a Saudi Arabian city north of Mecca containing The Mosque of the Prophet, which holds Muhammad’s tomb and is a holy site for Muslim pilgrims.

²⁵ Mecca is a Saudi Arabian city that was the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and is the holiest city of Islam. It is a pilgrimage site for all devout believers of the faith. This observation is from Aidi, Hisham.

“Jihads in the Hood—Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror.” *Middle East Report* 224, Fall 2002.

²⁶ From the intro to *All of the Above*, Coup D’Etat Records, 2002.

²⁷ From the intro to *Stillmatic*, Columbia Records, 2001.

message comes “with no apology, fraud or tricknology.”²⁸ In “Robin Hood Theory,” after an intro that features Minister Elijah Shabazz from the NOI’s Temple No. 7 in Harlem, Guru raps: “Necessary by all means, sort of like Malcolm/Before its too late, I create the best outcome/So I take this opportunity/To ruin the devilish forces fuckin’ up my Black community.”²⁹ In the song “Mumia 911,” from the *Unbound* tribute record for political prisoner Mumia Abu Jamal, Black Thought’s verse refers to white America as “this nation of savages [that has] been trying to kill us for years.”³⁰ In “Satisfied,” J-Live refers to the crackdown on civil liberties post-9-11 as “serious biz [business]”, and to the U.S. government in particular as “devils”:

Man, fuck that shit, this is serious biz
By the time Bush is done you won’t know what time it is,
If it’s wartime or jail time, time for promises
And time to figure out who the enemy is
The same devils that you used to love to hate
They got you so gassed and shook now, you scared to debate³¹

Or, from Busta Rhymes:

Funny how you sit, and drink what you drink
Thinking the foulest shit and not even knowing why you think
How you think
Must be a reason why we aren’t aware
Because the devil know how guilty and filthy he is in all his affairs
Fuckin’ with my mind when I was a youngster
‘Cause he know if we knew the truth
We’d make his ass run from amongst us
That’s why we be thinkin’ that it’s better to ball³²
While the devil be sittin’ and watchin’, plottin’ how to murder us all³³

²⁸ From the track “Sacrifice,” from the Roots’ album *Phrenology*, MCA Records, 2002.

²⁹ From the Gang Starr album *Moment of Truth*, Virgin Records, 1998.

³⁰ From the tribute track “Mumia 911”, which featured Black Thought, Pharoh Monk, Chuck D, Dead Prez, and Last Emperor. From the benefit album titled *Unbound*, Ground Control Records, 2000.

³¹ From J-Live’s *All of the Above*, Coup D’Etat Records, 2002.

³² “Ball” is short slang for “baller,” which means a person who shows off newfound wealth. The term has connotations with criminality and pimping.

Or Nas: "It was packed on the Rikers³⁴ bus/The tight cuffs is holdin' me shackled/The life of a thug caught in the devil's lap."³⁵

NGE rhetoric has permeated hip-hop lingo as well as certain rapper's lyrics. The belief that black men are Gods appears to underlie the common hip-hop greeting "What's up, G?" Although the "G" has come to signify gangster, apparently it initially signified God.³⁶ In addition, the expression "word is bond," which means staying true to one's promises, began as an NGE slogan.

The cryptic language in NGE rap renders its message indecipherable to outsiders. As a result, until recently the majority of the music press had no comprehension of what ideology was being communicated.³⁷ In a recent interview, J-Live, a Brooklyn rapper and an active member of the NGE, clarified some of the group's beliefs. Being a Five Percenter "means that I'm not specifically religious," he said. "To be religious means to subscribe to some kind of theology, or faith in a higher power. We teach that man is God, so it's slightly different. We teach Islam as a culture rather than a religion."³⁸ He

³³ From the track "The Struggle Will Be Lost," from Busta Rhymes latest album *It Ain't Safe No More*, J Records, 2003.

³⁴ Rikers Island is North America's largest penal colony. It is located in the waters above Queens in New York City, and holds up to 15,000 prisoners at a time, most of whom are awaiting court dates.

³⁵ From the song "My Country," from *Stillmatic*, Columbia Records, 2001.

³⁶ See Swedenburg, Ted. "Islam in the Mix: Lessons of the Five Percent." Presented at the Anthropology Colloquium, University of Arkansas, February 19, 1997.

³⁷ The NGE's program is articulated on an easily accessible website (<http://metalab.unc.edu/ngel/>), and includes the following, under the heading "What We Teach": 1) That black people are the original people of the planet earth. 2) That black people are the mothers and fathers of civilization. 3) That the science of Supreme Mathematics is the key to understanding man's relationship to the universe. 4) Islam is a natural way of life, not a religion. 5) That education should be fashioned to enable us to be a self sufficient as a people. 6) That each one should teach one according to their knowledge. 7) That the Blackman is god and his proper name is ALLAH. Arm Leg Leg Arm Head. 8) That our children are our link to the future and they must be nurtured, respected, love, protected, and educated. 9) That the unified black family is the vital building block of the nation. From: Nation of Gods and Earths website: <http://metalab.unc.edu/ngel/>, January 16, 2003.

³⁸ From an interview with the author, January 25, 2002 in Brooklyn, NY. Part of the interview was published in a *Georgia Straight* article titled "A New Game," March 6, 2002.

continued: “It is important to study the Bible and the Qur’an and the Tao, wherever history takes you. But take these things with a grain of salt. Take them for what they are. They are pieces of literature; they are not necessarily something to base an entire world-view on.” On the subject of the state of America, he said:

People ask: “Are you a patriot? Do you love this country? How do you feel about America?” This is my home. As a Five Percenter, as a member of the Nation of Gods and Earths, that nation was started in America. As a lover of hip-hop, this music—like jazz and rock—was started in America. So it’s not necessarily about being a patriot. It’s about being a critical thinker and understanding that to love your country is to want what’s best for your country. And what’s best for your country is not always to get up in arms and waving flags when you don’t know the whole story and you don’t necessarily have the same agenda as the people in charge.

Without direct explanation from NGE members, the Five Percenter belief system remains mysterious, except to those involved in hip-hop culture.

But if the NGE rhetoric has escaped the identification of many mainstream critics and listeners, the overtly political message contained in NGE rap came across loud and clear. As Aidi states, “the language of Islam in the culture hip-hop does often express anger at government indifference and US foreign policy, and challenges structures of domination.”³⁹ NGE rappers tend to be extremely outspoken on the issues of race and class. This trend has only accelerated post-9-11. For instance, Nas’s late 2001 album *Stillmatic* represented one of the first efforts on the part of hip-hop to speak out against the War on Terror. The tracks “Rule” and “My Country” remain some of the most strident critiques of American foreign and domestic policy to date. In “Rule,” Nas puts forward an anti-war stance with the lines:

³⁹ See Aidi, Hisham. “Jihads in the Hood—Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror.” *Middle East Report* 224, Fall 2002.

No war—we should take time and think
The bombs and tanks makes mankind extinct
But since the beginning of time it's been men with arms fightin'
Lost lives in the Towers and Pentagon
Why then must it go on?
We must stop the killin'
Tell me why we die, we all God's children ⁴⁰

Nas follows this stance on foreign policy with an attack on domestic policy: “Look at what this country's got/There shouldn't be nobody homeless/How can the president fix other problems when he ain't fixed home yet?”⁴¹ Criticisms like this tend to attract media attention, particularly in the era of the draconian Patriot Act.⁴²

This form of overt political criticism, combined with the media attention that has focused on Islamic influence in hip-hop following the dubious reports that linked in John Walker Lindh and John Allan Mohammed to Islamic sects within America, and to NGE-influenced rap in particular, has dramatically increased the visibility of the NGE.

The mainstream press has predictably responded with hysterical warnings of a “fifth column,” a subversive network within the country that supports the enemy. For instance, Mark Goldblatt’s op-ed piece in *US Today* “Hip-hop’s Grim Undertones” characterizes the NGE as a “virulently racist black group.” Goldblatt admits that what he finds “unnerving” about NGE rappers like Busta Rhymes, Nas, and Rakim “is that these acts are not only among the most critically acclaimed hip-hop stars, but they are acclaimed precisely because they’re considered the most politically sophisticated rappers.” Some press articles are even more alarmist. Christian evangelical Chuck

⁴⁰ From the song “Rule,” from *Stillmatic*, Columbia Records, 2001.

⁴¹ From the song “Rule,” from *Stillmatic*, Columbia Records, 2001.

⁴² The Patriot Act was passed by congress October 25 , 2001, to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, and to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools. The act includes tighter border and immigration control, and dramatically enhanced surveillance and data (on wire, oral, and electronic communications) collection privileges for local and federal law enforcement.

Colson wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* article that “alienated, disenfranchised people are prime targets for radical Islamists who preach a religion of violence, of overcoming oppression by jihad.”⁴³ Media commentator Daniel Pipes warns: “black converts [to Islam] tend to adopt anti-American and extremist views. Those in the NGE become black nationalists, pumped up with incendiary anti-white rhetoric”(231). This position is both exaggerated and profoundly unproductive, and it is a part of a broader picture of extreme anti-Islamic sentiment.

The consensus among Western media, government, and academic ‘experts’ lumps the entire Islamic world into the categories ‘good Muslims’ and ‘bad Muslims,’ and pits the ‘bad Muslims’ against the West. Daniel Pipes epitomizes this treatment of Islam in his latest book Militant Islam Reaches America. Pipes—who is the director of the Philadelphia-based Middle East Forum, a columnist for the *New York Post* and *The Jerusalem Post*, and a member of the U.S. Department of Defense’s Special Task Force on Terrorism Technology—takes great pains to characterize Islam as a peaceful religion practiced by 2-3 million American citizens. Militant Islam, he asserts, is what poses a grave threat to American society. Having made this careful distinction, Pipes continues to advance his alarmist agenda. He contends that immigrant Muslims have invaded American society, demanding changes to Western values, beliefs, and lifestyle, and complaining endlessly about discrimination. Pipes claims that militant Islamists dominate nearly all American Muslim organizations, as well as a “large and perhaps growing majority of mosques, weekly newspapers, and communal organizations,” and that these militant Muslims seek to transform the United States into an Islamic state (207).

⁴³ See Colson, Chuck. “Evangelizing for Evil in Our Prisons,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2002. Quoted in Aidi, Hisham. “Jihads in the Hood—Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror.” *Middle East Report* 224, Fall 2002.

Pipes also warns of “sleepers,” which he defines by referring to a speech from George W. Bush that claims: “Thousands of dangerous killers, schooled in the methods of murder, often supported by outlaw regimes, are now spread throughout the world like ticking time bombs, set to go off without warning” (145). Pipes argues that the liberal tolerance that Americans have for other races and religions (a highly contestable idea in and of itself) has rendered law enforcement officials incapable of effectively monitoring domestic terrorist activity. He advocates curtailing civil liberties, allowing racial profiling at airports, giving law enforcement increased powers of surveillance, and encouraging citizen vigilantism.

Pipes even goes as far as to accuse the American government of promoting Islam.

He writes:

Finally, federal officials may not realize the implications of their scolding Americans who are apprehensive about Islam, and their noisy espousal of that religion’s virtues. Here, then, it is spelled out for them: In adopting a determinedly apologetic stance, they have made themselves an adjunct to the country’s Islamic organizations. By dismissing any connection between Islam and terrorism, complaining about media distortions, and claiming that America needs Islam, they have turned the U.S. government into a discrete missionary for the faith. (102)

This argument is hardly convincing; it completely ignores the gap between rhetoric and policy. The American government can make as many pleasant speeches about Islam as it likes—the facts remain that it has bombed two Muslim countries in two years, maintained severe sanctions on Iraq for eleven years, and continues to support Israel’s brutal and illegal occupation of Palestine. Bush’s escalating references to other “Axis of Evil” offenders such as Iran reveal that this trend of military aggression in the Middle East is not likely to end anytime soon.

According to other sources of anti-Islamic propaganda, 9-11 represents the dramatic embodiment of a long-running struggle between Islamic fundamentalism and the democratic, capitalist, liberal West. This camp of pundits maintain that current global tensions cannot be understood by examining the concrete grievances that communities in the Middle East have with Western governments. Instead, the prevailing 'experts' insist that we must view such conflicts a 'clash of civilizations' that dates back to obscure, centuries-old, deep-rooted, un-resolvable resentments. Mid East expert Bernard Lewis represents a classic example of this line of thinking. He believes that the West is "facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them."⁴⁴ Lewis contends that "this is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both."

This view is logically flawed and politically motivated, and it has been refuted at length, most notably by Noam Chomsky, who points out that:

It is convenient for Western intellectuals to speak of 'deeper causes' such as hatred of Western values and progress. This is a useful way to avoid questions about the origin of the bin Ladin network itself, and about the practices that lead to anger, fear, and desperation throughout the region.
(77-78)

Such practices include the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, which is home to the majority of the Islamic holy sites, the U.S. support of Israel's occupation of Palestinian

⁴⁴ See Lewis, Bernard. "The Roots of Muslim Rage—Why So Many Muslims Deeply Resent the West, and Why Their Bitterness Will Not Easily Be Mollified." *The Atlantic*, September 1990. For further discussion, see Lewis, Bernard. Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror. New York: Modern Library, 2003, and Lewis, Bernard. What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle East Response. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

land, and the U.S. sanctions against Iraq that resulted in over a million deaths in the last ten years. Notably, even bin Laden cites these three specific grievances.

Despite dissenting voices such as Chomsky's, anti-Islamic propaganda continues to be a powerful force, creating a volatile set of tensions within American culture. On the one hand, the media, experts, and government pump out hysterical warnings of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, fueling public fear and perpetuating racist perspectives on Islam. On the other hand, the influence of Islam in communities throughout America is growing exponentially. Hip-hop culture—through its broad cultural influence, its ties to the NGE (and, to a lesser extent, the NOI and orthodox Islamic groups) and its outspoken critique of American foreign and domestic policy—is a powerful nexus for these colliding tensions.

This raises numerous questions that will surely play out on America's cultural stage in the coming years. How does the increased presence of Islam among oppressed minorities work to counter blind U.S. patriotism and the prevalent fear of Islamic fundamentalists? How do American youth—both urban and suburban, white and of color—respond to the Islamic teachings that are espoused by their rap heroes? What potential does this music have to foster political awareness and/or political action as the U.S. continues to launch wars of global domination?

CHAPTER FOUR

BITCHES AND SISTAS¹—SEXUAL POLITICS IN DA CLUB²

To white dominated mass media, the controversy over gangsta rap makes great spectacle. Besides the exploitation of these issues to attract audiences, a central motivation for highlighting gangsta rap continues to be the sensationalist drama of demonizing black youth culture and the contributions of young black men in particular. It is a contemporary remake of *Birth of a Nation*³ only this time we are encouraged to believe it is not just vulnerable white womanhood that risks destruction by black hands but everyone. When I counter this demonization of black males by insisting that gangsta rap does not appear in a cultural vacuum, but, rather, is expressive of cultural crossing, mixings, and engagement of black youth culture with the values, attitudes, and concerns of the white majority, some folks stop listening.

- bell hooks⁴

No study of the rap's political positions would be complete without a chapter addressing the role of sexism in hip-hop culture. Much has been made of rap's misogyny, particularly in the press, and with good reason. However, while sexism and violence against women are disturbing elements in hip-hop culture (and American culture as a whole) that must be confronted, a feminist critique of rap music presents a unique set of challenges.

¹ "Bitches and Sistas" is the title of a Jay-Z song from *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse*, Roc-a-fella/Def Jam, 2002.

² "In Da Club" is the name of a 50 Cent track from *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, Shady/Aftermath/Interscope, 2003.

³ *The Birth of a Nation* is a film that was released in 1915 that is renowned for its racism. The white actors appeared in black face, threatening, stealing from, and raping Southern whites.

⁴ See hooks, bell. "Sexism and Misogyny: Who Takes the Rap?" *Z Magazine*, February 1994, pgs. 26-29.

Historically, the feminist movement—and the American feminist movement in particular—has been constituted of middle and upper class white women, and has tended to be underscored by racism and bourgeois elitism.⁵ In Women, Race and Class, feminist scholar Angela Davis details this deplorable tradition. She notes that although the women’s rights movement grew out of the abolitionist movement, it steered toward a racist stance the moment its immediate goals were threatened by competing movements for social change. When the issue of Black male suffrage began to encroach on the progress of white female suffrage, first wave feminists—including famous leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony—agitated for the white female vote over the Black male vote. Further, they employed blatantly racist rhetoric to appeal to white men and to Southern white women for support. Stanton, for instance, argued:

When Mr. Downing puts the question to me: are you willing to have the colored man enfranchised before the women, I say no; I would not trust him with my rights; degraded, oppressed himself, he would be more despotic than ever our Saxon rulers are. If women are still to be represented by men, then I say let only the highest type of manhood stand at the helm of the State. (85)

In another speech, Stanton went even further, warning that advocating Black male suffrage ahead of white female suffrage would effectively “create an antagonism between black men and all women that [would] culminate in fearful outrages on womanhood, especially in the Southern States”(76).⁶ This line of argument—clearly designed to

⁵ I first encountered this argument in Delany, Sheila. Writing Woman. New York: Schocken Books, 1983. I am grateful to her for direction on the question of feminism and social change. Through both her writings and conversation, she has shaped my views on the feminist movement and its limitations.

⁶ Davis is quoting Flexner, Eleanor. Century of Struggle: The Women’s Rights Movement in the U.S. New York: Atheneum, 1973, who is quoting Stanton.

demonize Black men and to instill fear in white women—is especially repugnant considering the period in which the debate took place.

The suffrage debate began during the decades following the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, which were particularly racially volatile. Between 1865 and 1895, approximately ten thousand Black men were lynched, many of them under the pretense of avenging the rape of white women (Davis 184).⁷ Many Black leaders of the time argued that Black men needed to gain political power in order to ensure their very survival. Black activist Frederick Douglass, for instance, made a powerful and convincing argument for Black male suffrage to take precedence over white female suffrage:

When women, because they are women, are dragged from their homes and hung on lamp-posts; when their children are torn from their arms and their brains dashed upon the pavement; when they are objects of outrage and insult at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have [the same] urgency to obtain the ballot.
(Davis 82)

Unfortunately, white feminist leaders were unable to recognize the urgency of bringing Black men into the political process. Instead of supporting this as a gain for human rights, they perceived it as a threat to white women's interests and retaliated with racist attacks. In addition, as has often been observed by Black feminists, by allowing the debate to center on the rights of white women versus those of Black men, white feminists ignored the plight of Black women, who were doubly oppressed by the forces of white supremacy and patriarchy. By insisting that the white female vote was a priority, early feminists demonstrated that their actual aim was not to unite women and men against sexism and

⁷ Davis is referring to statistics from an anti-lynching pamphlet compiled by anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells.

racism, but rather to facilitate white women's quest to share the power and privilege that capitalism and imperialism had conferred on white men. This is the shameful legacy that white feminists must confront if they are to forge a progressive movement that unites people across gender, class, race, and embraces other social justice movements as necessary elements of the struggle to transform a society dominated by sexism, racism, and capitalist exploitation.

In Ain't I a Woman, bell hooks also chronicles the widespread racism that poisoned the feminist movement. Hooks roots her analysis of the relationship between Black women and feminism in the experience of slavery, charging that white feminists have been unwilling to address this historical relationship. As hooks explains, "white racial imperialism granted all white women, however victimized by sexist oppression they might be, the right to assume the role of oppressor in relationship to black women and black men"(123). During slavery, white women physically abused, harassed, and degraded Black female slaves; they also overlooked the physical and sexual abuse that their husbands and sons inflicted on Black women. When white women did respond to the white men who flaunted their sexual possession of Black female slaves, they often held Black women responsible—thus perpetuating the prevalent myth that Black women were sexually deprived and immoral—and punished them accordingly.⁸ White women took on the role of the oppressor in the domestic sphere during slavery, allowing racial identification to take precedence over female solidarity.

