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The purpose of this thesis is to define and document some of the issues and identifications commonly linked to the hip-hop generation. This particular faction of the African-American population is classified in the introduction as a group with unique values and cultural perspectives, as well as a host of generational mentalities (productive and pernicious) firmly embedded in the primary cultural movement of their era: hip-hop. Rap music is the greatest artistic achievement of this generation. Its popularity transcends economic, racial, and geographic boundaries. The lyrics of rap artists, from select periods of the hip-hop era, will be the major objects of critical analysis in this thesis.

The hip-hop generation is alternately referred to as the post civil rights generation. Thus, the latter term provides a framework for locating the cultural and socioeconomic experiences of these African-Americans. The aftermath of the civil rights/ black power movement was characterized by many visible signs of social progress: desegregated public facilities, an increase in black elected officials, and a steadily growing black middle class. However the onset of globalization and the steep decline of American manufacturing jobs throughout the 1980s and 1990s contributed to the presence of a troubled urban minority underclass. Despite its crucial role in defining and producing contemporary hip-hop culture, this same minority underclass has been substantially disenfranchised and marginalized in the broader national sphere. The implications of this cultural paradox are at the heart of "Representin'."

REPRESENTIN': THE RISE OF THE HIP-HOP GENERATION

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The rise of hip-hop culture is one of the most compelling stories in contemporary popular culture. It is the story of an urban culture, and more specifically, the saga of a musical movement that values ideas like innovation, liberation, and power. Since its inception hip-hop has transcended its role as a distinctive voice for masses of working-class young black and brown Americans.

Hip-hop is a cultural art form that originated in the impoverished postindustrial urban milieu of the Bronx, New York, three decades ago. Rap music, one of four artistic elements subsumed under the hip-hop rubric, has evolved into one of the most lucrative and controversial flash points of popular culture. Furthermore, rap as a commodified product has been responsible, along with globalization, for the circulation and reinterpretation of the hip-hop paradigm around the globe. In spite of its flaws, the hip-hop paradigm has served as an invaluable cultural resource for a generation of black and Latino Americans constructing their authentic political and social identities. This thesis specifically addresses the fundamental issues and sensibilities of a group of African-Americans known as the hip-hop generation.

The hip-hop generation consists primarily of African-Americans born in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, between 1965 and 1984, who are defined by their own set of beliefs and values. The term and its contingent definition were actually coined by hip-hop journalist and cultural critic Bakari Kitwana in his 2002 book *The Hip-Hop Generation*. Kitwana's text is devoted to explicating the ethical, political and gender struggles native to black Americans who

have come of age in the post civil rights era.

These African-Americans are the beneficiaries of societal progress like integrated schools, affirmative action, and voting rights; they are also the children of inflation, widespread unemployment, crime waves, and the Reagan era War on Drugs. They have experienced subtle and explicit racism, perpetuated intraracial class divisions, and matured sexually in the shadow of AIDS. Even after the election of the nation's first black president, Barack Obama, the issue of race, for the hip-hop generation, continues to be shaded by intense public conflicts, contradictions, and social nuances. Obama is one of many prominent individuals celebrated by the hip-hop generation; this distinguished group includes Michael Jordan, Spike Lee, Jay-Z, Queen Latifah, and Mos Def. In many ways, these iconic figures validate the aspirations, pride, and trials of the hip-hop generation.

The hip-hop generation is no different from any other generation in that it shapes its own unique purpose. Philosopher Frantz Fanon once wrote: "Each generation out of relative obscurity must discover their mission, fulfill it or betray it" (Fanon 24). One way of linking Fanon's critical insight to the hip-hop generation involves an analysis of the historical challenges endured by this group. Succinctly stated, the hip-hop generation has been impacted by periodic phases of abandonment. They have been abandoned by the government, black elected officials, public education systems, religious institutions, and in many instances, their parents. As a consequence of this multifaceted abandonment, hip-hop generationers have had to stand on their own, articulating (in some cases legitimizing) their struggles and perspectives while simultaneously realizing their own voices in terms of social, racial, and gender representation.

The basic elements of hip-hop cultural expression collectively afforded young working-class blacks avenues of entertainment, leisure, and escape before they gradually coalesced into

a common artistic platform from which to pursue clearly discernible goals of political empowerment, economic independence, and respect in the national arena. The artists, or rappers, most committed to these goals have confronted forms of covert resistance as they operated within the constraints of a white capitalist patriarchal power structure. However, hip-hop culture's potential as a tool for challenging systems of cultural and political hegemony, and producing diverse black identity formations, continues to endure.

The concept of the American Dream, the belief that wealth and prosperity are available to all hard-working individuals, is a crucial element in the lives of many hip-hop generationers. They tend to equate material success with personal happiness and professional status with self-actualization. However, continuing racial disparities within the workforce and the criminal justice system have tainted the notion of prosperity for many blacks born in the post civil rights era. One of the harshest realities facing members of the hip-hop generation is a racially imbalanced job market. Blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed as their white peers. Statistics have also shown that blacks working alongside whites earn lower salaries. Those forms of employment most accessible tend to be low-paying positions with equally low expectations of workers (Crossley 505). Faced with these prospects, urban blacks, males in particular, have turned to more illicit means of economic security. The occupations of hustling and drug pushing have appealed to many young minorities as facile sources of financial income.

CHAPTER II

BLACK CULTURAL DISCONNECT

Critics of the hip-hop generation have cited its embrace of a criminal lifestyle as evidence of the group's ingrained nihilism. It is a common belief among the civil rights generation that their descendants lack strong values and spiritual foundations.