Hooks believes that this constitutes a betrayal of the trust of Black women, and that this betrayal has been repeated throughout the history of the women's rights movement. Following slavery, racism continued to contaminate contact between white

⁸ See hooks, bell. Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism. Boston: South End Press, 1981.

and Black women in the areas of work, social clubs, and political struggle. For example, when Black women entered the labor force in large numbers during World War I, white women refused to work alongside Black women. They feared that their virtue would be contaminated by contact with so-called “loose” women, and demanded segregated work spaces, washrooms, changing rooms, and rest areas. Both the club movement and women’s rights organizations were largely segregated, and Black female activists like Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and Josephine Ruffage were for the most part unable to speak, march, and organize alongside of their white counterparts—let alone assume leadership roles.⁹

Carrying on into the second wave, which began in the early 1960s, feminism continued to be decidedly white and middle-class; white feminists continued to deny the special oppression that Black women suffer in a racist, sexist, capitalist society. Second wave feminist struggles often focused on issues that excluded Black women. The campaign to obtain reproductive rights, for instance, alienated some women (and men) of color by agitating for abortion rights while simultaneously ignoring the threat of enforced sterilization that dogged America’s ethnic communities.¹⁰ In addition, the anti-rape movement excluded many Black women (and men) by perpetuating the myth of the Black male rapist and refusing to acknowledge how this myth had been used to harass, imprison, and execute thousands of innocent Black men.¹¹ As well, white feminist academics have been notoriously slow to recognize, document, study, and teach the contributions of Black female activists, past and present.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See Davis, Angela. Women, Race and Class. New York: Random House, 1981.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Moving into the third wave, which began in the 1990s and continues at present, contemporary Black feminists point out the presence of racism in the women's movement. Joan Morgan, for instance, describes her experiences with feminism in When Chickenheads¹² Come Home to Roost—My Life As a Hip-Hop Feminist:

The spirit of these women [Black women activists] were nowhere to be found in the feminism I discovered in college. Feminists on our New England campus came in two flavors—both variations of vanilla. The most visible were the braless, butch-cut, anti-babes, who seemed to think that the solution to sexism was reviling all things male (except, oddly enough, their clothing and mannerisms) and sleeping with each other. They used made up words like “womyn,” “femynists,” and threw mad shade if you asked them directions to the “Ladies’ Room.” The others—straight and more femme—were all for the liberation of women as long as it did not infringe on their sense of entitlement. They felt their men should *share* the power to oppress. They were the spiritual descendents of the early suffragettes and absolutely not to be trusted. (35)

Morgan's comments draw attention to the historical continuum of racism and bourgeois elitism that has tainted the feminist movement, and that continues to limit its ability to forge an inclusive movement for social change.

Given this pattern, it should come as no surprise that feminists in the white liberal feminist tradition have been blatantly racist in their critique of rap music. Indeed, these feminists have often been on the front lines of the effort to demonize and censor rap artists. The battle over rap, and gangsta rap in particular, exploded in the media during the early nineties, not coincidentally at the exact moment that rap record sales skyrocketed, making it clear that hip-hop's cultural influence had crossed over from the ghetto to white suburbia. The FBI and numerous police detachments protested against

¹² “Chickenhead” is a hip-hop term that defines women who use their sexuality to gain access to men's money, power, and prestige.

Time Warner for releasing an Ice-T album that contained the song “Cop Killer.” Time Warner caved to pressure and removed the song from Ice-T’s album and eventually dropped him from the label. The group N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitudes) were repeatedly harassed by police when they tried to perform their hit “Fuck tha Police,” Bill Clinton publicly attacked activist and rapper Sista Souljah, and the rap duo 2 Live Crew were charged with obscenity for performing sexual lyrics in a Florida club. Finally, in February of 1994, Representative Cardiss Collins (Democrat-Illinois) and Senator Carol Mosely-Braun (Democrat-Illinois) initiated Congressional hearings on gangsta rap and the effects of “violent and demeaning music lyrics’s on our nation’s youth.”¹³ The moral panic that ensued was framed as a debate over American values that rejected sexism, racism, and violence. In actuality, it was a struggle to silence Black artists in order to maintain the status quo of a sexist, racist, capitalist society.

It was during this time that that pseudo-feminist Tipper Gore, wife of former Vice President Al Gore, launched a campaign against the rap music industry and established her lobby organization, the Parent’s Music Resource Center. She advocated the censorship of rap lyrics on the basis that they promoted hate to American children. She articulated this position in a 1990 op-ed piece for *The Washington Post* that epitomized the corrupt strain of feminism that has continually resurfaced throughout American history.

Gore’s article is tellingly titled “Hate, Rape, and Rap,” a headline that immediately calls forth the specter of the Black rapist and conflates rap music with Black male sexual aggression against white women.¹⁴ The myth of the Black rapist has been

¹³ See Kitwana, Bakari. *The Rap on Gangsta Rap*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1994, pg. 6.

¹⁴ Spencer, Jon Michael. “Rhapsody in Black: Utopian Aspirations” *Theology Today*, January 1992.

discussed at length by Angela Davis. As has already been mentioned, the practice of lynching emerged following the abolition of slavery. Given the barbaric nature of such murders, an ideological justification was required to explain the practice in the context of Christian society. The myth of the Black rapist entered as a powerful justification. As Davis explains, “In a society where male supremacy is all-pervasive, men who were motivated by their duty to defend their women could be excused of any excesses they might commit”(187). In reality, however, Black men had never raped white women in any significant numbers. In fact, during the Civil War—in which many Black male slaves were left alone with Southern white women as white husbands joined the battle—not a single Black man was publicly accused of rape (Davis 184).

Instead, it had been white men who had systematically raped and abused Black women both during and after slavery. Conveniently, the myth of the Black rapist was also used to sanction continued sexual violence against Black women, for, as Davis contends, “the mythical rapist implies the mythical whore”(191). In her critique of racism in the anti-rape movement, Davis explains that:

[white feminists’] historical myopia further prevents them from comprehending that the portrayal of Black men as rapists reinforces racism’s open invitation to white men to avail themselves sexually of Black women’s bodies. The fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous. For once the notion is accepted that Black men harbor irresistible and animal-like sexual urges, the entire race is invested with bestiality. If Black men have their eyes on white women as sexual objects, then Black women must certainly welcome the sexual attentions of white men. Viewed as “loose women” and whores, Black women’s cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy. (182)

Tipper Gore—whose essay was penned following an airing of the Oprah Winfrey show, in which Gore, Ice-T, and others debated the dangers of rap—ignores this history when she associates rape with rap music.

Ostensibly, Gore's stance is that rap music will negatively influence children by perpetuating racist and sexist ideology. She argues for the protection of American children, and subsequently American society as a whole, through the censorship of rap music. She acknowledges that rap employs culturally specific slang and a culturally distinct sense of humor. However, she questions, "Will our kids get the joke?" By advancing this position, she mines a historical reservoir of hatred and fear. When she calls for the protection of American children, who may misinterpret the slang and humor in rap music, she is really calling for the protection of *white* children. Clearly, young Blacks are not in danger of misinterpreting cultural tropes that originate in their own communities. This is confirmed by the presence of Black women in the audience of the Oprah Show, who protest Gore's reductive reading of rap and insist that they are comfortable with its language—both for themselves and for their children.

More to the point, Gore asks: "Do we want our daughters to think of themselves as 'bitches' to be abused?" By emphasizing the vulnerability of daughters (read: *white* daughters) to "abuse," Gore constructs a crisis in which white womanhood is threatened by rap, and by extension Black male sexual aggression. Gore implies that daughters are in jeopardy exactly to the extent that Black male slang is allowed to penetrate the minds of young white women—a hysterical claim if ever there was one.

Gore unsuccessfully deflects this racist logic by claiming to be concerned about racism, and weighing in on the infamous N-word debate. But here, her argument really

falls apart. She looks to Black Harvard psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, who maintains that “the wide-spread acceptance of such degrading and denigrating imagery may reflect low self-esteem among black men in today’s society.” This is an allusion to a commonly held belief about African-American men. According to this line of thinking—most famously articulated in the 1965 Moynihan Report¹⁵—the Black man has been emasculated by slavery, by his continued inability to support a family in a hostile economy, and by the Black woman’s success in the labor market and subsequent domineering role as “matriarch” in the home. This is extremely sexist, for, as hooks attests, “implicit in this assertion is the assumption that the worst that can happen to a man is that he be made to assume the social status of a woman”(Ain’t 20). As well, it is racist in that it blames Black women for the crisis in the Black community instead of historic oppression and institutionalized racism in the form of government policies that have systematically denied adequate education, housing, health care, and employment to African-Americans.

Following this claim of Black men’s “low-self esteem,” Gore goes on to assert that “there are few positive black role models for black children.” In contrast, Gore holds rappers up as negative influences and deplores Ice-T and the street ethos that he expresses in his music. “It is not the messenger that is so frightening,” she insists, but “the perpetuation—almost glorification—of the cruel and violent reality of his ‘streets’.” Significantly, there is no mention of what could have made these streets so cruel and violent; no discussion of widespread unemployment, cuts to social services, the War on Drugs, the influx of crack cocaine, the increasingly militarized policing of Black inner city communities, and the record levels of imprisonment of people of color—concrete

¹⁵ Moynihan, Daniel P. The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965.

policy decisions that Gore's husband, as Vice President of the United States, is absolutely implicated in.

In addition to demonizing Black men, Gore's argument contains a thinly veiled attack on Black women. The only mention of Black women in the article serves to ridicule and mock them. Gore points to several audience members on the Oprah Show in which these issues were debated; one group of young Black women maintained that they were not offended by Ice-T's lyrics in general, and by the epithet "bitch" in particular, and another young Black mother stated that she was not concerned about her son listening to Ice-T. Gore argues against these women, questioning their lack of concern about rap and implying they are negligent mothers and irresponsible members of the community.

But it is significant that the young Black mother refutes Gore's calls for censorship by drawing attention to Ice-T's financial success. In a country that offers limited options for employment options to people of color, and particularly working-class people of color, rap music has opened a whole new arena of opportunity. In many circles, it has been widely hailed as a victory for young Blacks, who have quite literally built a multi-billion dollar industry from nothing. In the realm of independent entrepreneurialism—a powerful trope for the current generation of African-Americans—Ice-T and rappers like him are positive role models.

But Gore denies this reality, and rejects the young mother's point about Ice-T's financial success with the moralistic position that "Ice-T's financial success cannot excuse the vileness of his message." She draws the analogy of Southern slaveholders profiting from slavery and of Germans profiting from Nazi ideology. Such analogies are

highly offensive. But besides the understandable outrage generated by comparing Nazis and Southern slaveholders to oppressed inner-city African-Americans, this focus on racism again serves to obscure Gore's real objective. It is revealing that she follows this line of argument, not with a catalogue of the effects of racism on American society, but with a laundry list of rape statistics. The implication is obvious—the real threat to society is sexual violence against whites, not the many forms of racial violence that regularly target Blacks. Gore is not concerned with racism's influence in American society, but with Black male sexuality literally and metaphorically invading white womanhood. Tellingly, Gore's efforts resulted in the right to label rap albums with a cautionary warning sticker, thereby further stigmatizing rap artists and reinforcing the myth of the Black male rapist with every purchase.

Other attacks on rap's sexism have come from notoriously sexist and racist enclaves. For instance, during the 2 Live Crew uproar, conservative columnist George F. Will published an article in *Newsweek* that is characterized by blatant racism. Titled "America's Slide into the Sewer," Will's piece directly invokes the myth of the Black rapist by conflating 2 Live Crew's sexually explicit lyrics with the brutal rape of a jogger in Central Park.

The rape of the white, twenty-eight year-old, investment banker and Yale graduate Trisha Meili—referred to in the media as the Central Park Jogger until she revealed her identity in 2003 with the release of her autobiography¹⁶—occurred on the evening of April 19, 1989. While running in the park, she was severely beaten, raped, and sodomized, supposedly by a group of Black and Hispanic teenagers from East Harlem.

¹⁶ See Meili, Tisha. *I Am the Central Park Jogger—A Story of Hope and Possibility*. New York: Scribner, 2003.

The group had been in the park, harassing people and committing acts of violence. The teenagers were arrested and apparently confessed to the crime, explaining their actions as a pastime called “wilding.” The media exploded with articles that condemned “wilding” and chastised the current generation of Black youth for barbaric immorality. As Houston Baker Jr. observed: “Suddenly every self-righteous entrepreneur of panic, every self-proclaimed moralist of the public order was pronouncing on wilding as though he or she were the encyclopedic entry for the term”(49-50). It was later discovered that the term wilding—which had fueled much of the depiction of the alleged rapists as callous, remorseless, and inhuman—had been misinterpreted. It was actually a reference to Ton Loc’s rap hit “Wild Thing,” which is slang for sex. This connection implicated rap music and solidified the threat that young Black rappers posed to white womanhood. The teenagers, known as the Central Park Five, were convicted on charges of rape, assault, robbery, and riot, and all served sentences ranging from seven to eleven years, despite the fact that there was no physical evidence linking the teens to the crime scene and despite their claims to have been coerced into making false confessions.

In his editorial, George Will paints the Harlem teenagers as animals and claims that when one of the defendants was arrested, he explained his actions with the statement: “It was something to do. It was fun.” Will moves on to quote testimony from the confessions of the Central Park Five that emphasize the savage nature of the offense. He juxtaposes this testimony with crude lyrics from 2 Live Crew songs, such as: “To have her walking funny, we try to abuse it/A big stinking pussy do it all/So we try real hard to bust the walls.” He then turns to the writing of a conservative Black journalist, presumably to make points that he doesn’t have the courage to make independently:

Juan Williams of *The Washington Post* is black and disgusted. The issue, he writes, is the abuse of women, especially black women, and the corruption of young blacks' sensibilities, twisting their conceptions "of good sex, good relationships, and good times." Half of all black children live in households headed by women. The black family is falling apart, teen pregnancy regularly ruins lives, the rate of poverty is steadily rising, and 2 Live Crew "is selling corruption—self-hate—to vulnerable young minds in weak Black America."

Having opened the door to such generalizations by referencing a Black columnist's writing, Will feels free to offer the following commentary:

Fact: Some members of a particular age and social cohort—the ones making 2 Live Crew rich—stomped and raped the jogger to the razor edge of death, for the fun of it. Certainty: the coarsening of a community, the desensitizing of a society, will have behavioral consequences.

Here Will confuses rap artists with rap fans, and crude, pornographic sexual fantasy (which is nothing new in America) with actual sexual aggression (which, regrettably, is also not unusual in America). Make no mistake, the phrase "particular age and social cohort" refers to young, Black, inner-city males, which, incidentally, are not the demographic that made 2 Live Crew or any other rap artist rich; it is widely acknowledged that the majority of rap record sales come from white suburban consumers.¹⁷

In addition, the "behavioral consequences" that Will warns of do not address the rape of Black women—as he falsely implies in the subtitle to the editorial: "a confused

¹⁷ See Samuels, David. "The Rap on Rap: The Black Music That Isn't Either," *The New Republic*, November 11, 1991. Samuels cites Soundscan (the electronic data base that tracks record sales) statistics that demonstrate that 70% of all rap sales come from white suburban consumers. This fact has been questioned by Tricia Rose and Bakari Kitwana, as Soundscan is attached mainly to chain record stores, and small boutiques and inner city record shops are not included in the figures. However, while the exact number may be contestable, the trend is widely acknowledged.

society protects lungs more than minds, trout more than black women.” If that was the case, Will should have mentioned the Black Brooklyn woman who was raped and thrown down an elevator shaft the same week that the Central Park rape occurred.¹⁸ Instead, he focuses on the Central Park rape, and on young Black men as a threat to white women. The impact of his racism is further compounded by his conclusion: “Words, said Aristotle, are what set human beings, the language-using animals, above lower animals. Not necessarily.” With this, Will completes his depiction of young Black men as bestial and reinforces their threat to white womanhood.

Will’s racist logic is shown to be all of the more destructive in light of the resolution of the Central Park case. In 2002, serial rapist Matias Reyes, who was already imprisoned, came forward and confessed to raping Meili alone. DNA testing of sperm on the jogger’s clothing confirmed his story. The Central Park Five’s convictions were vacated and they are currently suing the New York Police Department.¹⁹

In Trisha Meili’s recent autobiography, she ponders why her attack—and not any one of the other twenty-eight women who reported rapes that week—captured the attention of the nation. She contemplates a range of reasons, including its element of randomness, the fact that “it revealed the basest depravity human beings are capable of,” and the notion that it provided people with an opportunity to express empathy and therefore to affirm their own humanity (6-7). The reason that she does not explore—namely her status as a wealthy, white, educated woman—is more to the point. That Meili captured the attention of the nation has everything to do with race, class, and slanted media coverage. As a young, white, privileged, female member of corporate America

¹⁸ See Baker, Houston. *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

¹⁹ See “Central Park Jogger Speaks Out.” *CNN.com*, April 24, 2003.

deemed to have been attacked by young Black men from the ghetto, Meili signified the disruption of established power relations'and an attack on both white womanhood and the white elite. She represented a failure in the functioning of white supremacy and patriarchy in that both forces were unable to offer the expected protection. In this context, it should not come as a surprise that her case struck a chord with the public, as was evidenced by the outpouring of sympathy and support from across the country, including demonstrations, vigils, flowers (even from four of the five families of the accused), prayer services, letters, and presents. As well, it is interesting to note the way in which all of her immediate needs were provided for; assistance from her company covered medical bills for all six months of her hospitalization and rehabilitation, and furnished her with around the clock private nursing, a secretary to help with correspondence, security guards, a driver, and a corporate suite when she returned to Wall Street. I do not point out this extraordinary level of support to imply that she did not deserve it. It goes without saying that what happened to her was horrific and that she deserved any form of help that would ease her suffering during such a traumatic time. Rather, I draw attention to the level of physical and financial assistance that she received in order to emphasize her privileged status, and to question why such support is granted discriminately. I wonder what support the family of the Brooklyn victim received. Who wrote letters to them? What vigils were held in her name? Why don't we know her name? Who paid her hospital or funeral bills?

I also draw attention to Meili's privilege for another reason. While Meili is clearly a courageous woman who has had endure undue suffering and who has overcome many obstacles, it cannot help but be observed that her book entirely avoids the issue of race,

and indeed the racialized reality that five men were unjustly imprisoned. She says, “It has taken me fourteen years to go public with my story, and that story isn’t about the justice system, about who attacked me, or whether one confession or five were true”(3). She insists, “To me, the trials, as well as the attack itself, weren’t about race, but about violating and savaging a woman and leaving her to die...the point is not race”(184). I respectfully disagree. Whether she chooses to recognize it or not, the trials were definitively about race, both in their coverage and in their outcome. Meili’s failure to engage with the fact that five young teenagers were demonized, incarcerated, beaten in prison (for the nature of their alleged transgressions), and subsequently served many years for crimes they did not commit—in essence had their lives destroyed through no fault of their own, as did Meili—reflects both her personal unwillingness to confront race and the general moral myopia that is inherent to white America.

Meanwhile, the obsessive focus on Black men as a threat to white womanhood that characterized the Central Park Jogger coverage, and that continues to dominate press coverage of rap, has obscured the fact that much of rap’s violence and misogynistic rhetoric is not directed at white women at all. Most of it is directed at Black women. While white women may be included in the sexist sentiments that are expressed, they are rarely directly addressed and typically do not appear in the music videos. This gives the impression that white women are not the main target. The fact that the public debate on rap and sexism has focused on protecting white women has created a situation in which the interests of Black women are yet again ignored.

And yet, Black feminist critiques of rap’s sexism have been few and far between. The single well-known instance of Black feminist criticism comes from C. Delores

Tucker, a conservative activist from the National Political Congress of Black Women. Tucker's political career began as Pennsylvania's Secretary of State 1971-77; she was the first African-American woman to serve in that position. She was fired for running a private, profitable business at state expense. Tucker failed to re-gain her political clout until her anti-rap crusade, during which she used what status and connections she had left to widely discredit rap music—particularly gangsta rappers on the successful Death Row record label, including Snoop Doggy Dogg and Tupac Shakur.

Tucker's bourgeois values prevented her from seeing the artistic and political merit of rap music. She labeled the genre "gangster porno rap," and objected to its lyrics on the basis that they "glorify murder, rape, drugs, guns" and are "very misogynistic toward women."²⁰ During her anti-rap campaign, Tucker successfully lobbied for congressional hearings on the influence of rap music in American society. Tucker put enormous pressure on Time Warner, which owned 50% of Interscope Records, which in turn owned Death Row Records. The solution that Tucker eventually presented to Time Warner was the formation of a new, improved Death Row rap label that would be run by her and that would give her ultimate veto power over lyrical content. Needless to say, she was unsuccessful in obtaining control over the record label, but she did manage to convince Time Warner to divest themselves of their share in Interscope Records. In a bizarre twist, Tucker later sued Tupac Shakur's estate in a defamation suit for 10 million dollars, claiming that his unflattering comments in two rap songs destroyed her sex life with her husband. The lawsuit was unsuccessful and Tucker was widely ridiculed in the hip-hop community.

²⁰ See MacMichael, Ryan A. "Interview with C. Delores Tucker." *The Mary Washington College Bulletin*, February 1996, <http://www.laze.net/interviewed/dtuck.html>, June 16, 2003.

Given the pattern of white racist feminism just described—to which the only exception was a Black conservative opportunist who made a mockery of herself—it is not difficult to see why many Black women have been reluctant to speak out against rap's sexism. As Michelle Wallace noted in her 1990 *New York Times* article “When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music is Rap”:

Feminist criticism, like many other forms of social analysis, is widely considered part of a hostile white culture. For a black feminist to chastise misogyny in rap publicly would be viewed as divisive and counterproductive. There is a widespread perception in the black community that public criticism of black men constitutes collaborating with a racist society.²¹

Famous Black feminist scholars like Angela Davis and bell hooks have opted against direct attacks on rap, instead publishing interviews with the famous rapper Ice Cube that challenge him on the issue of sexism, but also strongly support his contribution to Black struggle.²²

Hip-hop generation Black feminists have been even more likely to openly defend rappers. Feminist writer Joan Morgan, for instance, takes the position that “the seemingly impenetrable wall of sexism in rap music is really the complex mask African-Americans often wear to both hide and express pain. At the close of the millennium, hip-hop is still one of the few forums in which young black men, even surreptitiously, are allowed to express their pain”(Chickenheads 74). She continues:

²¹ See Wallace, Michelle. “When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music is Rap.” *The New York Times*, July 29, 1990.

²² See hooks, bell. “Interview: Ice Cube’s rap on sistas is rough. bell hooks is a radical feminist scholar. Their deepest connection is a passion for speaking the truth.” *Spin*, Vol. 9, No. 1, April 1993 and Davis, Angela. “Nappy Happy: a conversation with Ice Cube and Angela Y. Davis.” *Transition Magazine*, Vol. 58, 1992.

We're all winners when a space exists for brothers to honestly state and explore the roots of their pain and subsequently their misogyny, sans judgment. It is criminal that the only space our society provided for the late Tupac Shakur²³ to examine the pain, confusion, drug addiction, and fear that led to his arrest and his eventual assassination was his jail cell. How can we win if a prison cell is the only space an immensely talented but troubled young black man could dare utter these words: "Even though I'm not guilty of the charges they gave me, I'm not innocent in terms of the way I was acting. I'm just as guilty for not doing things. Not with this case but with my life. I had a job to do and I never showed up. I was so scared of this responsibility that I was running away from it." We have to do better than this for our men. (81)

However, it should be noted that such defenses are not without an element of caution. Morgan, for instance, analogizes hip-hop to an abusive partner, and recommends that Black women give their love from a detached distance.

This type of qualified defense is often repeated by Black female rappers, who almost unanimously support Black male rappers in the media, but whose critiques of Black male sexism frequently occur on wax. During the 2 Live Crew controversy, for instance, rappers Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Sista Souljah, and Yo-Yo supported 2 Live Crew's right to free speech and refused to publicly comment on their lewd and sexist lyrics. As Tricia Rose has explained, these rappers defended their colleagues

...not necessarily because they did not find the lyrics offensive, but because they were acutely aware of the dominant discursive context within which their responses would be reproduced. Cognizant that they were being constructed in the mainstream press as a progressive response to regressive male rappers, these female rappers felt that they were being used as a political baton to beat male rappers over the head, rather than being affirmed as women who could open up public dialogue to interrogate sexism and its effects on young black women. Furthermore, they remain acutely aware of the uneven and sometimes racist way in

²³ Tupac Shakur was convicted of the sexual assault of a Black woman who had come to his hotel room. He maintained his innocence throughout his eleven-month prison sentence. For a description of these events, see Dyson, Michael Eric. *Holler If You Hear Me—Searching for Tupac Shakur*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2001.

which sex offenses are prosecuted, stigmatized, and reported.
(Noise 149-150)

Such realizations are not limited to Black feminists and female rappers. It is clear to many that the rhetoric of feminism has been appropriated by white America as a tool to oppress African-American men and women—historically through the feminist movement and contemporarily through the conservative backlash against rap. Given this history, any public critique of sexism in hip-hop is bound to generate anger in the hip-hop community. And yet, lyrics that describe sexist attitudes, violence against women, and stereotypes that are harmful to women should not be accepted without public debate. This presents a dilemma to academics and journalists who deal with rap music, and particularly to white female academics like myself. Is it possible to speak about sexism without playing into the hands of racism? Is it possible to engage in a constructive dialogue on sexism that doesn't demonize Black men or alienate Black women?

I am hopeful that it is. But I am also aware that any attempt to form an effective critique of misogyny in hip-hop must take all of these cultural dynamics into account. Any critique of sexism in rap cannot divorce itself from the sexist and racist history and contemporary culture of white America, and cannot allow itself to inadvertently support or directly provide ammunition to right-wing attacks on Black artists. Using white privilege to de-legitimize a powerful method of Black creative expression and political resistance is not the objective here. In attempting to avoid this outcome, it is important to acknowledge that rap music is not uniformly sexist. While there are lyrics that are openly hostile to women, there are also lyrics that support feminist struggle and lyrics that celebrate women. Sometimes these diametrically opposed impulses appear in the same

album by the same artist. Once again, it is important to recognize that rappers should be afforded a full and complex humanity. It is unethical, as well as unproductive, to isolate song lyrics from the cultural context in which they appeared or the complete career of the artist that produced them. This analysis will try to avoid hysterical and polarized thinking, and will instead attempt to explore the many representations of women that surface in the music of both male and female rappers.

So, from this standpoint, I would like to turn to an investigation of the major complaints that have been made against rap music. The main complaint that is normally waged against rap is that it represents women as sexual objects. There is ample evidence to substantiate this claim. Many rappers represent themselves as chronically sexually promiscuous, unfaithful players. Women, in turn, are dehumanized, degraded “bitches,” “hoes,”²⁴ and “chickenheads.”²⁵

Jay-Z’s track “Girls, Girls, Girls”²⁶ is an example of this trope par excellence. The chorus to the song is: “I love girls, girls, girls, girls/Girls, I do adore/Yo put your number on this paper cause I would love to date ya/Holla at ya when I come off tour.” Jay goes on to catalogue all of the different girls that he has “across the globe,” and the problems he has with each of them. The “Spanish chick” is too domestic, the “French chick” is too conceited and too sexual, the “Black chick” is too demanding, the “Chinese chick” is too enterprising (she bootlegs his albums), the “African chick” is too abrasive, and the “Indian chick” is a gold-digger. The “young chick” is too dramatic and too immature, the “model chick” won’t cook or clean and parties too much, the “hypochondriac chick” is

²⁴ “Hoe” is another term for whore.

²⁵ “Chickenhead,” as noted previously, is a slang term for women who use their sexuality to gain money, power, and prestige.

²⁶ From the album *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-fella/Def Jam Records, 2001.

afraid of sex, the “paranoid chick” is afraid to leave her house, the “chick from Peru” traffics and uses drugs, the “weed-head chick” is forgetful, and the “narcoleptic chick” always falls asleep. The only women that escape criticism are the “stewardess chick,” who is sexually servile, and the “project girl,”²⁷ who is celebrated for the traditionally desirable female traits of loyalty (“I got a project girl that plays the part/Baby girl is so thorough, she’s been with me from the start”) and self-sacrifice (“hid my drugs from the narc, hid my guns by the parts”). The song combines racial and sexual stereotypes about women in order to reinforce sexist myths about women and to establish Jay-Z’s sexual prowess.

Ludacris’s song “Area Codes,”²⁸ which features Nate Dogg, is another example of the player trope. In the track, Ludacris reduces women to “hoes” to be located by the telephone area code in which they live. Ludacris describes himself as “worldwide,” the “abominable hoe-man,” the “globe-trotting international post man,” and the “neighbor dick dope man;” he has so many hoes that his “cell phone says overload.”

Themes of promiscuity and sexual objectification are addressed with varying levels of sensitivity throughout rap music. Killer Mike’s song “A.D.I.D.A.S. (All I Dream About is Sex),” which features Big Boi from Outkast and embodies a less extreme approach, despite reducing women to their sexual body parts:

I've been cuttin' cute lil' coochies²⁹ since before the record deal
Catch me daydreamin' 'bout them: thick, medium, or slim
Doctors call the thing vagina, in the hood we call it trim
White boys call it snatch, Puerto Ricans call it chocha
Nathaniel likes his white, I like mine dark as cola
It's the first thing on my mind in the morn' when I roll over

²⁷ “Project” refers to public housing projects, or the ghetto.

²⁸ From the album *Word of Mouf*, Def Jam South Records, 2001.

²⁹ “Couchie” is slang for vagina.

All men young or old, in the end it's what we after
Even my grandpappy's happy, he got prescribed Viagra

However, he continues:

When I drill, I don't spill, even if she's on the pill
Keep my weapon covered, concealed, and in a shield
Cause I don't need that A-I-D-S
A "D" and an "A" missin' out my ADIDAS
Plus, we don't need no DNA mixin' between us
We just need to keep this thing friendly and hush hush
On the down low, like R. Kelly and youngsters³⁰
But over eighteen only cause baby I'm no perv

This verse defines his personal limits to player sexuality. While his goal is to get as much sex as possible, he will do so without contracting diseases, conceiving children, creating emotional drama, or transgressing established socio-sexual norms.

This position would not sound all that bad, if it applied to both sexes. But, unfortunately, the uninhibited role assigned to male sexuality is countered by a fairly traditional role for female sexuality. The women depicted in rap music invariably fall into the virgin/whore dichotomy. The virgins—while no longer literal virgins—represent typical Nineteenth Century ideals of womanhood. Loyalty, self-sacrifice, domesticity, sexual reserve, and submissiveness are highly valued character traits in hip-hop culture. Jay-Z's "Bitches and Sistas"³¹ demonstrates the tendency to gravitate toward rigid sex roles. The song serves to ridicule "chickenheads," or women that are after Jay-Z's money, power and prestige. He warns these women:

³⁰ R. Kelley is a gospel singer turned R&B artist who is well known for his penchant for young teenagers. He was recently arrested for sex with a minor when a video tape surfaced that allegedly records him having graphic sex with a fourteen year-old.

³¹ From the album *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse*, Roc-a-fella/Def Jam, 2002.

You ain't gonna get pregnant and
Hit off with paper,³² you gonna get hit off, and slid off
Before the neighbors take' off to go to work
So just take off your shirt, don't hit me with that church shit
I got a sister who schooled me to shit you chickens do
Trickin' fools...

Jay-Z clearly anticipates getting flack for the song; indeed, he yells in a mocking voice:

“Jay-Z what you gotta go and disrespect the women for, huh?” He answers this question with the following verse:

Sistas get respect, bitches get what they deserve
Sistas work hard, bitches work your nerves
Sistas hold you down, bitches hold you up
Sistas help your progress, bitches will slow you up
Sistas cook up a meal, play their role with the kids
Bitches are out in street with their nose in your biz
Sistas tell the truth, bitches tell lies
Sistas drive cars, bitches wanna ride
Sistas give up the ass, bitches give up the ass
Sistas do it slow, bitches do it fast
Sistas do their dirt outside of where they live
Bitches have niggas all up in your crib³³
Sistas tell you quick "you better check your homey"³⁴
Bitches don't give a fuck, they wanna check for your homey
Sistas love Jay 'cause they know how 'Hov³⁵ is
I love my sistas, I don't love no bitch

This verse defines “bitches” as irritating, unhelpful, mooching, lying, cheating, promiscuous gossips that “get what they deserve.” In contrast, the ideal woman, or the “sista,” is a hardworking, financially independent, maternal, domestic, loyal, and sexually reserved figure who is worthy of respect. Significantly, in Jay-Z’s view, women should

³² “Paper” is slang for money.

³³ “Crib” is slang for home.

³⁴ “Homey” is slang for friend, short for “homeboy” meaning long time friend or neighbor.

³⁵ “Hov” refers to Jay-Z’s nickname Hova. I have been unable to discover what Hova means.

maintain this behavior toward him, despite the fact that he is out “hitting off” multiple “chickens.”

Queens, New York rapper 50 Cent mirrors these requirements in the track “21 Questions,”³⁶ which features Nate Dogg. The song is addressed to 50’s ideal fantasy woman, or “shorty”.³⁷ He asks her a series of questions that probe her commitment to him:

If I feel off tomorrow would you still love me?
If I didn't smell so good would you still hug me?
If I got locked up and sentenced to a quarter century,
Could I count on you to be there to support me mentally?
If I went back to a hoopty³⁸ from a Benz
Would you poof and disappear, like some of my friends?
If I was hit and I was hurt, would you be by my side?
If it was time to put in work, would you be down to ride?
I'd get out and peel a nigga cap³⁹ and chill and drive
I'm asking questions to find out how you feel inside
If I ain't rap 'cause I flipped burgers at Burger King
Would you be ashamed to tell your friends you feelin' me?⁴⁰

These lines reiterate the expectations that many rappers have of women. 50’s “shorty” is being asked to love him regardless of his emotional state, his personal hygiene, his financial status, his physical health, his social status, and his state of incarceration. A tall order—especially considering the lines that follow:

If I was with some other chick and someone happened to see
And when you asked me about it, I said it wasn't me
Would you believe me? Or up and leave me?
How deep is our bond if that's all it takes for you to be gone?
Always remember, girl: we make mistakes
To make it up, I do whatever it takes

³⁶ From the album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, Shady/Aftermath Records, 2003.

³⁷ “Shorty” can mean either a desirable woman or a young kid. In this context, it means woman.

³⁸ A “hoopty” is slang for a jalopy car.

³⁹ This is a reference to shooting someone.

⁴⁰ “Feelin’” someone is slang for having a crush on them, or, alternatively, admiring their skills as a rapper.

50 is acknowledging that he is capable of infidelity, of “mistakes.” In contrast to the rigid standard that he holds “shorty” to, he has fairly flexible standards for his own conduct.

The queen/sista/shorty figure is sharply contrasted by the groupie/bitch/hoe, a figure that is derided in numerous rap songs, by both men and women. Tupac Shakur, for instance, rails against this figure in “Wonder Why They Call U,”⁴¹ defining a bitch along the lines of stereotypes like gold-diggers, welfare queens, irresponsible mothers, and sexually diseased sluts. The advice he offers women to avoid falling into this category is simple: “keep your head up, legs closed, eyes open.” Nas expresses similar disgust for this type of woman in “Black Girl Lost.”⁴² Although this time the figure is beautiful and desirable, she is nonetheless “stuck on weed, clowns and cars.” The chorus admonishes this type of woman: “You should be ashamed of yourself/The way you carry yourself/ The way you hang out all night long/Doin’ silly things that is wrong/ Black girl.” Such animosity reflects a well-documented tradition of hostility between Black men and women that has been exacerbated in the last forty years.⁴³

But, interestingly, the bitch/hoe/chickenhead figure does not escape the condemnation of female rappers either. For example, Brooklyn rapper Bahamadia addresses this figure in “True Honey Buns (Da Freak Shit).”⁴⁴ Bahamadia describes a situation in which she and her friend Kia (also the name of a famous female rapper known for flaunting her sexuality) are backstage at a Wu-Tang concert. When they get to

⁴¹ From the album *All Eyez on Me*, Death Row Records, 1995.

⁴² From the album *It Was Written*, Columbia Records, 1996.

⁴³ See Wallace, Michelle. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: Verso, 1979, and Kitwana, Barkari, “Where Did Our Love Go? The New War of the Sexes.” *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2002.

⁴⁴ From the album *Kollage*, Capitol Records, 1996.

the VIP room, Kia begins to act flirtatious. Bahamadia observes that “star-stud events must trigger hoochie alerts/‘cause Kia went berserk.” Then, “here come the raw maneuver, lewder than imagined/Kia aimin’ for attention, strivin’ for it with a passion/Slips out her sarong, starts dancing in her thong/Like a bootie song was on.” Bahamadia responds: “Sis, you know you wrong/You the reason nigs be screamin’ bitches, hoes, and tricks.” She continues: “These niggas think you hotter than the sun/Even if they talk to you, they wanna hit and run/If you scheming on the cream,⁴⁵ boo, you ain’t getting’ none.”

In a less confrontational vein, Lauryn Hill delivers a similar message in “Doo Wop (That Thing).”⁴⁶ Hill qualifies her advice by admitting that she is “only human/Don’t think I haven’t been in the same predicament.” She goes on to describe the sexually loose/gold-digger/groupie:

It's been three weeks since you've been looking for your friend
The one you let hit it and never called you again
'Member when he told you he was 'bout the Benjamins⁴⁷
You act like you ain't hear him, then gave him a little trim⁴⁸
To begin, how you think you really gon' pretend?
Like you wasn't down, then you called him again
Plus when you give it up so easy—you ain't even fooling him

She continues:

Girlfriend, let me break it down for you again
You know I only say it 'cause I'm truly genuine
Don't be a hard rock when you really are a gem
Baby girl, respect is just a minimum
Niggas is fucked up and you still defending them

⁴⁵ “Cream” is slang for money and power.

⁴⁶ From the album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Columbia/ Ruffhouse Records. 1998.

⁴⁷ This is a reference to a P. Diddy song “All About the Benjamins.” Benjamins is slang for money in general, and thousand dollar bills in particular (which have Benjamin Franklin’s face on them).

⁴⁸ “Trim” is slang for both vagina and sex.

Collectively, the focus on denouncing female promiscuity in these songs functions to reinforce the stereotype of Black women as sexually promiscuous and immoral.