Kitwana perceives the problem as a generational void:

The divide between the hip-hop generation and that of our parents (the civil rights/ Black power generation) has not yet registered on the radar screen of cultural critics, activists, or policy makers. It is a divide that is as vast as the one that separated white America in the 1960s, as radical white youth culture broke from the mainstream and swept across the country (Kitwana 22).

This generational divide is the result of numerous empirical circumstances. These include an emerging global economy, institutionalized racism, and the cultural domination of mass media. These forces have played an instrumental role in shaping the hip-hop generation's worldview. The hip-hop generation certainly has its share of habits and customs which differ significantly from the previous one, but both groups can also claim some commonalities: poverty, political disenchantment, and questions of cultural identity. The societal challenges faced by members of the post civil rights generation are complex and vast in scope. Legal and economic disparities have gone a long way in marring the essence of the American dream for the hip-hop generation.

CHAPTER III
THE BIRTH OF HIP-HOP

For many in the post civil rights generation, the ideal of the American Dream has always been inextricably linked to a vibrant call for broad and consistent social change. The art form of hip-hop was forged in the crucible of this ideological convulsion. When it first emerged in the city parks of South Bronx, NY, in the mid 1970s, hip-hop was viewed as a casual activity. It was a freewheeling, spirited past time engaged in by youth of varying ethnicities (black, Latino, white, and Asian). According to an overview of hip-hop in the *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, the genre has verbal origins in the sing-song games of children's jump rope and cheerleading competitions. The stylistic conventions of rap speech can be traced back to the Black Arts Movement and the albums of the Last Poets (Gates 79). The Last Poets were a band of spoken word artists whose politically charged verse was accompanied by distinct rhythms. Along with musician Gil Scott Heron and black female poets Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, the Last Poets established an important textual (gradually political) template for rap's reliance on raw cadences and vivid metaphors.

Hip-hop historians usually trace the birth of the form back to a specific time period and a particular artist. In 1967, a teenager named Clive Campbell immigrated with his family to America from Jamaica. Campbell was a fan of American soul music, and by the mid 1970s, he was hosting music parties in his South Bronx neighborhood. Using two turntables, Campbell was able to replicate the effects of the immense sound systems that he was exposed to as a child in Jamaica (Jackson and Anderson 22). He started calling himself Kool Herc and went into business

as a party promoter. In the process, he became of hip-hop's first DJs.

The appeal for many was the music being played at these parties. Early hip-hop shows were communal events dedicated to highlighting the talents of various singers, dancers, DJs, and aerosol painters. Following the success of Kool Herc, other DJs began to prosper as well, throwing lively parties in their respective neighborhoods. This group included Grandmaster Flash (Joseph Sadler), Afrika Bambaataa, and DJ Red Alert. Rappers began forming bands of two or more members, in the pursuit of greater exposure. Some of the earliest groups were the Cold Crush Brothers, the Crash Crew, the Fantastic Five, the Funky Four plus One, and the Treacherous Three. A female group dubbed Sequence constituted an early example of gender diversity in hip-hop.

Initially, much of the music went unrecorded. Then some of the artists began recording their material on four track tapes, which they distributed throughout the Bronx. The first studio recording ever produced in the rap genre "King Tim III" by the Fatback Band. The record was released by Spring Records in 1978 and did not generate a substantial amount of public attention (Watkins 15). The general consensus among hip-hop cultural producers was that their work was not suitable for mass market consumption. Hip-hop was an urban phenomenon, relatable only to the youths who created and promoted it.

DJs were traditionally the main recipients of a crowd's attention at hip-hop shows. The original DJs were a type of instrumentalists who manipulated classic recordings from R&B and soul artists, most notably James Brown, by replaying the beats from these songs on their turntables. As a means of distracting the crowd and keeping their techniques from becoming known, the most popular DJs enlisted the services of emcees (MCs), individuals who could rap

over a beat (Watkins 13). Over time, the emcees, with their rapid-fire rhymes, replaced DJs as the dominant figures in a performance.

Hip-hop exhibitions also presented the artistic manifestations of break dancers (alternately identified as B-Boys) and aerosol painters, or graffiti artists. Ideally, each demonstration of these creative endeavors constituted a paragon of natural skill, uninhibited passion, and pure individuality. Customary battles among select groups of DJs and MCs (or B-Boys and graffiti writers) are significant because they stress the virtues of competitiveness and self-confidence. An artist was only proficient as he or she could convince others. Accordingly, the concept of flava (personal style) correlated strongly with respect and influence.

Rap's first true foray into the American mainstream occurred in 1979. That year the Sugarhill Gang, a rap trio, released the song "Rapper's Delight" as a twelve-inch single on the independent music label Sugar Hill Records. "Rapper's Delight," a track heavily influenced by Disco, was built around an infectious beat and fun, light-hearted rhymes. The Sugarhill Gang was a manufactured rap act. New Jersey-based R&B producer Sylvia Robinson was searching for a hip-hop artist to launch her record label when her son Joey met Henry "Big Bank Hank" Johnson, a pizzeria worker who happened to be an aspiring MC. Recognizing Johnson's talent, the Robinsons paired him with two other local emcees, Guy O'Brien (Master Gee) and Michael Wright (Wonder Mike). Once the Sugarhill Gang was assembled they entered Robinson's studio and recorded their verses over the Chic song "Good Times", as performed by the label's house band (Watkins 15). "Rapper's Delight" became hip-hop's first hit single. It went gold and reached number 36 on the U.S. pop charts, number 4 on the U.S. R&B charts, and number 3 on the U.K. singles chart (Ards 312). The song's success signaled the arrival of rap on the pop radar.