However, Hill, unlike the others, balances this criticism of the female groupie figure with a sharp critique of the male player figure:

The second verse is dedicated to the men
More concerned with his rims⁴⁹ and his Timbs⁵⁰ than his women
Him and his men come in the club like hooligans
Don't care who they offend, popping yang like you got yin
Let's not pretend: they wanna pack pistol by they waist men
Cristal⁵¹ by the case men, still in they mother's basement
The pretty face men, claiming that they did a bid⁵² men
Need to take care of their three and four kids men
They facing a court case when the child's support late
Money taking, heartbreaking, now you wonder why women hate men
The sneaky silent men, the punk domestic violence men
Quick to shoot the shit—stop acting like boys and be men

Hill's critique alone acknowledges both sides of the social coin, and addresses the concrete consequences of the player stance: violence against both men and women, the financial and emotional neglect of children, and the destruction of romantic relationships.

The player figure is complimented with the pimp figure, and icon is that is widely disseminated in hip-hop music and culture. There is an established tradition of rappers assuming the pimp persona—to portray themselves as 'sexy hustlers,'⁵³ to demean women either playfully or pornographically, or to relay violent fantasies that develop their own image as powerful and intimidating.⁵⁴ The ultimate pimp figure is Too \$hort,

⁴⁹ "Rims" are customizing options on trucks.

⁵⁰ "Timbs" are Timberland boots, expensive footwear.

⁵¹ Cristal is expensive champagne that is particularly popular with the hip-hop set.

⁵² "Bid" is a prison sentence.

⁵³ See Quinn, Eithne. "Who's the Mack?: The Performativity and Politics of the Pimp Figure in Gangsta Rap." *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 34, No.1, April 2000, pgs. 115-36.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

an Oakland rapper who is famous for his smutty rhymes and his pimp iconography and rhetoric. But the pimp lexicon is by no means limited to its most famous figure. Pimp imagery continually surfaces in hip-hop culture. Famous songs that utilize the pimp trope include: Notorious B.I.G.'s "Big Poppa,"⁵⁵ Sir Mix-a-Lot's "Mack Daddy,"⁵⁶ Ice T's "Somebody's Gotta Do It (Pimpin' Ain't Easy!!!)"⁵⁷ and "Pimp Anthem,"⁵⁸ Snoop Dogg's "Gz Up, Hoes Down,"⁵⁹ Dr. Dre's "Bitches Ain't Shit But Hoes and Tricks,"⁶⁰ and Slick Rick's "Treat Her Like a Prostitute."⁶¹

More recently, Jay-Z has also framed himself as a pimp icon. In the successful single "Big Pimpin'"⁶² Jay raps: "You know I thug 'em, fuck 'em, love 'em, leave 'em/'Cause I don't fuckin' need 'em." And: "Me give my heart to a woman?/Not for nothin, never happen/I'll be forever mackin'/Heart cold as assassins, I got no passion/I got no patience and I hate waitin'/Hoe—get yo ass in, and let's ride." 50 Cent has also employed this trope with much success. On his major label debut *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, 50 Cent has a track titled "P.I.M.P." This song establishes 50's place in the pimp tradition, in which the sexual exploitation of women is commonplace and accepted:

I ain't that nigga trying to holla cause I want some head
I'm that nigga trying to holla cause I want some bread
I could care less how she perform when she in the bed
Bitch, hit that track, catch a date, and come pay the kid
Look baby, this is simple, you can't see
You fuckin' with me, you fuckin' with a P-I-M-P

⁵⁵ Pimp song list from Quinn. "Big Poppa" is from the album *Ready to Die*, Bad Boy/Aritsa, 1994.

⁵⁶ From the album *Mack Daddy*, first released on an independent imprint, 1991.

⁵⁷ From the album *Rhyme Pays*, Sire Records, 1987.

⁵⁸ From the album *VI—Return of the Real*, Rhyme Sydicate Records, 1996.

⁵⁹ From the album *Doggystyle*, Death Row/Interscope, 1993.

⁶⁰ From the album *The Chronic*, Death Row/Interscope, 1992.

⁶¹ From the album *The Great Adventures of Slick Rick*, De Jam, 1988.

⁶² From the album *Vol. 3...Life and Times of S. Carter*, Roc-a-fell/Def Jam, 1999.

And: “Man this hoe—you can have her/When I’m done, I ain’t gon’ keep her/Man, bitches come and go, every nigga pimpin’ know.” With such lines, pimping is represented as a powerful, sexy, socially defiant identity. As Beth Coleman has observed, “Pimps, with the help of popular culture, have made a fetish of their business”(70). However, she points out that pimping is “a business which is, of course, based on the appropriation of a person for a commodity.” In other words, it is “an economy of pleasure based on an economy of pain”(77). This point is worth emphasizing, as the representation of sexual slavery in rap is very often reduced to smooth-talking stylishness, a move that obscures the underlying current of violence and terror.

This current of sexual aggression occasionally erupts in lyrics that openly encourage rape. Southern rapper Ludacris, for instance, has a track called “She Said,”⁶³ whose chorus reads like a frat-boy locker room rant against frigid women: “She said she never done it, she said she never tried/She’s sittin’ there tellin’ a motherfuckin lie.” The song describes a woman who is a church member and a virgin and mocks her claims to have never strip-teased or had oral sex, anal sex, group sex, lesbian sex, or paid sex.

It is also not uncommon to encounter murder fantasies in rap music. In the latest and most bizarre example of this trend, British pop group Morcheeba recorded a duet with British-American rapper Slick Rick called “Women Lose Weight,”⁶⁴ in which Slick Rick murders his overweight wife. The chorus includes the refrain: “send that ass straight to the morgue.” The advice that he offers is: “Moral of the story is/Desire is important/So watch your weight/It’ll keep your mate smitten, it’s a given/Though looking back I realized I didn’t have to kill her.” Of course, Slick Rick is not the first rapper, nor is he

⁶³ From the album *Word of Mouf*, Def Jam South Records, 2001.

⁶⁴ From the Morcheeba album *Charango*, Reprise Records, 2002.

the most famous rapper to depict revenge fantasies. Eminem tops the lists on that subject, with horror songs that envision him raping and murdering his own mother, and songs that fantasize about slitting his wife's throat. In an interesting development, as Carl Hancock Rux has noted, Slick Rick was arrested by the INS for being an illegal resident (of over 30 years), and deported following the release of "Women Lose Weight." This may well be a coincidence, but Rux believes that it points to entrenched racial double standards over what is an acceptable subject for art in American public discourse.⁶⁵

Clearly, lyrics that sexually objectify and degrade women are rampant in hip-hop. And, equally obvious, there is reason for concern to the extent that such lyrics reflect broader societal trends of violence against women. Lyrics that normalize sexual aggression and violence perpetuate the sexual oppression of women, and should be rigorously criticized. Rap music should be targeted for such criticism.

This is part of the picture, but it is not the whole picture. There are many other dynamics that come into play. In his book The Rap on Gangsta Rap, Bakari Kitwana outlines the relationship that many young Black males in hip-hop have to their family and community:

- 1) they love and respect their biological mothers via lip service;
- 2) they maintain a steady flow of hatred, disappointment and disrespect for biological fathers and by extensions failed Black male "role models," who have either abandoned them or have given up their manhood via cooperation with the system;
- 3) they have siblings that are trapped in the systemic cycles of death;
- 4) they lack respect for their Black female peers, who are viewed as *hoes*, *skeezers*, *trix*, *gold diggers*, *bitches*, and, by extension, sources of sexual satisfaction that no matter how distorted, border on hatred;
- 5) finally, they claim they "still got love for" their Black male peers, homeboys, homeys, "my niggaz," although the call for violence is often

⁶⁵ See Rux, Carl Hancock. "Eminem: The New White Negro," Everything But the Burden—What White People Are Taking From Black Culture. New York: Broadway Books, 2003, pg. 18-19.

against Black male peers and homosexuality is an unacceptable option.
(55)

This list captures many of the main themes on sexuality that are expressed in the hip-hop worldview.

Many rappers have been raised by single mothers who have struggled to provide financially and emotionally for them. Mothers are roundly admired in hip-hop culture; almost every rapper has a song dedicated to his mother, including: Jay-Z's "Momma Loves Me,"⁶⁶ Nas's "One More Dance,"⁶⁷ and Snoop Dogg's "I Love My Momma."⁶⁸

Michael Eric Dyson has commented on this impulse, noting that "in black America mother love is second only to the love of God—but just slightly"(21). Dyson believes that Tupac's relationship to his mother, Afeni Shakur, symbolizes this trend of devotion. Afeni Shakur is an x-Black Panther who was tried and acquitted in the famous Panther 21 case, which involved twenty-one Black activists standing trial on charges of conspiring to commit terrorist acts.⁶⁹ Afeni raised Tupac alone, and struggled throughout his childhood with poverty and an addiction to crack cocaine. In an interview from prison, Tupac articulated his feelings for his mother:

My Moms is my homey...[she] respects me as a man and I respect her for all of the sacrifices that she made...I think all young black and Hispanic males, all males period, but especially from the ghetto...we have a deep love for our mothers, because they usually raised us themselves. So you always feel closer to your mom. Even back in the day, I always loved my mama. (Dyson 21-22)

⁶⁶ From the album *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-fella/Def Jam, 2001.

⁶⁷ From the album *God's Son*, Columbia, 2002.

⁶⁸ From the album *No Limit Top Dogg*. EMI, 1999.

⁶⁹ Afeni Shakur is often confused with Assata Shakur, who was tried and convicted for the murder of a white New Jersey policeman. Assata is believed by many to have been innocent; she escaped from prison and fled to Cuba, where she was granted political asylum. Afeni and Assata are good friends.

Tupac dedicated a famous song to his mother titled "Dear Mama,"⁷⁰ which includes the poignant lines: "Even as a crack fiend, mama/You always was a Black queen, Mama,"

and:

I finally understand
For a woman it ain't easy tryin' to raise a man
You always was committed
A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it
There's no way I can pay you back
But the plan is to show you that I understand
You are appreciated

In contrast to his devotion for his mother, Tupac articulates a deep resentment toward his father:

Now ain't nobody tell us it was fair
No love from my daddy cause the coward wasn't there
He passed away and I didn't cry, cause my anger
Wouldn't let me feel for a stranger
They say i'm wrong and i'm heartless, but all along
I was lookin' for a father he was gone
I hung around with the thugs, and even though they sold drugs
They showed a young brother love

This sentiment is repeated time and time again throughout hip-hop history. Jay-Z for instance has a biting track titled "Where have you been?":

We never kicked it at all
We never pitched or kicked at a ball
Dog, you never taught me shit
How to fight, ride a bike, fix a flat
None of that sorts of shit

...

⁷⁰ From the album *Me Against the World*, Interscope Records, 1995.

Nigga you left my mom
Left us with no good-bye's
You left us out to dry
You left us with no letters, notes, (nothing!) no replies
Yo' digits numbers was unlisted
You left us with some of my loneliest nights
Nigga, some of my hungriest nights

And, finally:

Fuck you very much you showed me the worst kind of pain
But I'm stronger and, trust me, I will never hurt again
Will never ask mommy "why daddy don't love me?
Why is we so poor? Why is life so ugly?
Mommy why is your eyes puffy?"
Please don't cry, everything'll be alright
I know it's dark now, but we gon' see the light
It's us against the world
We don't need him, right? (right)
Mommy drivin' 6's now (yeah), I got riches now (yeah)
I bought a nice home for both of my sisters now
We doin' real good
We don't miss you now
See how life twists around, fucker?

The pain and anguish that this situation creates, as Tupac alluded to, is often compensated by close relationships with male peers. However, as Kitwana pointed out, homosexuality is absolutely taboo on hip-hop culture. Homophobia is very common, as are lyrics that demean gay people.⁷¹ The focal point of this issue has been Eminem, who used the word "faggot" in his lyrics and was attacked in the media by a number of gay and lesbian rights organizations.⁷² The strong current of homophobia in hip-hop has been questioned lately by the presence of openly gay rappers, such as Caushun and Dutchboy,⁷³ and by a

⁷¹ See Williams, Zoe. "Hiphopophobia." *The Guardian*, April 29, 2003.

⁷² See Renna, Cathy. "Own Up to Your Own Words!" *Gay & Lesbian Review*, May/June, 2001, pgs. 16-17, and Tyler, Robin. "Eminem: Pied Piper of Hate." *Gay & Lesbian Review*, May/June 2001, pgs. 12-14, and Turkish, Tavia Nyong'o. "Who's Afraid of Marshall Mathers?" *Gay & Lesbian Review*, May/June 2001, pgs. 14-16, and Grantham, Christian. "Why Artists Defended Eminem," *Gay & Lesbian Review*, May/June 2001, pg. 18.

⁷³ See Toure, "Gay Rappers: Too Real For Hip-Hop," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2003.

controversial track from a previously homophobic rapper Common, titled “Between Me, You, and Liberation”:⁷⁴

He spoke with his eyes, tear-filled
A lump in his throat, his fear built
My whole life it was in steel
This ain't the way that men feel
A feeling, he said he wish he could kill
A feeling, not even time could heal
This is how real life's supposed to be?
For it to happen to someone close to me?
So far we'd come, for him to tell me
As he did, insecurity held me
I felt like he failed me
To the spirit, yelled help me
I'd known him for like what seemed forever
About going pro we dreamed together
Never knew it would turn out like this
For so long he tried to fight this
Now there was no way for him to ignore it
His parents found out and hated him for it
How could I judge him? Had to accept him if I truly loved him
No longer he said had he hated himself
Through sexuality he liberated himself

Just as there are exceptions to the rule of homophobia in hip-hop culture, there are many exceptions to hip-hop's prevalent sexism. Many male rappers do not portray women in the limited terms of bitch and sista; many male rappers have made records that support women, feminist struggle, and Black women in particular. Tupac Shakur, for instance, offered a number of tracks dedicated to Black women, including: “Brenda's Got a Baby”⁷⁵ (a dark tale about a ghetto girl molested by her cousin, impregnated, abandoned, forced into prostitution, and finally murdered that urges protection for young inner-city

⁷⁴ From the album *Electric Circus*, MCA Records, 2002.

⁷⁵ From the album *2pacalypse Now*, Interscope Records, 1991.

women) and “Keep Ya Head Up”⁷⁶ (a tribute to Black women that, while being slightly paternalistic, offers solidarity and compassion).

In the area of body image—which is currently a major preoccupation of North American women—De La Soul offers appreciation for all body types in “Baby Phat”⁷⁷:

Your shape's not what I date, it's you
My crew don't mind it thick
Every woman ain't a video chick
Or runway model anorexic
I love what I can hold and grab on
So if you burn it off, then keep the flab on
We gonna stay gettin our collab on

And: “You ain't in this alone I got a tummy too/ Just let me watch the weight—don't let it trouble you.”

On the subject of reproductive rights, Diggable Planets’ “Femme Fetale”⁷⁸ supports women’s right to control their own bodies. Framed as a conversation between two friends, the song begins with the character Nikki defining her dilemma:

You remember my boyfriend Sid, that fly kid who I love
Well our love was often a verb, and spontaneity has brought a third
But due to our youth and economic state, we wish to terminate
About this we don't feel great—but baby, that's how it is
But the Feds have dissed me
They ignore and dismiss me
And the pro-lifers harass me outside the clinic
And call me a murderer, now that's hate
So needless to say we're in a mental state of debate

The narrator reflects on this problem and responds with the following advice:

⁷⁶ From the album *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, Interscope Records, 1993.

⁷⁷ From the album *Art Official Intelligence: Bionx*, Tommy Boy Records, 2001.

⁷⁸ From the album *Reachin' (A New Refutation of Time and Space)*, Capitol Records, 1993.

Hey beautiful bird, I said, digging her somber mood
The fascists are some heavy dudes
They don't really give a damn about life
They just don't want a woman to
Control her body or have the right to choose
But baby, that ain't nothin'
They just want a male finger on the button
Because if you say war, they will send them to die by the score
Aborting mission should be your volition
But if Souter and Thomas⁷⁹ have their way
You'll be standing in line unable to get welfare
while they're out hunting and fishing
It has always been around, it will always have a niche
But they'll make it a privilege not a right
accessible only to the rich
Pro-lifers should dig themselves
cause life doesn't stop after birth
And to a child born to the unprepared
it might even just get worse
Supporters of the h-bomb and fire-bombing clinics
What type of shit is that? Orwellian in fact
If Roe v. Wade⁸⁰ was overturned, would not the desire remain intact?
Leaving young girls to risk their healths
and doctors to botch, and watch, as they kill themselves
I don't want to sound macabre
but hey, isn't it my job
to lay it on the masses, and get them off their asses
to fight against these fascists?
So whatever you decide, make that move with pride
Sid will be there, and so will I.

This pro-choice response reiterates feminist arguments that legislating against abortion increases child poverty, encourages back-alley abortions and significant risks to women's health, and is fundamentally hypocritical in that it caters to the violent pro-lifer movement.

In addition to providing tracks that support women's issues, some male artists have directly criticized the sexual objectification of women that pervades both hip-hop

⁷⁹ Pro-life Supreme Court Judges David Hackett Souter and Clarence Thomas.

⁸⁰ Roe v. Wade is the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision that allowed abortion on demand.

and American culture. For instance, The Roots song “Pussy Galore”⁸¹ denounces America’s obsession with women as sex objects. Front man Black Thought raps:

Headin’ out for tour
Looking out the limo window up at the billboards
For 200 miles, “She” was the only thing I saw
Promoting everything from the liquor, to the nicotine,
cell phones, antihistamine, chicken wings
You gotta show a little skin to get them listening, for real
Y’all know the world is a sex machine
Full of pretty freaks in designer jeans

He observes that “sex control America/Turn the T.V. it's in the open on the regular, yo.”

He continues sarcastically, “What the freaks in the video for?/Fuck a song—give me a thong and Pussy Galore.” Other artists have also addressed this issue. Dead Prez, for instance, use their music to counter the tendency to objectify women. In “Mind Sex,”⁸²

Stic-man raps:

See, I ain't got to get in your blouse
It's your eye contact that be getting me aroused
When you show me your mind, it make me wanna show you mine
Reflecting my light, when it shines, just takin' our time
Before the night's through, we could get physical too
I ain't tryin' to say I don't wanna fuck, cause I do
But for me, boo, makin' love is just as much mental
I like to know what I'm getting' into

Fatherhood is also a state that tends to change rapper’s perspectives on women. The

Coup’s “Wear Clean Draws”⁸³ is classic father/daughter ode that contains such lines as:

“You're my daughter/My love/More than kin to me/This for you and the woman that you fittin' to be,” and “Tell that boy he's wrong/Girls are strong/Next time at show and tell

⁸¹ From the album *Phrenology*, Universal Records, 2002.

⁸² From the album *Let's Get Free*, Columbia Records, 2001.

⁸³ From the album *Party Music*, Arista Records, 2001.

play him our song,” and “Life’s a challenge and you gotta team up/If you play house pretend that the man clean up/You too busy with the other things you gotta do.”

Brooklyn rapper J-Live illustrates many of these tendencies in his ode to women “Like This Anna.”⁸⁴ He begins by appreciating the voluptuous Black female figure. He raps: “It’s like this Anna, It’s Like that Anna/I’m only starin’ cause your ass is so fat, Anna/I noticed it as soon as you walked up in the place, Anna/You can’t blame a man for havin’ good taste, can ya?” He adds:

And the world got you feelin' insecure
Cause you think you're fine, but you're not sure
But your beauty lies not just in your booty⁸⁵
But your face, all natural (it's a cutie!)
Don't you ever let the bullshit blind you
If you forget, I'll be quick to remind you

He goes on to warn women (somewhat paternalistically) of men who are out to sexually objectify them, describing them as “snakes [that] wanna get up in your tenderonie.” J-Live explains that “it’s OK if all systems ain’t go, Anna/You gotta tell a brother no means no.” He advises women to “keep ya eyes open so that you can spot a phony,” but adds that “this doesn’t mean that you should stop trustin’ all brothers, straight throwin’ in the towel/ The next just might just be just right, like Baby Bear⁸⁶ style.” The chorus sums up his pro-woman stance:

It's like this, Anna
This is a message to my homegirl,⁸⁷ Ms. Anna
You're so fly, Anna
I can't let nobody desecrate my Anna
I'm not your man, Anna

⁸⁴ From the album *All of the Above*, Coup D’Etat Records, 2002.