CHAPTER IV

THE MEANING BEHIND THE MESSAGE

In 1982, the Bronx hip-hop crew Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five made their recording debut with a song titled “The Message.” The song matched lyrical descriptions of urban decay with angular, propulsive beats. The opening lines convey the tense mood: “It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under.” The track is performed as a solo rap by Melvin “Melle Mel” Glover, the Furious Five’s head emcee. Throughout his verses, Melle Mel is an indignant narrator who raps about his troubled mental state, dysfunctional family, and his fellow citizens in the ghetto, all of whom are palpably damaged and stunted by the daily ravages of crime and poverty.

In the first verse, Melle Mel raps about the chaos of his environs. Here is a sample:

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs
You know they just don’t care
I cant’ take the smell, I can’t take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away but I couldn’t get far
‘Cause the man with the tow truck
Repossessed my car

One of the most fascinating aspects of “The Message” is how the lyrics depict the life of the narrator and his surroundings in stark detail with an immediacy and rage that gave the aural impression of encountering an underemployed urban man’s unhinged entries in a diary.

The lyrics were equally effective in evoking the rigors of being an impressionable youth in such a bleak environment. The narrator bemoans his young son's defeatist attitude towards school, which is engendered by the teacher's own disinterest in helping the child. The boy wants to drop out of school and become a street sweeper, a line of work correlative to his perceived inferiority.

As emphasized earlier, hip-hop generationers have been subjected to periodic instances of abandonment by political and social institutions. Visible institutional neglect, and the deviance spawned in its wake, functions as one of the song's principal themes. The environment in which the children live resembles "one great big alleyway" complete with "thugs, pimps, and pushers" personifying illusory appearances of power and wealth. In the absence of caring, morally inclined male role models, these problematic figures become the prototypes for black urban masculinity and the respect it demands.

Ultimately, it is the youth of a disadvantaged postindustrial community who are the greatest victims. This sentiment is conveyed in the song through the lines, "A child is born with no state of mind/ blind to the ways of mankind." They are irrevocably scarred by a world where the violence of neglect is complemented by an embedded pervasive legitimacy of violence. A seething resentment of the ghetto's inhumanity, by its residents, works in tandem with the violent atmosphere: "you grow in the ghetto living second rate/ and your eyes will sing a song of deep hate." Melle Mel gave a voice to early '80s urban rage and disenfranchisement.

This song is more than a lyrical depiction of the alienation, criminality, and spiritual detachment that underscore postindustrial ghetto existence; it is the narrative of a young black man who immerses himself in the underground economy with the goal of realizing his manhood, and ultimately becomes a casualty of the prison system. The song's debut also

marked the emergence of what has become known as the prison industrial complex. The need for more prisons created more economic opportunities for the private industries tasked with their construction and maintenance (Kitwana 74). This was one example of how government and private corporations influenced the decline of urban communities during the post civil rights era. The real value of “The Message” was its articulation of the underlying socioeconomic factors responsible for persisting patterns of criminal behavior in these urban communities. The track points to a moment in time when hip-hop cultural production began to take on even more substantive implications.

“The Message” was not the first rap song to address the hardships of black and Latino communities in the late 1970s/ early 1980s. Early rap songs emblematic of post civil rights angst included Kurtis Blow’s “The Breaks” and “Hard Times,” Brother D and the Collective Effort’s “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise,” and Tanya “Sweet Tee” Winley’s “Vicious Rap” (Chang 179). “The Message” was the first socially conscious hip-hop track to garner popularity with audiences beyond the confines of urban communities. In interviews, Grandmaster Flash frequently noted how the song’s slow tempo, a rarity in rap at the time, made lyrics a focal point (Chang 179). *Village Voice* writer Vince Aletti praised the song: “It’s been awfully easy to criticize mainstream, street-level rap for talking loud and saying. No more” (Chang 179). Without necessarily conforming to the standards of Eurocentric mainstream popular culture, hip-hop was becoming a force in the broader public sphere. New York City remained the quintessential hub of hip-hop culture in the early 1980s. Mixtapes, clubs, and neighborhood parties still served as the main conduits for rap performances.

CHAPTER V

BAMBAATAA AND THE FIRST MOVEMENT

By 1983, Sugar Hill records had all but vanished from the spotlight. Enjoy and Profile, labels that lacked the resources of Sugar Hill but possessed street credibility, filled the void. Regional loyalties and tensions were common but two MCs and a DJ who performed under the moniker Run DMC managed to mitigate them by earning mass popularity and respect for their native borough of Queens. The hip-hop community was also teeming with people like Fab 5 Freddy (Frederick Braithwaite), a visual artist whose talents covered the full range of hip-hop: rapping, djing, graffiti art, and break-dancing. Fab 5 Freddy's artistic versatility was notable at the time, as hip-hop's participants often engaged in more than one segment of aesthetic production.

If the hip-hop movement could claim its own aesthetic and political spearhead, that person would have been Afrika Bambaataa (Kevin Donovan), a DJ from the South Bronx. Bambaataa's penchant for flashy costumes and experimentation with diverse musical styles, including funk, reggae, rock, and calypso, provide contemporary hip-hop with a more theatrical spirit. Always innovative, Bambaataa made his greatest contribution to hip-hop in the form of the Zulu Nation, a hip-hop artist collective dedicated to community activism.

The legacy of Bambaataa as an activist really begins in the Bronx during the early 1970s. It was a period dominated by the influence and violence of street gangs. The two most populous of these gangs were the Savage Skulls, consisting largely of Puerto Rican youths, and their rivals, the African-American Black Spades.

The gangs originated as street squads charged with protecting poor neighborhoods from such threats as robbers and drug addicts (Chang 49). However, hostility from law enforcement officers and a general climate of lawlessness resulted in the devolution of street squads from neighborhood defenders to criminals. As the gangs spread throughout New York, the violence grew more common. By 1973, there were approximately 315 gangs in the city with 19,503 members (Hagar 17). The Black Spades counted a teenaged Bambaataa as one of its leaders.

By 1975, street gangs were declining in number, largely due to so many gang members being killed, incarcerated, or simply moving on with their lives. During this time the Savage Skulls and Black Spades entered into a tenuous peace treaty (Chang 58). These events were contemporaneous with the emergence of hip-hop. It was a movement in which Bambaataa would once again find himself at the forefront.

Naming his organization after a 1965 film about the Zulus, a legendary tribe of African warriors, Bambaataa assembled a league of DJs, MCs, and graffiti artists to hold shows in Bronx community centers and public parks. He realized the energy and enthusiasm produced in hip-hop circles could be channeled into positive activity, actions beneficial to the youth and their environments. The Zulus conducted a number of public forums centering around topics of crime, poverty, and self-empowerment (Watkins 23). The ultimate purpose of Bambaataa's Zulu organization was to afford urban youths an array of alternative options. The collective privileged the virtues of education, knowledge, and history in an era when many urban public school systems were severely underfunded.

Despite the Zulu Nation's evolution as a global culture, the organization never achieved the kind of sustained systematic influence it could have had over time. Its conceptual ties to the Black Spades gang did not go unrecognized by New York's civic authorities. As late as 1995, the

Zulus were branded by the city's political establishment as a criminal entity. During that year Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and other public officials gathered in the Bronx River Projects to promote Operation Commitment. Operation Commitment was the name given to the city's strategic crackdown on crime and graffiti in housing projects. Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation were noticeably absent from the event (Watkins 23). To many hip-hop generationers, this amounted to a banning of the very people most aligned with the values and needs of Bronx River residents; the Zulu's exclusion was equally suggestive of the political establishment's tendency to marginalize (or vilify) the grassroots activism in minority communities.

The Zulu Nation was one of the first structural manifestations to be intimately connected to the issues and sensibilities of the post civil rights generation. The international campaign to end South Africa's brutally oppressive political institution of racial apartheid inspired scores of young blacks to become politically active. "Apartheid was such a stark situation," remarked Pedro Noguera, a student leader at U.C. Berkeley in the mid eighties. "It was so clear. How repressive the regime was how unjust [it] was- in some ways it was easier to see the issues there than it was to see the issues here" (Chang 215). Reverend Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign also ignited hip-hop generationers. Jackson, a member of the civil rights generation, connected with young African-Americans nonetheless. His historic campaign served for many as a touchstone of racial pride and a symbolic statement of hope for greater things to come in the country.

CHAPTER VI
HIP-HOP RADICALS

In the 1980s, the hip-hop movement was thriving from a commercial standpoint. Rap artists like Run DMC, LL Cool J, and Public Enemy gained substantial mainstream exposure on radio and MTV (Music Television). Within that trio, the first two based their visual presentation and rhyming techniques on the nascent South Bronx rap scene. They were influenced by old school predecessors Melle Mel and the Cold Crush Brothers. Public Enemy took the genre in new artistic and thematic directions.

The story of Public Enemy goes back to Long Island and the earliest days of hip-hop's presence there. During the late 1970s, Carlton Ridenhour and Hank Shocklee maintained a hip-hop radio program at Adelphi University billed *The Super Spectrum Mix Hour*. The program served as a showcase for local rap talent, but Ridenhour sometimes produced songs of his own in order to promote the show. One of these tapes was secured by Def Jam records co-founder Rick Rubin was so impressed with Ridenhour's performance that he offered him a recording contract. Ridenhour eventually accepted the offer, but along the way he made a few important changes. First, he gave himself the emcee moniker of Chuck D. Second, he persuaded Shocklee and a number of their closest associates to join him in the endeavor. Ridenhour's radio crew became his rap crew and they renamed themselves Public Enemy in 1986.

The impact Public Enemy had on the national consciousness solidified the concept of hip-hop as a political vehicle for the young black urban masses. When "The Message" was released in 1982, its power was largely psychological. The lyrics revealed the mental and

emotional ravages perpetuated by a ghetto existence. Melle Mel's narrator documented the problematic conditions of the postindustrial ghetto thoroughly but his analysis was deficient in linking the ghetto's alarming material realities to hegemonic structures. Public Enemy's lyrical approach was much more effective in connecting bases of black urban despair with specific channels and sites of political and racial oppression.

PE's 1988 album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* introduced them to white mainstream music fans. The group's style was extraordinary in how they honored the street-level rituals of hip-hop and advocated the teachings of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. As Chuck stated on the song "Bring the Noise": "Now they got me in a cell 'cause my records they sell/ 'Cause a brother like me said "Well Farrakhan's a prophet that I think you ought to listen to." Elsewhere, the endorsement was even more nuanced- "The follower of Farrakhan/ Don't tell me that you understand/ Until you hear the man" ("Don't Believe the Hype"). On *Nation*, Chuck D crafted insistent statements of political protest and paeans of black self-love in equal measure. His rhymes were complex, but an element of humanity reverberated in the words he spoke.

The aesthetic core of Public Enemy was molded by two vociferous figures- Chuck D and William "Flava Flav" Dayton- with contrasting personalities. Chuck D was the young black revolutionary with a stentorian voice. He linked his radical status to a number of black protest icons: Nat Turner, Denmark Vessey, and Black Liberation Army member Joanne Chesimard, aka Assata Shakur. He aspired to bridge the black class divide with a message of racial unity and uplift: "Rock the hard jams treat it like a seminar/ reach the bourgeoisie, and rock the boulevard" ("Don't Believe the Hype"). A veritable "enemy", Chuck D the emcee (the D stands for "Dangerous") operated outside the parameters of mainstream media and political

institutions. He took an oppositional stance toward racist whites and chastised certain affluent blacks for disparaging and disregarding their working-class brethren.