⁸⁵ “Booty” is slang for both a woman’s rear end and sex; in this case it refers to a woman’s behind.

⁸⁶ A reference to the children’s story “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.”

⁸⁷ “Homegirl” is an affectionate term of endearment meaning female friend.

I just really want you to understand, Anna
Life is rough, but, uh
Somebody cares enough to tell you this stuff

In an interview conducted in Brooklyn early this year, J-Live discussed his motivation for writing the song:

It [the sexism] is there. I mean, on some level, just the braggadocios aspects of what an MC is, in a party, tryin' to mack—it's going to come out. It really just goes to show, you give a guy a microphone and he is going to speak his mind. And you give him all this attention, he is going to say what ever he feels. And sometimes he feels a certain way about the way women put us through things. Sometimes it's counterproductive. Sometimes you can't do anything more than just laugh because cats get so blatantly ignorant with it. But, if you think about it, [the sexism] scared the women out of the shows. For the longest time, if you were an underground artist, and you were doing whatever venues across the country and across the world, cats would be like: "Where are the women? How come the women aren't coming to the shows?" The only women that would be at the shows would be somebody's girl, and they came with their man. And you would be like: "OK, what's the matter?" Perhaps they just got tired of hearing all this. Maybe the switch over to R&B has been about, "Look, I am not going to sit here and listen to you call me a bitch all day, I am going to listen to someone that wants to love me." So, really it's about the game. And kind of I tried to put the game back into it. So, "Like This Anna" is really saying "Come on back to the show. We are here for you."⁸⁸

There are similar instances of reflection on gender throughout the hip-hop community.

Prominent hip-hop writer Kevin Powell, for instance, published an article titled

"Confessions of a Recovering Misogynist" that included the following comments:

Patriarchy, as manifested in hip-hop, is where we can have our version of power within this very oppressive society. Who would want to even consider giving that up? Well, I have, to a large extent, and these days I

⁸⁸ From an interview conducted January 26, 2002. Published in part in my article "A New Game—Hip-Hop Takes a Political Turn in NYC," in *The Georgia Straight*, March 15, 2003.

am a hip-hopper-in-exile. I dress, talk, and walk like a hip-hopper, yet I cannot listen to rap radio or digest music videos without commenting on the pervasive sexism. Moreover, I try to drop seeds, as we say, about sexism, whenever and wherever I can, be it at community forums or on college campuses. Some men, young and old alike, simply cannot deal with it and walk out. Or there is the nervous shifting in seats, the uneasy comments during the question-and-answer sessions, generally in the form of “Why you gotta pick on the men, man?” I constantly “pick on the men” and myself, because I truly wonder how many men actually listen to the concerns of women. Just as I feel it is whites who need to be more vociferous about racism in their communities, I feel it is men who need to speak long and loud about sexism among each other.⁸⁹

The debate over sexism in the hip-hop community is complex and multi-faceted. But, unfortunately, what is actually a diverse cultural conversation has been reduced in the media to one-sided accounts of sexism and misogyny.

Instead of acknowledging efforts to minimize hostility and stereotypes on both sides of the gender divide, both the media and academia have tended to pit male and female rappers against one another. Women rappers, while remaining largely silent in the media about rap’s sexism, have been active in confronting it on record since the beginning of hip-hop. Much scholarly and journalistic attention has documented this trend, typically representing female rappers as the sole solution to rap’s sexism.

Starting with Roxanne Shante’s famous early 1980’s track “Roxanne’s Revenge,” women in hip-hop have consistently pointed out the double standards that allow men to pursue sexuality for sport while women are labeled sluts, bitches and hoes for the same behavior. Most famously, such sexual double standards were deplored by Salt ‘N Pepa in “None of Your Business,” when they rapped: “If I wanna take a guy home with me tonight, it’s none of your business/If she wanna be a freak and sell it on the weekend, it’s none of your business/Now you shouldn’t even get into who I’m givin’ skins to/And I

⁸⁹ See Powell, Kevin. “Confessions of a Recovering Misogynist,” *Ms. Magazine*, May/ June 2000.

will tell you one more time, it's none of your business." Such double standards were also rejected by aggressively sexual female rappers like BWP (Bitches With Problems), Boss, Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, and more recently, Trina, Kia, and Missy Elliot.

Woman rappers have also consistently challenged male rappers to be more respectful to women, and to Black women in particular. Queen Latifah epitomizes this impulse in her track "U.N.I.T.Y."⁹⁰:

Instinct leads me to another flow
Every time I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a hoe
Trying to make a sister feel low
You know all of that got's to go
Now everybody knows there's exceptions to this rule
Now don't be getting mad, when we playing, it's cool
But don't you be calling out my name
I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame

In this verse, Latifah acknowledges that the term "bitch" can be used humorously. But she objects to its use to "disrespect" and to "make a sister feel low." She moves on to examine forms of disrespect, including sexual harassment and domestic violence.

However—and this a key distinction that is missing from much commentary on women rappers—Latifah's chorus calls for unity between black men and women:

U.N.I.T.Y., U.N.I.T.Y. that's unity—you gotta let him know
You go, come on here we go
U.N.I.T.Y., love a Black woman from (You got to let him know)
infinity to infinity (You ain't a bitch or a hoe)
Here we go
U.N.I.T.Y., U.N.I.T.Y. that's unity—you gotta let him know
You go, come on here we go
U.N.I.T.Y., love a Black man from (You got to let him know)
infinity to infinity (You ain't a bitch or a hoe)

⁹⁰ From the album *Black Reign*, Motown Records, 1993.

Latifah's response to Black male sexism is characteristic of many Black female rappers. She points out destructive behavior and attitudes, but qualifies her criticism with support for Black men and calls for Black unity. The strategy addresses sexism while attempting not to play into the hands of racism.

The most recent example of black female challenge to rap's sexism comes from New York performance poet/MC Sarah Jones. The track "Your Revolution" is a re-writing of Gil Scott Heron's famous poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." In it, Jones takes lines from popular hip hop party tracks and flips them into a powerful feminist message:

Your revolution will not find me in the back seat of a jeep
with LL hard as hell, you know
Doing it and doing it and doing it well⁹¹
Your revolution will not involve me feeling your nature rise
Or helping you fantasize
Because that revolution will not happen between these thighs
No, no, not between these thighs
uh-uh
My Jamaican brother
Your revolution will not make you feel boombastic, and really fantastic
And have you groping in the dark for that rubber wrapped in plastic⁹²
You will not be touching your lips to my triple dip of
French vanilla, butter pecan, chocolate deluxe
Or having Akinele's⁹³ dream, um hum
A six foot blow job machine, um hum
You wanna subjugate your queen?
uh-huh
You think I'm gonna put it in my mouth just because you
Made a few bucks,
Please, brother, please

⁹¹ This is a reference to an LL Cool J song called "Doin' It."

⁹² This is a reference to a Shaggy song titled "Mr. Boombastic"

⁹³ This is a reference to Akinele's "Put it in Your Mouth," a notoriously smutty song that includes the lines: You wanna go down? Why not?/I be like Herbie and Hand-you-a-Cock/And tell you that my name is Ak/Get on your knees, make like the breeze and begin to blow/But don't give me no Ralph Lauren grin/If you're not down to go low/I'm all about mouth fuckin'/only if you down for dick suckin'."

Your revolution will not happen between these thighs
Will not happen between these thighs⁹⁴

Jones' song is the most strident critique of hip-hop's sexism to date. It became the subject of a widespread controversy over free speech after a Portland, Oregon DJ Deena Barnwell began airing "Your Revolution" on her KBOO-FM radio show "Soundbox." In October of 1999, a listener was offended and contacted the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to complain. The Federal Communications Commission enforcement agency fined the community station \$7,000 for indecency and banned "Your Revolution." Sarah Jones sued for first amendment rights violations and won her case to have the ban lifted. This case represents a departure from the norm for female MCs. Rather than being celebrated for denouncing sexist rappers, Jones was severely punished. It will be interesting to observe during the next couple of years whether this case signals a new movement in cultural politics.

The issues of gender and sexuality in hip-hop are complex and controversial topics. The media have tended to demonize Black men and alienate Black women through reductive and often racist arguments that depict Black male rappers as misogynists and sexual threats to white America. In contrast, academics have presented female rappers as the progressive alternative to regressive sexism. However, a more balanced view reveals that Black male and female rappers are engaged in a lively, constantly evolving cultural debate that encompasses a broad spectrum of beliefs and attitudes.

⁹⁴ Various Artists. *Xen Cuts*, Ninja Tunes, 2000.

CHAPTER FIVE THE WHITE NIGGA¹: MULTIRACIAL UNITY OR CULTURAL THEFT?

The Afro-Americanization of white youth...results in white youth—male and female—imitating and emulating black male styles of walking, talking, dressing, and gesticulating in relation to others. One irony of our present moment is that just as young black men are murdered, maimed, and imprisoned in record numbers, their styles have become disproportionately influential in shaping popular culture.

- Cornel West²

I said, Elvis Presley ain't got no soul
Chuck Berry is Rock and Roll (damn right)
You may dig on the Rolling Stones
But they ain't come up with that style on they own
Elvis Presley ain't got no soul (hell no)
Little Richard is Rock and Roll (damn right)
You may dig on the Rolling Stones
But they ain't come up with that shit on they own

Guess that's just the way shit goes
You steal my clothes and try to say they yo's (yes they do)
Cause it's a show filled with pimps and hoes
Tryin' to take everything that you made or control (there they go)
Elvis Presley ain't got no soul
Bo Diddly is rock and roll (damn right)
You may dig on the Rolling Stones
But they ain't the first place the credit belongs

- Mos Def³

Though I'm not the first king of controversy
I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley
To do Black music so selfishly
And use it to get myself wealthy

- Eminem⁴

¹ The designation "white nigga," or shorthand word "wigger," has evolved from the late 1950's name for white hipsters, or white people who appropriate black culture, as articulated in Mailer, Norman. "The White Negro," *Advertisements for Myself*. New York: Putnam, 1959. For a history of the term and its various meanings, see Roediger, David. "In Conclusion: Elvis, Wiggers and Crossing Over to Non-Whiteness," *Colored White—Transcending the Racial Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

² From West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, pg. 88.

³ From the song "Rock and Roll," off the album *Black on Both Sides*, Rawkus Records, 1999.

The last decade of the twentieth century saw the birth of a new trend in academic inquiry, popularly referred to as whiteness studies. This discourse is pre-dated by the reflections of African-American writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka and Malcolm X, and more generally by the insights that Black people have gained from their informal study of white behaviors and attitudes, a practice that has been necessary to ensure survival in a violently racist society.⁵

The critical discourse on whiteness begins from the premise that white identity is a problem, and that, as David Roediger has written, “both the origins and the persistence of white identity demand explanation”(18). Roediger describes the main thrust of whiteness studies as “the argument that white identity is decisively shaped by the exercise of power and the expectation of advantages in acquiring property.” Whiteness is not a religion, nor an ethnicity, but rather a decision to adhere to the racial hierarchy that structures American society. As George Lipsitz explains, whiteness “is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology”(Possessive vii).

However, white identity is more often than not presented as the acceptable, inevitable status quo. As Richard Dyer points out, “White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular”(44). This stance on race relations refuses to recognize whiteness as a mode of domination, and ignores institutionalized racism. Whiteness studies ends the silence on white identity that has pervaded American history

⁴ From the song “Without Me,” off the album *The Eminem Show*, Interscope Records, 2002.

⁵ See Roediger, David. *Colored White—Transcending the Racial Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

and culture, and exposes the ways in which white privilege benefits whites, while limiting the freedom, safety, life-choices, and economic opportunities of people of color.

Seminal texts for the discipline include legal scholar Cheryl Harris's insightful and comprehensive study "Whiteness as Property." The article tracks the development of race in American legal history, and argues that property relations in the United States are rooted in the principles of domination and conquest. Further, she posits that white skin has come to represent a form of property in and of itself, and one that proffers advantages that are continually protected in the courts. Harris demonstrates that

In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect...Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law. (1713)

George Lipsitz's The Possessive Investment in Whiteness—How White People Profit From Identity Politics picks up on this theme, exploring the ways in which white status results in better housing, education, employment, and health. Lipsitz believes that whiteness has "a cash value," and that it

accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educations allotted to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations." (vii)

Lipsitz details how race has been used strategically since America's inception, first to justify the seizure of Native American land and to nearly obliterate the Native population,

then to justify subordinating Africans to slavery, and more recently to prevent unions between working-class whites and people of color. Lipsitz believes that white American racism continually reinvents itself and that its latest incarnation sees neo-conservatives attempting to mobilize the population to make racist attacks on civil rights gains through generating fear of minority communities. He explains that

By generating an ever repeating cycle of “moral panics” about the family, crime, welfare, race, and terrorism, neoconservatives produce a perpetual state of anxiety that obscures the actual failures of conservatism as economic and social policy, while promoting demands for even more draconian measures of a similar nature in the future. (15-16)

Lipsitz points to massive changes in U.S. domestic policy since the Reagan era, changes that disproportionately affect African-Americans, including the export of production overseas, urban renewal, white flight from cities to suburbs, the expansion of the prison industry, and the War on Drugs. Concurrent with these negative developments, civil rights gains have been systematically dismantled through a pattern of white resistance and refusal to abide by civil rights laws, which has led to government renegotiation. Together, these two trends have exacerbated the social and economic crisis that inner-city people of color are experiencing.

Interestingly, the majority of white Americans are completely ignorant of these changes. For example, in a recent public opinion poll, seventy percent of white Americans believed that African-Americans “have the same opportunities to live a middle-class life as whites.”⁶ However, despite espousing the view that racism has been overcome, fifty percent of whites viewed Blacks as lazier, less intelligent, and less

⁶ See Orefield and Ashkinaze, *The Closing Door*, pg. 206, as quoted in Lipsitz, pg. 19.

patriotic than whites,⁷ and sixty percent believed that Blacks have problems obtaining housing and employment because of a lack of will power.⁸ As Lipsitz explains:

Because they are ignorant of even the recent history of the possessive investment in whiteness—generated by slavery and segregation, immigrant exclusion and Native American policy, conquest and colonialism, but augmented by liberal and conservative policies as well—Americans produce largely cultural explanations for structural social problems. (18)

Such justifications allow whites to simultaneously believe that Blacks are inferior and that America has moved beyond racial prejudice.

David Roediger's Colored White—Transcending the Racial Past takes on the myth of a “color-blind society,” and presents a solid case against this argument. The “race is over” notion that is currently dominating conservative circles involves the perception that laws, social practices (particularly interracial marriage and reproduction), and the personal opinions of whites are now color-blind, and that those who continue to profess to an anti-racist stance are “irrational, counterproductive, and even...racist”(12). The problem with this view is that it refuses to confront the history of racial oppression in America. As Roediger astutely points out, “in its conviction that everything is new regarding race, the ‘race is over’ school tends to cut off the present and future from any serious relationship to the past”(7). In addition,

the evasions of questions of power and privilege in the ‘race is over’ literature also obscure the extent to which the fiction of race still structures life chances in the United States. If whiteness continues to confer material

⁷ See Landry, Bart. “The Enduring Dilemma of Race in America,” America at Century's End. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pg. 206 quoted in Lipsitz, pg. 19.

⁸ See Janieson, Kathleen Hall. Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pg. 100 quoted in Lipsitz.

advantages, and if large groups of Black and Latino people exist in grinding poverty, then the wholesale abandonment of older categories of racial categorization and identification seems unlikely. (10-11)

As a result of the denial of history, power, and privilege, the color-blind camp of pundits calls for an end to African-American identity (and all social activism based on that identity) without ever questioning white identity. White studies attempts to counter this trend by interrogating white privilege and exploring the ways in which it affects people of color.

However, it must be noted that for all of its radical self-reflexivity, there are some problems with white studies. *Transition*—the cultural studies journal edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah—recently published a special issue titled The White Issue, that put forward the crucial warning that white studies contains “a danger of insularity, a narcissistic temptation intensified by the often confessional nature of writing about one’s own white skin”(4-5). The introductory essay to the volume also cautions that “one can’t help but register a concern that ‘white studies’ by, for, and about white people might displace examinations of groups that have only begun to be considered legitimate subjects of academic inquiry in the last thirty years”(4-5).

At its best, white studies creates a space for the rigorous critique of white privilege, as well as the opportunity to build progressive coalitions. At its worst, the discipline lapses into personal narratives that hog the academic spotlight at the expense of ethnic studies, wallow in paralyzing guilt and self-indulgent introspection, and refuse to partner pseudo-radical theorizing with concrete struggle for social change.

The discourse of white studies has inevitably manifested in popular culture. Michael Moore embodies this scholarly trend, although somewhat uncritically, in his recent best-selling book Stupid White Men. Moore formulates white identity as a “Stupid White Virus” that is responsible for the destruction of the environment, the prevalence of war, and the oppression of people of color. One of the earliest and most intriguing examples of white studies appears in the work of retired graffiti artist, writer, activist William “Upski” Wimsatt. In a self-published collection of essays titled Bomb the Suburbs, which has become a cult classic particularly for graffiti writers, Wimsatt ruminates on the racial issues that have shaped his participation in hip-hop. As a white man from a wealthy family, Wimsatt’s perspective simultaneously offers both the positive and negative possibilities that arise for whites in hip-hop cultural. In an essay originally published in *The Source* titled “We Use Words Like Mackadocious,” Wimsatt chronicles his experiences with white hip-hop fans as he hitchhiked across America. The essay picks up where Normal Mailer’s “White Negro” left off, describing white suburban youth as obsessively attracted to Black culture:

They discovered rap within the last four years. They like the bass. They like the attitude. They hate Vanilla Ice. They think it’s unfair that they are *called* Vanilla Ice. They want to experience blackness, dramatic and direct (more so than fans of jazz or reggae)—but not too direct, thank you very much. Associating themselves with rap sends the desired message, whether it’s “I want some black dick,” “I’m not racist,” or simply “I’m cooler than the rest of you white motherfuckers!”...Sporting their rap gear and attitude serves to disguise white kids’ often bland, underdeveloped personalities. Unlike the rappers they admire, many are shy and inarticulate...If you ask them a question, they act like they are being tested. If someone accuses them of “acting black,” they have a speech prepared. They mete out calculated, color-blind answers and brag on how much struggle they have been through—however little that is. (18)

Despite poking fun at this type of rap fan, Wimsatt ultimately includes himself in this group:

Wanting to be down but not wanting to sacrifice for it—the way blacks have to sacrifice to be down with us—that’s the age-old story of whites in black culture (let alone every other culture on the planet). We fall in love with black culture and the deeper we get, the more we begin to hear with black ears, move with black limbs, see with black eyes. Over time and (what we imagine is much) tribulation, our striving grows less apparent, less offensive, harder to laugh at. Then we get jobs as documenters, marketers, and even creators of something that used to be black music. One day the rap audience may be as white as tables in a jazz club, and rap will become just another platform for every white ethnic group—not only Irish—to express their suddenly funky selves. In the meantime, every Josh, Eric, Martay, Brian, Laramie, Chris, Frank, Andrew, Jamie, Alex, Sista PA,⁹ and Upski of the white race plunges deeper into a debt that we have no intention of repaying. (21)

This concept of a “debt” is an intriguing and useful one, and an idea that Upski continually returns to in his writing. His belief that white people should not profit from Black culture without contributing to Black struggle appears again in an article for the *Transition* “White Issue,” titled “In Defense of Wiggers.” In the piece, Upski argues that white interest in hip-hop represents both cultural appropriation and political possibility. He writes:

The very things I hate most about the wigger—his stupid audacity and perverted desire (deeply held and deeply denied) to be *down* with black people—are a cause for celebration. If channeled correctly, the wigger can go a long way toward repairing the sickness of race in America. (199)

Although Wimsatt’s method for realizing this political potential basically amounts to encouraging philanthropy and developing relationships with Black people—as Noel

⁹ Names of subjects that he interviewed for the article.