Flava Flav was essentially the outfit's version of a cheerleader. He played the role of hype man during the shows, urging live concert crowds to cheer PE on and reiterating the group's greatness for audio listeners. Occasionally, Flava Flav would perform a solo rap on the albums; these raps could range from comical ("Cold Lampin'") to thought-provoking ("911 is a Joke"), but it was often more of the former. He wore an oversized clock and his rhymes were fast, boastful, and extremely imaginative. Here is a sample from "Cold Lampin'": "Flava Flav on a hype tip/ Um ya hype drink, come take a big sip/ Um in position, you can't play me out da pocket/ I'll take the dopest beat you got and I'll rock it." The relatively playful nature of Flava Flav's compositions served as a respite from Chuck D's more serious perspective.

The group was rounded out by a DJ known as Terminator X (Norman Rogers) and a pseudo security force called the S1Ws (Security of the First World), which was headed by Professor Griff (Richard Griffin), the group's minister of information. PE was constructed as a militant, highly organized force in hip-hop. Professor Griff's title was not the only indication of this; Chuck D himself considered the group to be "the Black Panthers of Rap" (Chang 252). The label does not imply a literal rebirth of the Black Panther party, but a celebration of the most productive principles proffered by the Panthers, including the necessity for black solidarity in a new era of racial unrest.

Public Enemy employed elements of drama, pathos, and satire in their attacks on hegemonic forces. But the group's central variable was its members' intersectional relationship with the civil rights/ black power era. Chuck D noted, "My parents were young in the 1960s, and had radical ideas. My crucial development years [were] in the middle years of the Black Power

movement” (Alridge 230). As a lyricist, Chuck D applied the political and spiritual values of an earlier time to post civil rights problems.

In “Bring the Noise,” Chuck provided a vigorous defense of rap music. He rapped,

Soul control, beat is the father of your rock’n’roll
Music for whatcha, for whichin’, you call a band man
Makin’ a music, abuse it, but you can’t do it, ya know
You call ‘em demos, but we ride limos too
Whatcha gonna do? Rap is not afraid of you
Run DMC first said a deejay could be a band
Stand on its feet, get you out your seat

The emcee used Run DMC as a prime example of rap artistry; the group’s DJ (Jam Master Jay) sampled hard rock music in his work. Those lyrics reference both the Afro-American origins of rock’n’roll as well as rap’s blossoming material status. PE’s oral validation of hip-hop was very significant. As a musical genre, rap was virtually ignored by major black radio stations (Chang 260). Public Enemy positioned themselves as champions of the art form.

One of *Nation’s* more straightforward songs, “Night of the Living Baseheads”, served as a commentary on the 1980s crack cocaine epidemic. Along with the depletion of legitimate urban jobs and black middle-class flight, the crack epidemic devastated the lives of many hip-hop generationers (Neal 373). Following the lead of Melle Mel, whose 1983 single “White Lines” documented the perils of crack addiction, Chuck D broached the topic from the view of a spectator, someone who watches the crisis as it unfolds in his neighborhood.

Chuck D portrayed the crack epidemic as a thing of complexity in his lyrics. He realized that a variety of factors accounted for the drug’s incipient rise in urban communities. The federal government’s discriminatory drug laws (“Check out the justice/ and how they run it”) and ruthless drug dealers who “sell to their own/ rob a home/ while some shrivel to bone”, are

all complicit in the crisis. Incidentally, the epidemic inspired the use of harsher policing tactics by law enforcement officials patrolling black communities. The criminalization of black youth reached new levels of fervency as the crack explosion was sensationalized in the mainstream media.

In the following lyrics, Chuck D condemns crack dealers as hazards to black communities and the embodiment of a moral vacuity concealed by a capitalistic ethos: "And everybody know/ Another kilo/ From a corner from a brother keep another below." The crack epidemic was synonymous with the disempowerment of black people. But the epidemic was only one facet of postindustrial oppression explored by Public Enemy.

Imprisonment is one of the key leitmotifs in the album's lyrics and imagery. The album's cover art depicts Chuck D and Flava Flav peering out from behind a set of prison bars. There is also a photo of the entire group clustered in between several closed prison cells and standing on an American flag. Most of these features were based on the tyranny of state persecution, but not all of them. One in particular, a quote borrowed from 1960s soul group the Bar-Kays read- "FREEDOM IS A ROAD SELDOM TRAVELED BY THE MULTITUDE" (Chang 263). This quote suggests a self-imposed constraint on the human will. Furthermore the logic of imprisonment, self-imposed or otherwise, is antithetical to the black cultural awareness and knowledge which PE promoted.

In the song, Chuck D envisions himself as a black man who receives a draft notice from the government. Recognizing the army as an apparatus of white structural domination, Chuck D scoffs at the notice. The emcee is appalled by the idea of enlisting to fight for a country that has historically dehumanized his people: "Here is a land that never gave a damn/ About a brother

like me and myself.” Chuck’s act of insolence has grave consequences and he is given a maximum security prison sentence for disregarding the government notice.

Eventually, Chuck D conceives a plot to escape and includes fellow black inmates in the quest for freedom. The captives of Chuck’s narrative are described as being “packed in a cell like slaves.” The reference to slavery is an intentional element of the song; it’s also a searing critique of the prison industrial complex. In spite of daunting obstacles, Chuck D’s prison break is successful. He raps about taking the correctional officers hostage, with the assistance of his fellow prisoners. In “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” the black rebels defy the proverbial system, and emerge as victors in a literal and political sense.

The reality for young black males was much bleaker. A year after *Nation’s* release, more than 600,000 black men ages twenty to twenty-nine were either incarcerated, paroled, or on probation. America’s prison population doubled over a twelve-year period from 1979 to 1989 (Neal 372). As with “Night of the Living Baseheads,” the song “Black Steel” was touching on timely subject matter.

“Black Steel” can still be declared as one of the most inventive and profound tracks in Public Enemy’s catalogue. Its oppression to liberation trajectory is gracefully rendered in the lines, “52 brothers/ bruised, battered, and scarred but hard/ Going out with a bang...53 brothers on the run, and we are gone.” Even the use of the phrase “anti-nigger machine” holds deep metaphorical significance. It functions as a semantic inversion of the prison industrial complex’s essential purpose. It is an institution partially responsible for the destruction and effacement of black life in the United States. Chuck D verbally reformulated the phrase to legitimate his radical political agenda.

CHAPTER VII

TALKING BACK

The historical context in which Public Enemy produced *Nation* has been widely documented as a time of intense racial polarization. In addition to the apartheid protests and unjust imprisonment of South African activist Nelson Mandela, several racially-charged events generated substantial discussion in the national sphere. The most visceral of these incidents were the 1983 beating death of Michael Stewart, a young black man, by a Brooklyn police officers and (three years later) the murder of Michael Griffith by a violent white mob in the New York suburb of Howard Beach.

Public Enemy was inevitably shaped by these occurrences and the fearful, tense atmosphere caused by them. The group's manager Bill Stephenev conveyed as much when he explained the origin of their name: "Okay, I can [the concept.] We're all public enemies. Howard Beach...Michael Stewart. The Black man is definitely the public enemy" (Chang 247). There is a moment in the *Nation* track "Rebel Without a Pause" where Chuck D rapped the lines "No matter what the name- we're all the same/ Pieces in one big chess game." Through a single master stroke of brevity, Chuck D stated what many hip-hop gnerationers believed to be an unassailable truth. The greater destiny of black Americans was still largely controlled by external forces.

There are spaces on the album where Chuck D seems to be responding to the bigotry and racism of contemporary times. On "Prophets of Rage" he raps "I roll with the punches so I survive/ Try to rock 'cause it keeps the crowd alive/ I'm not balling, I'm just calling/ But I'm past

the days of yes y'allin." Through his potent protest rhymes and uncompromising articulation of blackness, Chuck D purposefully declared himself as the voice of a new movement in hip-hop- "If you don't think I'm a brother/ Then check my chromosomes/ Then check the stage/ I declare it a new age/ Get down for the prophets of rage." These lyrics are exemplary of the new black power hip-hop asserted as a revelatory sensibility of the late 1980s.

At the apex of Public Enemy's fame, Chuck D pronounced rap to be the "Black CNN" (Kitwana 201). Essentially, he was gesturing to the way in which rap, prior to its extreme commercialization, communicated African-American realities in a way mainstream news outlets had failed to do. More specifically, Chuck D identified rap as the voice of a marginalized people characterized by candor and substance. The timing of Chuck's "Black CNN" quote is incontestably salient. It constituted a period when rap artists could still rightfully portray themselves as underdogs in the realm of (black) American culture. Given their perceived public status as anti-musicians, free of corporate influence, many of these artists were afforded creative space to express their frustrations with society. N.W.A. was one of rap's most effective acts in this regard.

N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) formed in the economically disadvantaged suburban enclave of Compton, near Los Angeles. The primary lyricists were Ice Cube, MC Ren, and Eazy-E. The group pioneered the gangsta rap style with their 1989 album *Straight Outta Compton*. Gangsta rap offers explicit narrative of crime, drugs, sex, and violence. On the pop cultural landscape, N.W.A.'s songs and music videos dramatized ghetto life and provided an updated formation of black outlaw imagery in the form of the gangsta persona. But the sub genre also included an aspect of subversion.

According to Robin Kelley, professor of history and Africana studies at NYU, “Gangsta rap was a critique of ghetto life. So much of it was about turning the cameras on crime and violence and the police... it wasn’t meant to be any kind of uplift narrative. It was a form of reportage- turning the mirror back on the community” (Coates 314). Here again, rap expression is viewed as an authenticating element of urban black experiences.

N.W.A.’s relevance to the hip-hop generation goes beyond the debates generated by their provocative music. The group’s popularity shifted the spotlight on rap music from the east coast to the west coast, a shift illustrating hip-hop culture’s transcendence of regional boundaries. The albums Ice Cube subsequently recorded as a solo artist during the early nineties seemed to lyrically prophesy the 1992 Los Angeles riots; violence that occurred after the acquittal of four white police officers for beating black motorist Rodney King. Eric “Eazy-E” Wright’s death from AIDS served as a sobering reminder of the disease’s grip on the hip-hop generation.

For all of the controversy they incited, Public Enemy and N.W.A. encompassed distinct angles of the post civil rights worldview. The former was fiercely intellectual and privileged afrocentric ideological structures, while the latter did not shy away from rapping about the more gritty and sordid aspects of urban black life. The dialectic involving cultural radicals and ghetto gangstas was affirmed by one crucial emotion: outrage. It is a focused outrage, highly indicative of what literary scholar Scott Crossley cited as hip-hop’s “profound lack of faith in those institutions charged with providing a safety to Blacks” (Crossley 504). The above insight helps to explain the revolutionary potential inherent in hip-hop. The art form provided contemporary black youth with a forum for expressing their frustrations with racially biased authority figures and systematic oppression in society.