Ignatiev pointed out in an interview with Wimsatt and Cornel West¹⁰—the notion that white hip-hoppers present a unique possibility for racial unity is an interesting contrast to the argument that white rappers engage in cultural theft.

These ideological currents inform a debate that is currently taking place in hip-hop circles over the explosive success of white rapper Eminem. In 2002, Eminem (born Marshall Mathers) became North America's top-selling and most visible rap artist. The year saw his total sales reach a genre record-breaking 30 million units,¹¹ the release of the multi-platinum-selling album "The Eminem Show," the invitation to grace the covers of every major music magazine from *Vibe* to *Rolling Stone*, an MTV Video Music Award for Best Rap Video, a Grammy Award for Best Rap Album, and the opportunity to star in the loosely autobiographical Hollywood film *8 Mile*, which grossed over 100 million dollars.

Media coverage of Eminem has always been, as Harry Allen has recently pointed out,¹² greater in amount and quality than coverage of his Black counterparts. Nevertheless, Eminem's treatment in the media improved in 2002; journalists shifted away from moralistic tirades on his controversial attitudes—in particular, his sexist, violent, and homophobic lyrics—in favor of gushing over his skill and his titillating role in popular culture. Novelist Zadie Smith epitomizes this trend in her *Vibe* magazine cover story. She opens the article with the following characterization:

¹⁰ Ignatiev charged: "Give money and live in a black community and have black friends. That's what I've heard you say, Upsi. I'm sorry you don't like it, but that's what I've hear you say. And when I talk about the challenges, your response immediately becomes, always, individual solutions." See "I'm Ofay, You're Ofay," *Transition* 73, 1998, pg. 195.

¹¹ See Turan, Kenneth. "Yo Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2002.

¹² See Allen, Harry. "The Unbearable Whiteness of Emceeing—What the Eminence of Eminem Says About Race." *The Source*, February, 2003, pgs. 90-92.

As Chris Rock had it, something sure has changed in America when the best golfer is black and the best rapper, white. Rock's choice of words is remarkable: not *richest*, not *most famous*, but *best*. Because there can be no doubt about it anymore, and it's getting sort of churlish to deny it. You may dislike the language, the philosophy (and it *is* philosophy), or the hair dye... But let's settle on the bald facts: Eminem has secured his place in the rap pantheon. Tupac, Biggie, and Pun are gone, and right now there just isn't anyone else but Eminem who can rhyme 14 syllables a line, enrage the U.S. senate, play the dozens, spin a tale, write a speech, push his voice into every register, toy with rhythm, subvert a whole goddamn genre, and get metaphorical, allegorical, political, comical, and deeply, deeply personal—all in one groove of vinyl. (90)

As Smith rightly points out, Eminem's astronomical success foregrounds his race. On this issue, there are two opposing lines of thought. On the one hand, rappers like Benzino and music writers like Harry Allen and Greg Tate take the position that Eminem is a cultural imposter engaged in an out-and-out theft of Black music. On the other hand, rappers like Jay-Z, Nas, and Fat Joe, as well as writers like Todd Boyd, believe that Eminem should be judged by his skills and his level of respect for and familiarity with Black music.

Benzino advances the former line of thought somewhat problematically, both because he is himself racially mixed, and because he is a discredited figure within hip-hop culture. As the co-owner of *The Source* magazine—until recently the most prominent hip-hop magazine—Benzino has routinely been accused of conflict of interest. The magazine provides overwhelmingly positive reviews of all of Benzino's projects, despite the fact that he is a minor figure in the hip-hop scene and a mediocre rapper. Many complain that Benzino frequently flaunts the status and social control that his stake in *The Source* affords him, thus undermining the objectivity that the magazine had previously maintained.

Benzino's dispute with Eminem apparently started in response to Frank Rich's *New York Times Magazine* cover story on Eminem, which lauds Eminem as America's top rapper and praises him for crossing cultural boundaries.¹³ Benzino took issue with this view, claiming that Eminem is receiving preferential treatment because of his race and that he is stealing Black culture.¹⁴ "I have a problem with the machine [the music industry] and Em is the poster boy for the machine," he said in an interview with *allhiphop.com*/. "And because of the machine, a lot of cats with skills can't get put on."

Despite insisting in interviews that the target is not Eminem but the industry as a whole, Benzino singles Eminem out for abuse in his music. In his diss track¹⁵ "Die Another Day,"¹⁶ Benzino paints himself as "the rap Huey, the rap Malcolm, the rap Martin." In contrast, Eminem is "sleeping[ing] with the Five-O"¹⁷ and "walk[ing] with the Feds"¹⁸. Benzino moves on to charge Eminem with cultural theft:

Lord help us, my peoples bein' raped,
Deliver me from evil and I sell his devil's faith
Let's take a closer look at what's really happenin'
He wants you to believe that it is all about rappin'

He continues to maintain that his attack on Eminem is not personal:

And all I try to do is open up my niggas eyes

¹³ See Rich, Frank. "Mr. Ambassador," *The New York Time Magazine*, November 3, 2002, pgs. 52-57.

¹⁴ See Rodriguez, Jayson. "Benzino Fires Back at Eminem," *allhiphop.com*/ January 11, 2002

¹⁵ A "diss track" is a record that adheres to a longstanding competitive tradition in hip-hop. The first diss record in hip-hop was "Roxanne's Revenge" (1984), which dissed UTFO's "Roxanne, Roxanne" and instigated a dispute, or "battle," between fourteen year-old MC Roxanne Shante and the group. Lyrics battles can take place in person (freestyling) or on wax (with diss tracks). Both forms involve the objective of humiliating and discrediting the opponent through cutting, witty, humorous rhymes. This tradition is styled after "playing the dozens," or street corner verbal battle. See Robin Kelley for meditations on the role of playing the dozens in hip-hop culture: Kelley, Robin. *Yo Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

¹⁶ Independently released.

¹⁷ "Five-O" is slang for police.

¹⁸ "Feds" is slang for the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation).

It wasn't about me and Em, you gotta realize
It's just a smokescreen, my niggas, there's a bigger picture
I want the streets to pay attention' cause I'm ridin' with ya
This credibility is what we here for
Then how come the hoods sellin' units no more?

Despite this qualifier, Benzino's critique of Eminem dissolves into outright hostility when he calls for Eminem's (hopefully metaphoric) death: "Now it's time to turn the prophesy, times up/Marshall Mathers gotta die, rise up/No choice, the only way we gonna turn this shit around/Is put this little bitch in the ground." Benzino moves on to threaten the life of Eminem's daughter ("Tell Hailey it ain't safe no more/Daddy better watch your back at the candy store/We fuck up, resort to Plan B/Fuck around and she be up like Jon Benet Ramsey"), to accuse Eminem of being cowardly (he didn't murder his wife for her adultery) and homosexual (he performed a duet with Elton John at the 2001 Grammy Awards), and to label Eminem's closest friends, the rap group D12, "house niggas."

What can be written off as the jealous rants of a lukewarm talent is less easily dismissed from legendary hip-hop writer, activist, and self-proclaimed "media assassin" Harry Allen, who convincingly argues along similar lines in his recent article on Eminem titled "The Unbearable Whiteness of Emceeing—What the Eminence of Eminem Says About Race." Allen introduces his take on white hip-hop by examining a *Los Angeles Times* interview with Jimmy Iovine, co-chairman of Interscope Records (the record label that distributes both Dr. Dre's *Aftermath* and Eminem's Slim Shady boutique labels) and executive producer for the film *8 Mile*. During the interview, Iovine refers to a recent book, *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business and the End of White America* by Leon E. Wynter, which argues that the prominence of African-American influences in popular culture has brought about a situation in which the mainstream is "now equally defined by

the preferences, presence, and perspective of people of color.”¹⁹ Wynter predicts that this situation will eventually lead to “the end of ‘white’ America.” Commenting on the book’s thesis, Iovine agrees and says, “The power of hip-hop is in these race changes, and you see these changes beginning in the 1990s with the kids in this movie. It’s about class, not race, and hip-hop is one of the reasons.”

This notion that America has evolved into a color-blind society is currently extremely popular with conservative executives, writers and politicians alike. The argument has been used to justify blatantly racist attacks on policies that benefit African-Americans, such as affirmative action. Claims of racial progress, as well as working-class collectivity, are hardly convincing coming from notoriously racist and exploitative enclaves.

Allen rightly rejects the color-blind thesis on racial politics. He answers Iovine’s claim that the issue of class takes precedence in *8 Mile* with the following:

Too bad that’s not true. To the contrary: *8 Mile* is definitely, even definitively, about race. For starters, consider that, in the above quote, a white label head discusses a movie, ostensibly about a Black art form, in which the lead character is white, the screenwriter is white, the director is white, the producer is white, most of the production talent, no doubt, white, and, of course, the film itself owned by a company run by, mostly owned by, and deriving the majority of its income from white people. Yet, something or other is “about class, *not* race.” What exactly? Certainly not Marshall Bruce Mathers III’s mind-boggling success—*8 Mile*’s stupendous \$54.4-million opening take; the soundtrack’s rare, simultaneous 750,000 units per week debut in the No. 1 spot; the pre-natal Oscar buzz for his performance; “The Eminem Show’s” 6.4 million units sold. All of this is about race; about, both in the sense of “with regard to,” and “in a circle around: on every side of”; about the power of hip-hop fused with the power of white supremacy. The fact that many people argue—as do Iovine and Wynter—that these triumphs show us to be “moving past” race, is in fact part of the proof that we’re not...

¹⁹ See Wynter, Leon E. *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business and the End of White America*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2002.

Here, Allen emphasizes two key points: first, that cultural appropriation involves a concrete loss of money and opportunity for Black people and an equally concrete gain in the same areas for white people. And second, that white people continue to deny white privilege, even in the face of the “mind-boggling” statistics that evidence it. In this context, Iovine’s (and Wynter’s) cheerful optimism on race is uncloaked as crass economic opportunism and willful ignorance of oppression.

Long time *Village Voice* staff writer Greg Tate takes a similar view in his introduction to a collection of essays on cultural appropriation titled Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black Culture. Tate rightly identifies the long-standing pattern of white co-option in Black music history that crowned Paul Whiteman the king of swing, Benny Goodman the king of jazz, Elvis Presley the king of rock and roll, and Eric Clapton the king of the blues. He writes of this trend:

What has always struck Black observers of this phenomenon isn’t just the irony of white America fiending for Blackness when it once debated whether Africans even had souls. It’s also the way They have tried to erase Black presence from whatever Black thing They took a shine to: jazz, blues, rock and roll, doo-wop, swing dancing, corn rowing, antidissemation politics, attacking Dead Men, you name it. (2-3)

The co-opting of hip-hop, Tate argues, is the latest manifestation of this trend.

In contrast, many argue that hip-hop culture is not the sole property of Black America, that it is in fact an incredibly hybrid form. Robin D.G. Kelley, for instance, asserts:

Several scholars insist that Hip Hop is the pure, unadulterated voice of a

ghetto that has grown increasingly isolated from 'mainstream' society. Missing from this formulation is rap's incredible hybridity. Hip-hop's hybridity reflects, in part, the increasingly international character of America's inner cities resulting from immigration, demographic change, and new forms of information. (38)

This point is well taken. Puerto Ricans, for example, have always been a huge part of hip-hop culture, particularly in New York, and their presence has often gone unacknowledged.²⁰ However, Kelley's argument ignores the fact that, for the most part, hip-hop culture evolved out of Black musical forms, and was created mainly by Black artists with Black audiences in mind. I am not sure that there is anything productive to be achieved from contesting this.

Other cultural commentators, like Todd Boyd, resign themselves to cultural appropriation rather than fighting it. Boyd believes that

One must recognize that in a media climate like that of today, culture is there for the taking, and because so many people have access, the possibilities for appropriation are infinite. This is reality and is to be accepted. There is nothing we can do to stop young suburban White teenagers from wanting to imitate the posture of a gangsta rapper. (37)

Boyd believes that hip-hop has expanded from its initial base in poor Black and Latino communities to include, and in fact be the singular generational voice for subcultures throughout the world. In this context, Boyd has no problem with Eminem's fame and fortune. Reflecting on the Eminem phenomenon, Boyd writes:

Mind you, he is not a White boy who wants to be Black, he is *Black*, yet his appearance simply happens to be White. This is still America, and yes, skin color still matters, in most, if not all things. Even so, to the extent that hip-hop has defined the real as rooted in a marginal, poverty-stricken, pathology defined existence, then Em is potentially more *Black than* many

²⁰ See Guevara, Nancy. "Women Writin' Rappin' Breakin'." *The Year Left*. New York: Verso, 1987.

of the middle-class and wealthy Black people who live in mainstream White society today. In other words, to me, Em is a nigga. No doubt. (128)

Many rappers concur with this sentiment. Following Harry Allen's *Source* article, competitor magazine *XXL* surveyed top rappers on their feelings about Eminem.²¹ Nas had this to say:

He's a threat because he is White, but that's the way the world works. He's White, and he knows it. And the beauty of it is he puts it in his music all the time. I love what Eminem is doing for hip-hop and for our young people in America. He brings together White and Black people and he does it while representing rap music in its truest form.²²

Jay-Z articulates a similar feeling:

In my opinion, this is not an issue. I mean, he can rhyme. The guy's got skills. If he didn't have skills, I'd say the guy's stealing from under the table, but he's good to go. There's no denying that he can rhyme. I'm sure his race has something to do with the numbers that he does, but there's just no denying his talent.²³

Fat Joe highlights hip-hop's cross-race appeal, and again emphasizes Eminem's skill:

The thing that is so dope about hip-hop is that it's so diverse. When I first started rapping, 10 years ago, people looked at me like I was an alien because I was Puerto Rican, and at that time they weren't a lot of Latinos rapping. So you know I gotta roll out the carpet and show him love. And you can never forget that Eminem is super-nice. That's the main part of the whole thing: Eminem is dumb nice. How could you even diss him?²⁴

Without denying the role that his race has played in his success, these rappers emphasize Eminem's skills. Nas points out that Eminem is fully aware of his racial privilege and

²¹ See N.C.B. "Politics as Usual: Is Eminem's success bad for hip-hop?" *XXL*, March 2003, pg. 126.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

that his self-reflexivity earns him a certain level of respect. Nas also draws attention to the fact that hip-hop brings races together; which Fat Joe implies when he speaks of hip-hop's diversity. These rappers maintain that hip-hop is a global, multi-cultural youth subculture and that the possibility that it could create cross-racial unity should not be overlooked.

Other defenders of Eminem stress his unshakable street credibility, his economically oppressed background, his slow ascent from the underground, and his enduring connection to the Black community. In an on-line editorial, rapper Freddie Foxxx makes this argument, while flipping the "color-blind" argument from its anti-Black origins to express a more liberating form of multiculturalism:

There's no room for color in hip-hop. If there was room for color in hip-hop, it wouldn't be hip-hop. That's not what hip-hop is about. It's about being a culture fucking colorblind of anything. So when we talk about, 'fuck that motherfuckin' cracker,' he's not in hip-hop! We're talking about motherfuckers like Bill O'Reilly²⁵ or whatever the fuck. I got white dudes that I'm cool with that be like, 'Fuck that White motherfucker!' And they're not talking about his skin color. They're talking about his ideology."²⁶

On the subject of Eminem in particular, he adds:

So after he's admitted that people may treat him better because he's White, do you blame it on him? No. Is it his fault he's White? No. This ain't about being White. This is about a motherfucker who sat down and took some words in his mind and composed them on a piece of paper and then spit them on a beat. And the shit made sense! That's what this is about. He said it himself. He was from a trailer park. He basically said, 'I was White trash'. How could you knock a motherfucker who says that?

²⁵ Bill O'Reilly is a neo-conservative host of the talk show "The O'Reilly Factor," who has attacked hip-hop for the last several years. See Solomon, Akiba. "5 Reasons Bill O'Reilly Could Never Come to the 'Hood," *The Source*, March 2003, pg. 132.

²⁶ Foxxx, Freddie as told to Paine. "White People, Eminem, and Racism." *allhiphop.com*/ June 19, 2003.

...If you close your eyes and listen to Eminem, he spits like he's from the hood. You can't see, you can't hear what color he is.

Whereas Eminem's detractors emphasize appropriation, his defenders tend to focus on his respect for Black culture, his underprivileged upbringing, and his skill.

Eminem, for his part, has been careful to give credit to the Black artists who created hip-hop. His 2003 Grammy Awards speech consisted of thanking the other rappers, most of whom are Black, who have inspired him. "Instead of me coming out here and thanking the people I usually thank, because all those people that had something to do with my album know who they are, I made me a little list of MCs that I wanted to name off that inspired me to bring me where I am today," Eminem said. "Honestly, I wouldn't be here with out them."²⁷ He thanked Master Ace, Run DMC, The Beastie Boys, Nas, Jay-Z, Biggie Smalls, Tupac, and Kool G Rap.

On the economic front, Eminem works in conjunction with Black artists, such as producer Dr. Dre (who introduced him) and rapper 50 Cent (who he and Dre have jointly introduced). In this way, his success is intricately linked to, even mediated by, Black artists—a point that has previously been made by Greg Tate.²⁸

Eminem has also been tremendously self-reflexive about the role that white privilege has played in bringing about his success, as Nas and Fat Joe have suggested. In "White America," he addresses this issue directly:

Look at these eyes, baby blue, baby, just like yourself
If they were brown, Shady lose, Shady sits on the shelf
But Shady's cute, Shady knew, Shady's dimples would help
Make ladies swoon baby, ooh baby, look at my sales

²⁷ See Moore, Morris. "Eminem, Nelly, Outkast and Killer Mike Win Grammys." *allhiphop.com/*, February 24, 2003.

²⁸ See Tate, Greg. "Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects." *Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black Culture*. New York: Broadway Books, 2003.

Let's do the math, if I was black, I would've sold half
I ain't have to graduate from Lincoln high school to know that²⁹

He indicts white America for racism in the intro to the song: “How many people are proud to be citizens of this beautiful country of ours? The stripes and the stars for the men who have died to protect, the women and men who have broke their necks for the freedom of speech the United States government is sworn to uphold. Or so we’re told.” With this, he questions the rhetoric of freedom and liberty that defines America. He moves on to threats to subvert the status quo by exciting the hostility of the next generation of youth: “See the problem is I speak to suburban kids/Who otherwise would have never known these words exist.” His chorus charges: “White America, I could be one of your kids/White America, little Eric looks just like this.”

David Roediger has suggested that the popularity of hip-hop in white suburbs is “a telling sign of the dissatisfaction of white youth with whiteness” (213). I think that Eminem’s success confirms this. The problem is that young white suburban angst does not necessarily represent a radical political opportunity. Eminem’s lyrics tend to encourage random rebellion as opposed to informed political resistance. For instance, he raps:

I would have never in a million years dreamed I’d see
So many motherfuckin’ people who feel just like me
Who share the same views and the same exact beliefs
It’s like a fuckin’ army, marchin’ in back of me
So many lives I’ve touched
So much anger aimed
In no particular direction, it just sprays and sprays³⁰

²⁹ The song “White America,” is from “The Eminem Show,” Interscope Records, 2002.