The cultural agitators of the hip-hop world could be especially brazen in their critiques of hegemonic structures. In the song “Louder than a Bomb,” Chuck D raps about being the target of government surveillance during Public Enemy’s commercial heyday. His rhymes are explicit and incendiary: “Although I live the life that of a resident/ But I be knowin’ the scheme that of the president/ Tappin’ my phone whose crews abused/ I stand accused of doing no harm/ ‘Cause I’m louder than a bomb.” Such dissent was not new; the Last Poets and the Watts Prophets launched similar attacks on right-wing governments in the late sixties.

A lack of faith in the civil institutions responsible for protecting blacks and other minorities figured prominently in the discursive constructions of hip-hop expression during the late 1980s. In some cases, these constructions took the form of counter narratives designed to articulate an oppositional view of encounters with an institutional force. By producing the oppositional discourses, rappers legitimized the concerns and fears of marginalizing urban constituents (Rose 106). One example of a hip-hop counter narrative is the 1989 track “Who Protects Us from You?” by Boogie Down Productions. The song, performed by head emcee KRS-One, addresses the problem of police brutality: “You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you...if I hit you, I’ll be killed, if you hit me I can sue” (Rose 107). The lyrics deftly illustrate the unequal power relations underscoring conflicts between the police and young black subjects.

N.W.A.’s single “Fuck Tha Police,” also released in 1989, became a post-civil rights anthem due to Ice Cube’s blunt denunciation of discriminatory policing, particularly the practice of racial profiling. The following lyrics demonstrate this: “They have the authority to kill a minority/ ...Searchin’ my car for the product,/ Thinkin’ every nigga is sellin’ narcotic.” These two songs are significant because they advance a different perspective. The artists challenge the

moral immunity of police officers by presenting their side of the story, in regards to encounters with law enforcement. Even if they remain utterly helpless during the commission of an arrest or search by a police officer, the rappers have asserted their authentic voices of protest in the formation of hip-hop counter narratives.

The dissemination of hip-hop counter narratives was not a smooth or simplistic process. N.W.A.'s violent lyrics made the group an ideal target for conservative watch groups, civil rights era black leaders, and many of the same hierarchical forces lyrically assailed by the group. As the popularity of "Fuck Tha Police" grew, the group faced a heavy backlash. In June 1989, the right-wing newsletter *Focus on the Family Citizen* published an article about the song with the headline "Rap Group NWA says Kill Police." By August of that year, FBI assistant director Milt Ahlerich had sent a letter to N.W.A.'s record label condemning the song's lyrics and noting the rising death toll of police officers, due to homicides (Chang 325). Clearly, the FBI was establishing a link between gangsta rap and real criminal trends. This incident highlighted a conundrum endured by many gangsta rappers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They fought to be recognized as authenticating agents of urban black realities. However, the unsavory nature of their lyrics, music videos, and album covers alienated them from mainstream society.

CHAPTER VII

THE WHITE RAP FAN

The broad popularity of gangsta rap among white youth in the 1990s was the beginning of one of hip-hop's most enduring paradoxes. Rap, ideally the most visible representation of urban black masculinity, is heavily co-opted by individuals from the opposite end of the racial, and frequently class, spectrum. Many white hip-hop fans have taken their love of music beyond the activity of listening to albums. They adopt a hip-hop influenced style of dress and language. Some even engage in illicit past times like underage drinking and drug use, behavior often referenced in gangsta rap lyrics. According to a well publicized poll, whites comprise 75% of the consumers who purchase rap albums and singles (Crossley 3). While not a problematic statistic in and of itself, some hip-hop aficionados speculate as to how this affects the commercial viability of the music.

As traditional tastemakers of mass culture, white youths often play a prescient role in determining the commercial direction of rap music. The recent success of post gangsta rap artists like 50 Cent and the artful yet accessible hip-hop of Kanye West and Jay-Z solidifies rap's financial power in the arena of contemporary mainstream pop music. But why are gangsta representations of hip-hop more commercially profitable than others? The question is genuinely difficult to answer. Music critic David Samuels explores this question from a racial vantage point: "Rap forfeited whatever claim it may have held to particularity by acquiring a White mainstream audience whose tastes increasingly dominated the nature of the form. What whites wanted was not music, but black music, which as a result stopped really being either"

(Samuels 24). Samuels's statement appears rather provincial when considered in the context of hip-hop. Even if white consumerism impacts rap music in tangible ways, it cannot account for the breadth of aesthetics and cultural sensibilities produced in rap.

The preceding quote disregards the fact that rap, a cultural element of hip-hop, has always multivalent in form. Influential rap artists achieved stylistic distinction and depth through the production of diverse black identity formations. Long Island emcee Rakim made great innovations as a lyricist. Groups like Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, and Poor Righteous Teachers preached strands of black activism and self-determination in their music. West Coast rappers N.W.A., Ice T, and Too Short drew creatively upon the slang and mores, drug dealers and pimps representative of where they were from. In the early nineties a rap aesthetic known as Native Tongue appeared. Its chief practitioners included the Jungle Brothers, De La Soul, and a Tribe Called Quest- groups who typically combined literate rhymes with unorthodox beats. The singular factor uniting all of these artists is a sizeable white fanbase.

White youths still compose a significant portion of crowds at hip-hop concerts. However, the aesthetic preferences of these fans vary, as they do with black, Latino, and Asian fans. In the hip-hop community, one may encounter whites who listen to gangsta artists 50 Cent and DMX, while others prefer socially conscious underground emcees Common and Immortal Technique. Therefore, examining whiteness in a hip-hop context is a deeply complicated task.