³⁰ The song “White America,” is from *The Eminem Show*, Interscope Records, 2002.

There is, of course, a big difference between “spraying” anger “in no particular direction” and participating in an organized, mass movement for social and economic equality for people of color.

It appears that Eminem occupies a liminal position in popular culture. He benefits from white privilege, yet he also speaks out against it. He is aggressively self-reflexive about this process, and remains intimately involved with Black artists and the Black community. As a working-class white man who identifies with Black culture, his liminal position disturbs the binaries of white and Black America, upsets the expectations of white solidarity, and co-creates (with the Black artists he works with) the potential for cross-racial unity. However, it must not be forgotten that, like Elvis, The Rolling Stones, and Eric Clapton, Eminem has facilitated the crossover of an originally Black cultural form into white suburbia. I have to concur with Tate and Allen that this does represent a loss to the Black community, to the extent that white suburban fans remain unwilling to engage with Black struggle.

This issue resonates for me personally, as I am myself a white person who makes a living writing about an originally Black cultural form. During the course of my career, I have continually reflected on what this means, and what it should mean. I have no pat answers to this question, and can only offer a series of ever-evolving thoughts.

To begin with, I think that it is paramount to recognize white privilege. It is crucial to study and speak out on the oppressive conditions that Black people in the United States experience. It is important struggle through writing, debate, and grassroots activism to improve these conditions. I also agree with Upski that white hip-hop writers owe a debt to Black America. This debt can be repaid with respect, by supporting

campaigns for reparations and affirmative action, by contributing time, money, and energy, by making space in popular media to acknowledge racism and the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and opportunity, by staying open to feedback, and by continually evaluating one's behavior, attitudes, and motives.

There are many of other solutions that have been posited by writers on this topic. Michael Moore, for instance, practices his own form of affirmative action, and now only hires Blacks. Upski advocates spending money in Black-owned businesses, donating a certain percentage of your salary, working to support the careers of Black artists, and not infringing on Black's cultural space. Noel Ignatiev works to abolish white identity, and writes that "the task is to make it impossible for anyone to be white"(202-203). This could be accomplished by "break[ing] the laws of whiteness so flagrantly as to destroy the myth of white unanimity." In order to do this, one "would have to respond to every manifestation of white supremacy as if it were directed against them." He continues:

On an individual level, it would mean, for instance, responding to an antiblack remark by asking, "what makes you think I'm white?" On a collective level, it would mean confronting the institutions that perpetuate race: the police and the court system; all forms of segregation in schools, like tracking by "merit"; and all mechanism that favor whites in the job market, including the labor unions when necessary. (202-203)

These are but a few responses to the problem of white privilege. There are many more out there, and we will undoubtedly encounter them if we are willing to listen. But, most importantly, I think it is important not to become paralyzed by endless analysis. Radical theory is useless without radical practice. On that note, I would like to end with a quote from Cornel West that guides much of my work:

Any great artist is wrestling with evil, because that's what life is about. You can't talk about life without talking about evil. In talking about white supremacy, you are really talking about old historic values: What are you alive for? What are your callings in life? Are you willing to fight? What moral character do you have? What kind of integrity do you have? How much courage do you have? Are you brave? Are you willing to take a risk? These are basic questions. It's not like it's so complex. We've got folk in the academy who have the sharpest analysis and the most wonderful vision in the world, but who rarely take a courageous stand. That's a question of character...Anybody serious about fighting white supremacy in America will more than likely live under some death threat. There's no escape, because the hatred is so deep, the fear is so overwhelming. You've got loved ones, too. You've got to deal with that. That ain't no academic question. It's a question of, "What are you going to do with your life?" Because somebody can take it away quickly. It's no plaything, either, because you wonder, "Damn! Is my sacrifice worth what I'm willing to give up?" That's a serious question. And if you say yes, you've got to be willing to fight even more intensely. (I'm Ofay 198)

IN CONCLUSION: HIP-HOP AND HOPE¹

It's morbid the way the karma spin orbit
I memorize all my trauma and then record it
It's all live—never been Memorex
To manifest faith through my text

- ZION I²

It is late January and I am in New York City. Being in the U.S. with the country on the verge of war is a bizarre experience for a left-leaning Canadian. At a friend's house, the TV is tuned to the annual Super Bowl; thousands of Americans stand in solemn reverence as the Dixie Chicks wail out the Star-Spangled Banner. In the neighborhood deli, the morning headlines of the *New York Post* read: "France and Germany Wimp Out." In a packed bar, a CNN newscast blares, layering images of proud U.S. troops gathering at bases in the Middle East with sound bites that speak of freedom and democracy. If one were to rely on the media alone, it would be easy to get the impression that all Americans are rallying around the flag, standing behind their President in support of a war with Iraq.

But the feeling on the streets of New York is neither pro-war nor particularly patriotic. The mood is better described as one of profound ambivalence. A taxi driver shakes his head at the radio; people in line at a restaurant exchange despairing

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published as a newspaper article. See Henley, Tara. "A New Game—Hip-Hop Takes a Political Turn in NYC," *The Georgia Straight*, March 15, 2003.

² From "Karma," from the album *Deep Water Slang*, Raptivism Records, 2003.

predictions; a group of students grimly distribute antiwar leaflets at a subway station. All eyes are on the impending conflict; watching it unfold on TV, reading about it, debating it, and, at times, trying desperately to ignore it. The hip-hop community is no exception.

Anti-government resistance has always existed in the hip-hop community, and it has been steadily increasing since 9-11, both on and off wax. Nas addresses these issues on his album *Stillmatic* in the songs “Rule” and “My Country.”³ Reverend Run of Run-DMC is working on an antiwar record, the Beastie Boys are releasing a song called “In a World Gone Mad,” Jay-Z, Nas, Outkast, Missy Elliot, and Russell Simmons have joined Musicians United Against the War, Chuck D has labeled the impending conflict “grand theft oil,” and both P. Diddy and Common have spoken out against the war at concerts.⁴ Talib Kweli has released his protest song “The Proud,”⁵ and Mr. Lif has put out his “Emergency Rations” EP.⁶ It has recently been announced that Paris is in the studio recording an album to be titled *Sonic Jihad*.⁷ I have come to New York—hip-hop’s commercial and cultural capital—to meet with artists, and to experience the growing anti-war movement firsthand.

It’s a painfully cold Saturday night in the city that never sleeps. In a mid-size club in the ultra trendy Williamsburg district of Brooklyn, several hundred hip-hop heads await a performance from underground MC and ex-schoolteacher J-Live. In contrast to the freezing temperature outside, the packed venue is hot and claustrophobic; the crowd charged with anticipation.

³ From the album *Stillmatic*, Columbia Records, 2001.

⁴ See Sanders, Christopher. “P. Diddy Not Happy With War,” www.allhiphop.com/, March 22, 2003, and Strong, Nolan. “Various Rappers Speak Against War,” www.allhiphop.com/, March 16, 2003.

⁵ From the album *Quality*, Rawkus/MCA, 2002.

⁶ From the EP *Emergency Rations*, DefJux Records, 2002.

⁷ Paris. “Killers on the Payroll,” www.allhiphop.com/, February 12, 2002.

Finally, J-Live takes the stage with hype-man Wordsworth and launches into a witty, electric set. Heads nod, arms pump; the applause is deafening. At around 3 a.m., J-Live drops “Satisfied,” a jam from his recent album *All of the Above* that many consider hip-hop’s most strident post-9-11 critique of America. Over reggae-flavored, bass-heavy beats, he raps:

Now it’s all about NYPD caps and Pentagon bumper stickers
But yo, you still a nigga
It ain’t right that them cops and them firemen died
That shit is real tragic, but it damn sure ain’t magic
It won’t make the brutality disappear
It won’t pull equality from behind your ear
It won’t make a difference in a two-party country
If the President cheats to win another four years.⁸

He hollers: “Brooklyn, where you at?” and the crowd explodes in applause.

Earlier that same night, Dead Prez’s MC Stic is eating dinner at a funky vegetarian restaurant in the East Village. He is surrounded by several members of his crew, who lounge and munch on southern-fried tofu. The atmosphere is friendly and relaxed; DMX plays in the background and Stic slaps hands with fans that approach the table to give props.

Since their debut album *Let’s Get Free*,⁹ Dead Prez has established itself as one of the most radical groups in hip-hop. With a style that merges the raw street ethos of N.W.A. and the political savvy of Public Enemy, MCs Stic and M1 have addressed issues ranging from police brutality to the growing prison industry. Most famously, MTV banned their video for “They Schools”—a track that attacks the American school system for perpetuating racism.

⁸ From the album *All of the Above*, Coup d’Etat Records, 2002.

⁹ *Let’s Get Free*, Loud/Columbia Records, 2000.

Last fall, after problems with their record label Sony/Columbia, Dead Prez changed their name to dpz and independently released an LP titled *Turn Off The Radio*.¹⁰ The disc is a timely collection of tracks, including the charged “Know Your Enemy,” which targets American patriotism. On it, Stic raps:

Now everybody walkin' round patriotic
How we gonna fight to keep freedom when we ain't got it?
You wanna stop terrorists?
Start with the U.S. imperialists
Ain't no track record like America's
See bin Laden was trained by the C.I.A.
But I guess if you a terrorist for the U.S. then its OK

“Fuck George Bush’s war,” Stic says, when asked to elaborate on the group’s anti-war stance. “George Bush is waging war on *us*—right here, in Brooklyn, in the Bronx, in the ‘hoods all over America. The police is wildin’ out. Police is harassing niggas; they raping niggas with plungers, they terrorizing the community. They are the number one terrorists.” The other men at the table nod in agreement.

“As for Iraq, the Iraqi people got a right to freedom and to self-determination and to live,” he continues. “Nobody wants no war. The same people that put us in prison, that cut off the educational spending, and the welfare spending—but they drafting us to war? What are we really fighting for anyway? Niggas, we got good sense. We’re not tryin’ to go to that shit’.”

“The U.S. controls the media that people read and get,” adds the thoughtful rapper. “So you gotta listen to the raps and you gotta listen to the streets and the hoods to see what the community is thinking and what we are really standing for. We are trying to

¹⁰ *Turn Off the Radio*, Holla Black Records, 2002.

“speak not just for Dead Prez, but for the people who don’t be getting the opportunity to speak.”

Underground rapper, ex-Company Flow member, and Def-Jux record-label founder El-P is reached by phone at his Brooklyn apartment, recovering from a recent trip to Costa Rica and sipping his morning coffee. His solo debut album *Fantastic Damage*,¹¹ released in 2002, is a cathartic work influenced by the devastation of September 11.

“I feel wonderful,” El-P says sarcastically, when asked about his feelings on the looming war. “I see the dawning of a new age of understanding. I just see great things coming out of it—a lot of really cool news programs. I think we are really headed in the right direction. I think that we should just keep going. I think we should pick a country that literally doesn’t even have an army. I think that that should be our next goal.”

“I think that it’s insane,” he adds, more seriously. “I think that we are headed toward the inevitable destruction of our society, period. Roman Empire-style.”

“But what can you do?” he asks. “That is a lot of what my record is about. I am just trying to enjoy the same rights of passage that people before me did. I am trying to grow up, I am trying to fall in love, I am trying to build something for myself, I am trying to figure out how to exist—and I don’t want that to be interrupted. It’s not fair. Unfortunately, that selfish desire and the reality of what’s happening are conflicting. I don’t know what to do. I’ll be honest with you—I really don’t know what to do.”

“But I’m not here to bludgeon people with negativity,” he continues. “I see hope and I see beauty. That’s the whole point of the album *Fantastic Damage*. Out of these things—out of the damage—comes this inspiration. On the one hand I wanted to present

¹¹ *Fantastic Damage*, DefJux Records, 2002.

you with all of my horrible negative fear. And on the other hand, I wanted to present the reason why the fear of destruction is there. Why else would you fear it unless there were these things that were beautiful? I see a lot of power and a lot of excitement and energy and beauty in our generation.”

The next afternoon, it is still minus 29 degrees out. J-Live is sitting on a couch in the chilly, empty lounge of Brooklyn’s North Six nightclub. He has just finished sound check and his toddler dances around him.

I ask him about the mood in the New York underground regarding the conflict with Iraq. J-Live laughs and says: “There isn’t necessarily a united front amongst artists that sell less than 20,000 records. I can only vouch for cats in my circle.”

I ask J-Live how it feels, as a Five Percenter, to see the strong current of anti-Islamic sentiment in the media. He is quick to redirect. It doesn’t take a Five Percenter, he counters, to recognize that we are only getting half the story on the war. “It’s a struggle for oil in the name of freedom,” he says.

“That’s not even to say that I’m this militant activist on the mike,” he adds. “Because I got rhymes about partying, I got rhymes about women, about being a dope MC, representing on-stage, raising a family. But at the end of the day, my world-view, and what I have learned from the music that I’ve listened to over the years—and what it has inspired me to go study—also influence the way that I write,” he emphasizes. “And it’s not something that I will hold my tongue about.”

Several nights later, after getting lost briefly in the matrix that is New York’s subway system, I find my way to the Clinton/Washington station in Brooklyn and locate

a baseball-cap-clad individual pacing the street corner above.¹² I establish that he is Oddjobs' MC Nomi, and the two of us set out into the darkness. After a half hour trek, we arrive at an apartment block and enter a warm suite. Fortified with hot tea, I am able to concentrate on the matter at hand—getting the scoop on this up-and-coming rap group.

The Oddjobs represent the next generation of hip-hop, the youthful ranks that are making their slow ascent from the underground. The group moved from Minneapolis, Minnesota to Brooklyn several years ago, and were subsequently signed to the fledgling indie label Third Earth Music. The crew—which consists of MCs Nomi, Crescent Moon, Advizer, and DJs Deetalx and Anatomy—got their first break when Crescent Moon caught the attention of fellow Twin Cities rapper and underground legend Slug from Atmosphere. This connection led to an invitation to join Atmosphere's 2002 "God Loves Ugly" tour, during which the Oddjobs managed to generate a considerable buzz for themselves. They followed with a full-length album *Drums*,¹³ and an EP *The Shopkeeper's Wife*.¹⁴

As the gentle lull of a John Coltrane album fills the brownstone apartment which all five artists share, Nomi and Crescent Moon discuss the war. "I think that President Bush is using the September 11th attacks to fuel this feeling of retaliation that is the American way," Crescent Moon reflects. "I think that the whole fear element is being used to stimulate blood lust." He adds: "I think that the scariest thing is how the media—especially in America—is conditioning people."

¹² This section is from another previously published article. See Henley, Tara. "The Oddjobs at Home With the Personal and the Political," *The Georgia Straight*, June 6, 2003.

¹³ *Drums*, Third Earth Records, 2002.

¹⁴ *The Shopkeeper's Wife*, Third Earth Records, 2003.

“I don’t believe this is a justified war,” MC Nomi says. “I believe that it’s fueled by our country’s current economic situation. It’s not so much about nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction—there are many countries that have these things. I think it’s a mask for what it’s really about. The whole anti-terrorist movement and stopping the Axis of Evil is really just a mask for America to keep its dominance over the globe.”

“In the year and a half that George W. has been in office, all we have heard from him is terrorism and war,” he continues. “We don’t know anything about the health care plan, education, taxes. Everything is just slipped under the rug. That’s not how you run a democracy.”

I stand at the Clinton/Washington station alone, reflecting on the last several days. As I ruminate on the artists that I have met and the messages that they have delivered, the station fills a radio blaring President Bush’s State of the Union address. I feel dismay, horror, and nausea at the knowledge that is only a matter of time until America invades Iraq. But as I recall my last several days in this exciting, intense, beautiful city, I feel a wave of hope.

I realize that this is what hip-hop provides me with: hope. My personal hopefulness, about the state of America, about the future of the people of color inside of its borders, and for humanity as a whole, reflects both my response to hip-hop and a conscious practice of hope that I have attempted to inject into my academic work since hearing a paper on the topic several years ago, a paper which was delivered by Ghassan Hage at the Transculturalism Symposium at the University of British Columbia.¹⁵

¹⁵ Hage, Ghassan. “Globalization, Social Belonging, and the Political Economy of Hope,” Transculturalisms Symposium, February 24, 2002, University of British Columbia.

In his talk, titled “Globalization, Social Belonging, and the Political Economy of Hope,” Hage expressed his desire to create a political economy of hope—a culture in which hope is produced, distributed, and exchanged. He believes that hope has been largely ignored in academia because it is a difficult notion to make operational. Hope is a largely ambiguous concept and there is a long tradition within philosophy of viewing hope with suspicion. Hage links this cynicism to the ongoing critique of religious hope—alternatively referred to as ‘passive hope’—a type of hope that makes people detach from their own political realities.

The kind of hope that Hage envisions is a hope that fuses with desire and therefore becomes active. This ‘active hope’ can be used to define both the state of self and the state of self within society. This concept links well with Freire’s notion of *conscientizaçao*, which, again, refers to “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality”(35).

Hage explains that within contemporary capitalist culture, hope has become inseparable from “dreams of upward mobility.”¹⁶ Hage proposes that “the most radical intellectual task,” presently at hand, is finding new ways to hope.¹⁷ He claims that communal identification is crucial to this construction of hope. Communal identification with the “we” allows people to transcend the hopelessness that pervades modern life and move into conscious struggle for social change. I have come to believe that hip-hop forms the communal “we,” and effectively constructs, distributes, and exchanges hope.

¹⁶ Hage, Ghassan. “Globalization, Social Belonging, and the Political Economy of Hope,” Transculturalisms Symposium, February 2002, University of British Columbia.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

This recognition is what is so often missing from academic and press perspectives. Hip-hop articulates the horrific economic and psychic conditions that have emerged in post-industrial America, and the frightening collective social response to these conditions. It addresses both the violence created within inner city communities and the violence imposed on these communities by the government, the police, and white America. Hip-hop speaks of reality, but it also speaks of fantasy—the fantasy of punishing the oppressor, of overcoming poverty and achieving extraordinary wealth, of escaping the harsh realities of urban America. But hip-hop also generates and distributes hope. It provides a mode of identification across class and race lines, a way to protest current conditions, and the site of pleasure, play, and artistic expression.

Academics and music critics alike need to recognize that it is possible for an art form to be both regressive and progressive at the same time, just as it is possible for human beings to embody both tendencies. Hip-hop is sexist, violent, and homophobic. But it is also radical and resistant. It encompasses all of these impulses, and many more, and it has become the voice of the current generation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abu-Jamal, Mumia. Live From Death Row. New York: Avon Books, 1995.
- Aidi, Hisham. "Jihads in the Hood—Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror." *Middle East Report* 224, Fall 2002.
- Allah, Beloved. "The Bomb: The Greatest Story Never Told." *The Word*, 1987, posted at Nation of Gods and Earths website: <http://metalab.unc.edu/nge/> January 16, 2003.
- Allen, Harry. "The Unbearable Whiteness of Emceeing—What the Eminence of Eminem Says About Race." *The Source*, February, 2003, pgs. 90-92.
- Allen, Ernest Jr. "Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap." Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture, Philadelphia: Temple Press, 1996, pgs. 159-91.
- Baker, Houston. Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Berman, Marshall. "In the Forest of Symbols: Some Notes on Modernism in New York." All That is Solid Melts Into Air—The Experience of Modernity. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982.
- Boyd, Todd. The New H.N.I.C.(Head Nigga In Charge)—The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip-Hop. New York: New York University Press, 2002.
- Bulger, Adam; Callan, Matt; Koyen, Jeff; Taibbi, Matt; Taylor, J.R.; Zaitchik, Alexander. "The 50 Most Loathsome New Yorkers." *New York Press*, Volume 6, Issue 13, March 26, 2003.
- Carter, Shawn. "In My Lifetime," *Vibe*, January 2003.
- Century, Douglas. "Hip-hop Cops: Is the NYPD at War With Hip-hop?" *MTV.com*, February 5, 2003.
- Chomsky, Noam. 9-11. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001.
- Clark, Antoine. "Stranger Among Us: hip-hop's interest among the boys in blue has increased," *The Source*, No. 162, March 2003, p. 130-31.
- Clegg, Claude Andrew III. An Original Man—The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

- Coleman, Beth. "Pimp Notes on Autonomy," Everything But the Burden—What White People Are Taking From Black Culture. New York: Broadway Books, 2003, pgs. 68-80.
- Colson, Chuck. "Evangelizing for Evil in Our Prisons," *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2002.
- Cross, Brian. It's Not About a Salary - Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles. New York: Verso, 1993.
- Curtis, Edward E. Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islam. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Davis, Angela. "Nappy Happy: a conversation with Ice Cube and Angela Y. Davis." *Transition Magazine*, Vol. 58, 1992.
- _____. Women, Race and Class. New York: Random House, 1981.
- Davis, Wade, McKenzie, Ian and Kennedy, Shane. Nomads of the Dawn—The Penan of the Borneo Rainforest. Berkeley: Pomegranate, 1995.
- Delany, Sheila. Writing Woman. New York: Schocken Books, 1983.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folk. New York: Dover Publications, 1994.
- Dyer, Richard. "White," *Screen*, Fall 1998.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. Holler if You Hear Me—Searching for Tupac Shakur. New York: Basic Civitas, 2001.
- Evanzz, Karl. The Messenger—The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.
- Fazier, E. Franklin. The Black Bourgeoisie. New York: The Free Press, 1957.
- Fernando, S.H. The New Beats. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.
- Flexner, Eleanor. Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the U.S. New York: Atheneum, 1973.
- Foxxx, Freddie as told to Paine. "White People, Eminem, and Racism." *allhiphop.com*/ June 19, 2003.
- Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1970.

- Gates, Henry Louis. The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988
- George, Nelson. Hip Hop America. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
- Gibbs, Melvin. "ThugGods: Spiritual Darkness and Hip-Hop." Everything But the Burden—What White People are Taking From Black Culture. New York: Broadway Books, 2003.
- Goldblatt, Mark. "Hip-Hop's Grim Undertones." *USA Today*, October 29, 2002.
- Gore, Tipper. "Hate, Rape, and Rap." *The Washington Post*, July 1990.
- Grantham, Christian. "Why Artists Defended Eminem," *Gay & Lesbian Review*, May/June 2001, pg. 18.
- Guevara, Nancy. "Women Writin' Rappin' Breakin'." The Year Left. New York: Verso, 1987, pgs. 160-175.
- Hage, Ghassan. "Globalization, Social Belonging, and the Political Economy of Hope," Transculturalisms Symposium, February 2002, University of British Columbia.
- Haley, Alex. The Autobiography of Malcolm X. New York: Ballantine Publishing, 1964.
- Harris, Cheryl. "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, No. 107, 1993, pgs. 1709-1791.
- Haupt, Adam. "Stifled Noise in the South African Music Box: Prophets of da City and the Struggle for Public Space," *SATJ*, Vol. 10, No. 2, September 1996, pgs. 51-61.
- Hazard-Donald, Katrina. "Dance in Hip-Hop Culture." Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture, Philadelphia: Temple Press, 1996, pgs. 220-35.
- hooks, bell. Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism. Boston: South End Press, 1981.
- _____. "Interview: Ice Cube's Rap on Sistas is Rough. Bell hooks is a Radical Feminist Scholar. Their Deepest Connection is a Passion for Speaking the Truth." *Spin*, Vol. 9, No. 1, April 1993
- _____. Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- _____. "Sexism and Misogyny: Who Takes the Rap?" *Z Magazine*, February 1994, pgs. 26-29.

Henley, Tara. "A New Game—Hip-Hop Takes a Political Turn in NYC," *The Georgia Straight*, March 15, 2003.

_____. "The Oddjobs at Home With the Personal and the Political," *The Georgia Straight*, June 6, 2003.

_____. "Why is Sarah Jones Speaking Up?" *The Peak*, July 30, 2001.

Ignatiev, Noel. "The New Abolitionists," *Transition 73—The White Issue*, 1998, pgs. 199-203.

Janieson, Kathleen Hall. Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Johnson, Brett and Russell, Malik. "Nation of Islam—Time To Build." *The Source*, No. 158, November 2002, pgs. 118-122.

Kelley, Robin. "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics—'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles." Race Rebels—Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class. New York: Free Press, 1994.

_____. Yo Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Kitwana, Bakari. The Hip-Hop Generation—Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002.

_____. Kitwana, Bakari. The Rap on Gangsta Rap. Chicago: Third World Press, 1994.

Klein, Naomi. No Logo—Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000.

La Franco, Robert. "The 2nd Annual *Rolling Stone* Money Report: Rock's 50 Richest." *Rolling Stone*, No. 919, April 3, 2003, p. 57-61.

Landry, Bart. "The Enduring Dilemma of Race in America," America at Century's End. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Lewis, Bernard. Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror. New York: Modern Library, 2003.

_____. "The Roots of Muslim Rage—Why so many Muslims deeply resent the West, and why their bitterness will not easily be mollified." *The Atlantic*, September 1990.

_____. What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle East Response. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Lipsitz, George. "History, Hip Hop, and the Post-Colonial Politics of Sound." Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Politics of Place. London: Verso, 1994, pgs. 25-48.

_____. The Possessive Investment in Whiteness—How White People Profit From Identity Politics. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998

_____. "We Know What Time it is: Race, Class and Youth Culture in the Nineties." Microphone Fiends - Youth Music and Youth Culture. New York: Routledge: 1994, pgs. 17-28.

Lincoln, C. Eric. The Black Muslims in America. U.S.A.: Beacon Press, 1961, 1973.

Lunine, Brih David. "Genocide 'N Juice: Reading the Postcolonial Discourse in Hip-Hop Culture." Postcolonial America. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000, pgs. 254-74.

Lusane, Clarence. Race in the Global Era—African-Americans at the Millennium. Boston: South End Press, 1997.

MacMichael, Ryan A. "Interview with C. Delores Tucker." The Mary Washington College Bulletin, February 1996, <http://www.laze.net/interviewed/dtuck.html>, June 16, 2003.

Mailer, Norman. "The White Negro." Advertisements for Myself. New York: Putnam, 1959.

Maxwell, Ian. "True to the Music: Authenticity, Articulation and Authorship in Sydney," Social Semiotics, Vol.4, No. 1-2, 1994, pgs. 117-37.

Meili, Tisha. I am the Central Park Jogger—A Story of Hope and Possibility. New York: Scribner, 2003.

Mitchell, Tony. Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the U.S.A. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

Moynihan, Daniel P. The Negro Family: The Case for National Action. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965.

Moore, Michael. Stupid White Men. New York: Regan Books, 2001.

Moore, Morris. "Eminem, Nelly, Outkast and Killer Mike Win Grammy's." allhiphop.com/, February 24, 2003.

- Morano, Marc. "Homegrown Terrorists Incubate Behind Bars," *CNSNews.com*, November 14, 2002.
- Morgan, Joan. "Fly-Girls, Bitches, and Hoes: Notes of a Hip Hop Feminist." *Social-Text*, Winter 1995, pgs. 151-157.
- _____. When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
- Muhammad, Elijah. Message to the Black Man. Chicago: Muhammad Mosque of Islam, No. 2, 1965.
- Nasheed, Tariq "K-Flex". The Art of Mackin'. U.S.A.: Research Associates School Times Publications, 2000.
- N.C.B. "Politics as Usual: Is Eminem's success bad for hip-hop?" *XXL*, March 2003, pg. 126.
- Neisel, Jeff. "Hip-Hop Matters: Rewriting the Sexual Politics of Rap Music." Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Newfield, Jack. "How the Other Half Still Lives," *The Nation*, March 17, 2003.
- Newton, Huey P. Revolutionary Suicide. New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1973.
- Olavarria, Margot. "Rap and Revolution: Hip-Hop Comes to Cuba." *NACLA Report on the Americas*. May/June 2002, pgs. 28-30.
- Papastergiadis, Nikos. "Tracing Hybridity in Theory." The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, Pgs. 168-231.
- Paris. "Killers on the Payroll," *www.allhiphop.com/*, February 12, 2002.
- Perkins, William Eric. "Nation of Islam Ideology in the Rap of Public Enemy," *Black Sacred Music*, Vol.5, No.1, Spring 1991, pg. 41-50.
- _____. "The Rap Attack." Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.
- Pipes, Daniel. Militant Islam Reaches America. New York: Norton, 2002.

- Potter, Russell A. Spectacular Vernaculars—Hip Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Powell, Kevin. "Confessions of a Recovering Misogynist," *Ms. Magazine*, May/June 2000.
- _____. Keepin' It Real—Post-MTV Reflections on Race, Sex, and Politics. New York: Ballantine Books, 1997.
- Prevos, Andre. "Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in France During the 1980s and the 1990s: Developments and Reactions," *The European Studies Journal*, Vol.XV, No.2, 1998, pgs. 1-33.
- Quinn, Eithne. "'Who's the Mack?: The Performativity and Politics of the Pimp Figure in Gangsta Rap.'" *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 34, No.1, April 2000, pgs. 115-36.
- Rahn, Janice. Painting Without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture. Westport: Greenwood, 2002.
- Remsburg, Charlie. "Tenants Don't Want Jay-Z," *allhiphop.com/*, May 3, 2002
- Renna, Cathy. "Own Up to Your Own Words!" *Gay & Lesbian Review*, May/June, 2001, pgs. 16-17.
- Ro, Ronin. Gansta—Merchandizing the Rhymes of Violence. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.
- _____. Have Gun, Will Travel—The Spectacular Rise and Fall of Death Row Records. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.
- _____. Bad Boy—The Influence of Sean "Puffy" Combs on the Music Industry. New York: Pocket Books, 2001
- Roberts, Robin. "'Ladies First': Queen Latifah's Afrocentric Feminist Music Video." *African American Review*, Vol. 28, No. 2, pgs. 245-257.
- Robinson, Randall. The Debt—What America Owes to Blacks. New York: Dutton, 2000.
- Rodriguez, Jayson. "Benzino Fires Back at Eminem," *allhiphop.com/*, January 11, 2002,
- Roediger, David. Colored White—Transcending the Racial Past. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Rose, Tricia. Black Noise - Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

- _____. "Flow, Layering, and Rupture in Postindustrial New York." Signifying, sanctifyin' and slam dunking: a reader in African expressive culture. Ed. Gena Dagel Caponi, U.S.A.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999, pgs. 190-221.
- _____. "Hidden Politics: Discursive and Institutional Policing of Rap Music." Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.
- Ross, Andrew and Rose, Tricia. Microphone Fiends—Youth Music and Youth Culture. New York: Routledge: 1994.
- Rossi, C.T. "The Snipers: Do Islam and Hip-Hop Make a Deadly Mix?" *Free Congress Foundation*, November 8, 2002.
- Rich, Frank. "Mr. Ambassador," *The New York Time Magazine*, November 3, 2002, pgs. 52-57.
- Rux, Carl Hancock. "Eminem: The New White Negro," Everything But the Burden—What White People Are Taking From Black Culture. New York: Broadway Books, 2003, pgs. 15-38.
- Said, Edward. Covering Islam—How the Media and the Experts Determine How We see the Rest of the World. New York: Vintage Books, 1981.
- Samuels, David. "The Rap on Rap: The Black Music That Isn't Either," *The New Republic*, November 11, 1991.
- Sanders, Christopher. "P. Diddy Not Happy With War," *www.allhiphop.com/*, March 22, 2003.
- Shakur, Assata. Assata: An Autobiography. Chicago: Laurence Hill Books, 1987.
- Simmons, Russell. Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money, and God. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001.
- Smith, Zadie. "The Zen of Eminem." *Vibe*, November 2002, pgs. 90-98.
- Solomon, Akiba. "5 Reasons Bill O'Reilly Could Never Come to the 'Hood,'" *The Source*, March 2003, pg. 132.
- Spencer, Jon Michael. "Rhapsody in Black: Utopian Aspirations" *Theology Today*, January 1992.
- Strong, Nolan. "Various Rappers Speak Against War," *www.allhiphop.com/*, March 16, 2003.

- Sullivan, Randall. Labrinth—A Detective Investigates the Murders of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G., the Implication of Death Row Records' Suge Night, and the Origins of the Los Angeles Police Scandal. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2002.
- Swendenburg, Ted. "Snipers and the Panic Over Five Percent Islamic Hip-Hop," *Middle East Report*, November 10, 2002.
- _____. "Islam in the Mix: Lessons of the Five Percent." *Presented at the Anthropology Colloquium, University of Arkansas, February 19, 1997*.
- Tate, Greg. "Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects." Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black Culture. New York: Broadway Books, 2003.
- Thorton, Sarah. "The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital." The Subcultures Reader. New York: Routledge, 1997, pgs. 200-212.
- Tomlinson, John. Globalization and Culture. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1999.
- Toop, David. The Rap Attack- African Jive to New York Hip Hop. London: Pluto Press, 1984.
- Toure, "Gay Rappers: Too Real For Hip-Hop," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2003.
- Trotsky, Leon. Art and Revolution. New York: Pathfinder, 1970.
- Turan, Kenneth. "Yo Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2002.
- Turkish, Tavia Nyong'o. "Who's Afraid of Marshall Mathers?" *Gay & Lesbian Review*, May/June 2001, pgs. 14-16.
- Tyler, Robin. "Eminem: Pied Piper of Hate." *Gay & Lesbian Review*, May/June 2001, pgs. 12-14.
- Valdes, Mimi Ed. Vibe Hip-Hop Divas. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Vaughan-Scott, Adrian. Indelible Revolution - 500 Years Manifesto. New York: Independent, 2000.
- Verstegen, Ian. "'I'm Still Number One!': B.D.P.'s Ambivalent Leadership of Political Rap." *Schuyllkill: A Creative and Critical Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 2000, pgs. 70-80.
- Walkowitz, Daniel J. "New York: A Tale of Two Cities." Snowbelt Cities. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Wallace, Michelle. Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman. New York: Verso, 1979.

_____. "When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music is Rap." *The New York Times*, July 29, 1990.

West, Cornel. Race Matters. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

_____. "I'm Ofay, You're Ofay—In Conversation With Noel Ignatiev and William Upski Wimsatt." *Transition 73—The White Issue*, 1998, pgs. 176-198.

Williams, Zoe. "Hiphopophobia." *The Guardian*, April 29, 2003.

Wimsatt, William Upski. Bomb the Suburbs. New York: Subway and Elevated Press, 1994.

_____. "In Defense of Wiggers," *Transition 73—The White Issue*, 1998, pgs. 199-203.

_____. No More Prisons. New York: Subway and Elevated/Soft Skull Press, 1999.

Winslow, Mike. "The NYPD is Targeting Rappers," *allhiphop.com/*, April 4, 2001.

Winston, Dallas. "Jay-Z's Gun Trial Delayed," *allhiphop.com/*, June 11, 2001

Wright, Steve. "A Love Born of Hate: Autonomist Rap in Italy," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2000, pgs. 117-35.

Wynter, Leon E. American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business and the End of White America. New York: Crown Publishers, 2002.

Younge, Gary. "Rhyme and Reason." *Gaurdian Weekly*, June 21-27, 2001.

Zinn, Howard. A People's History of the United States. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1980.

SELECT DISCOGRAPHY

- 50 Cent. *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, Shady/Aftermath/Interscope, 2003.
- Abstract Rude. *P.A.I.N.T.*, Battleaxe, 2001.
- Bahamadia. *Kollage*, Capitol, 1996.
- Brand Nubian. *In God We Trust*, Elektra, 1993.
- Busta Rhymes. *It Ain't Safe No More*, J Records, 2003.
- Common. *Electric Circus*, MCA, 2002.
- De La Soul. *Art Official Intelligence: Bionx*, Tommy Boy, 2001.
- Dead Prez. *Let's Get Free*, Loud/Columbia, 2000.
- _____. *Turn Off the Radio*, Holla Black, 2002.
- Diggable Planets. *Reachin' (A New Refutation of Time and Space)*, Capitol, 1993.
- Dr. Dre. *The Chronic*, Death Row/Interscope, 1992.
- _____. *The Chronic 2001*, Interscope, 1999.
- El-P. *Fantastic Damage*, Def Jux, 2002.
- Eminem. *The Eminem Show*, Interscope, 2002.
- Gangstarr. *Moment of Truth*, Noo Trybe/Virgin, 1998.
- J-Live. *All of the Above*, Coup D'Etat, 2002.
- Jay-Z. *The Blueprint*, Roc-a-fella/Def Jam, 2001.
- _____. *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse*, Rock-A-Fella/Def Jam, 2002.
- _____. *Vol. 3 Life and Times of S. Carter*, Roc-a-fell/Def Jam, 1999.
- Lauryn Hill. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse/Columbia. 1998.
- Ludacris. *Word of Mouf*, Def Jam South, 2001.
- Morcheeba. *Charango*, Reprise, 2002.

Mos Def. *Black on Both Sides*, Rawkus, 1999.

Mr. Lif. *Emergency Rations*, Def Jux, 2002.

Nas. *God's Son*, Columbia, 2002.

_____. *It Was Written*, Columbia, 1996.

_____. *Stillmatic*, Columbia, 2001.

Notorious B.I.G. *Ready to Die*, Bad Boy/Arista, 1994.

Oddjobs. *Drums*, Third Earth, 2002.

_____. *The Shopkeeper's Wife*, Third Earth, 2003.

Poor Righteous Teachers. *Holy Intellect*, Profile, 1990.

Snoop Dogg. *Doggystyle*, Death Row/Interscope, 1993.

Talib Kweli. *Quality*, Rawkus/MCA, 2002.

The Coup. *Party Music*, Arista, 2001.

_____. *Steal This Album, Polemic*, 1997.

The Roots. *Phrenology*, MCA, 2002.

Tupac Shakur. *All Eyez on Me*, Death Row/Interscope, 1995.

_____. *Me Against the World*, Interscope, 1995.

_____. *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, Interscope, 1993.

_____. *2pacalypse Now*, Interscope, 1991.

Various Artists. *2 Fast, 2 Furious Soundtrack*, Island Def Jam, 2003.

Various Artists. *Unbound*, Ground Control, 2000.

Various Artists. *Xen Cuts*, Ninja Tunes, 2000.

Queen Latifah. *Black Reign*, Motown, 1993.

ZION I. *Deep Water Slang*, Raptivism, 2003.

APPENDIX A*

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS



BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA
CANADA V5A 1S6
Telephone: 604-291-3447
FAX: 604-268-6785

August 13, 2003

Ms. Tara Henley
Graduate Student
Department of English
Simon Fraser University

Dear Ms. Henley:

**Re: 'Make me nod my head in reverence':
passion, pain and politics in hip-hop poetry**

The above-titled ethics application has been granted approval by the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board, in accordance with Policy R 20.01, "Ethics Review of Research Involving Human Subjects".

Sincerely,

Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director
Office of Research Ethics

* For inclusion in thesis/dissertation/extended essays/research project report, as submitted to the university library in fulfillment of final requirements for graduation. Note: correct page number required.