The role of whites in hip-hop culture has always been a fairly ambiguous one. From an economic standpoint, whites have made important contributions to hip-hop: Def Jam CEO Lyor Cohen and producer Dante Ross have guided the careers of numerous artists, among them the Beasties Boys and LL Cool J (Kennedy 77). Some of the most successful mainstream rap artists,

such as Vanilla Ice, House of Pain, and Eminem, have been Caucasian. The predominant role of most whites in hip-hop has been that of cultural spectator. Quite often, this position is informed by a degree of otherness.

When New York's hip-hop scene began broadening its reach in the early 1980s, part of the attraction many white avant garde enthusiasts shared for hip-hop was rooted in a hunger for urban exoticism. Black feminist scholar bell hooks labels this desire as "[confronting] the Other... the process of leaving behind white "innocence" and entering the world of "experience" or "otherness" (hooks 23). Two early manifestations of the fascination with hip-hop cultural otherness were the constant exhibitions of work by graffiti artists in East Village art galleries and the performances various MCs and DJs gave in elite uptown nightclubs like the Roxy. Break dancing legend Richie "Crazy Legs" Colon commented on the vibe of otherness he used to feel as a Roxy patron: "The Roxy could have also been a zoo. People were able to hang out in the cage with us and feel safe from getting beat up or stuck up, as opposed to coming to the Bronx, coming to a jam" (Chang 177). Colon's observation implies that the club goers wanted to enjoy the spectacle and vitality of a hip-hop performance, minus the dangers and hassles of an authentic hip-hop setting. This mindset is quite understandable, but it is a clear example of cultural spectatorship with aspects of class and racial tensions added to the picture.

Nevertheless, hip-hop's ever evolving white fanbase does have the potential to affect the cultural movement in positive ways. Race relations between hip-hop generationers and their white peers can be improved through hip-hop discourse. This is something Kitwana suggests in his book when he promotes the idea of a unified coalition of artists, activists, and industry insiders pushing white consumers to engage with hip-hop on an intimate (as opposed to superficial) level. According to Kitwana, young white professionals who take jobs in the rap

industry could use their influence to hire more minorities and “narrow the racial divide not only inside the industry but outside of it” (Kitwana 212). Gwendolyn Pough concurs with this notion in her critical essay “Seeds and Legacies: Tapping the Potential in Hip-Hop” by writing: “Imagine if [young white hip-hop fans] became immersed in not just rap music but also a movement for change” (Pough 284). The nature and scope of this movement for change would have to be determined by its participants, but the idea of music being a catalyst for positive social change is powerful and resonant. Clearly, hip-hop’s latency for fueling a movement among young people founded on anti-racist principles is considerable.

If white hip-hop fans choose to buttress their appreciation for hip-hop with a broad education and awareness of African/ African-American history and culture, their potential to effectively bridge contemporary economic, racial, and gender divides increases. The foundation for a movement of change exists in our society. Fundamentally, a diverse and productive social movement in hip-hop will depend on not just clear goals and organization, but the images and lyrics transferred in the work of mainstream rap artists and the cultural lens through which they are interpreted by white consumers. By the early twenty-first century, the landscape of hip-hop had changed. The commercialization of rap afforded young blacks greater visibility than they had received at any other time. Somehow the multiplicity of voices reflected in rap decreased as the genre dominated on an international scale.

CHAPTER IX

THE ESSENCE OF HIP-HOP REPRESENTATIONS

In 2003, Curtis Jackson, a Queens emcee who called himself 50 Cent, released his debut album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. The album was extremely lucrative, and it has come to be regarded as a benchmark in the birth of a new movement, post gangsta. Post gangsta rap maintains fidelity to the sub genre's convention of ghetto slang, imagery steeped in the criminal world and occasionally violent lyrics. As a former crack dealer, 50 Cent possessed the street credibility to back up his rhymes detailing a life of hustling and drug dealing. The music press focused extensively on the rapper's past troubles and a shooting that left nine bullet wounds in his body (Watkins 5). 50 Cent's re-interpretation of the gangsta narrative was just as raw and vivid as what came before. Some in the black community wondered if this post gangsta narrative was truly reflective of contemporary urban black experiences.

One way in which post gangsta rappers are different from their '90s counterparts is the former's embrace of status symbols connected to the bling-rap trend. Bling-rap was chiefly the invention of rapper/producer Sean "P.Diddy" Combs and the acts on his label Bad Boys records. The commercial brand promoted by Combs encapsulates a lifestyle of hypercapitalism, due to his fame as a rapper, entertainment mogul, and fashion entrepreneur. A few of the status symbols associated with a bling lifestyle are luxury cars, designer clothes, jewelry, and exotic women. These adornments are often featured in the lyrics of post gangsta rappers.

The post gangsta narrative prevails in hip-hop, but it has not been immune to rigorous critique from black journalists and urban intellectuals. One recent example is a *Village Voice*

article by Ta-Nehisi Coates titled “Keepin’ It Unreal: Selling the Myth of Black Male Violence, Long Past Its Expiration Date.” Published in 2003, Coates’ piece is a multilayered perspective on why the lyrics of 50 Cent and other post gangsta rappers retain commercial power even as the crack trade, and the violence it fostered, is viewed by many cultural critics as a remnant of the past. Coates pegs neo-gangsta as something “stuck in history rather than rooted in current reality” (Coates 311). It is a charge Coates is warranted in making. He writes about growing up in the throes of the crack epidemic and witnessing the original ascendancy of gangsta rap.

The crack plague was driven by a number of causes: the Reagan/ Bush administration’s disinvestment in urban schools and social services, eroding job opportunities in urban areas, large numbers of unsupervised youth, and an increase in gun crime (Coates 313). While largely ambivalent about the moral consequences of the crack trade, gangsta rap artists were accepted as the most authentic chroniclers of its epic devastation. As I proposed earlier, N.W.A. established a template for gangsta by critiquing power relations in the ghetto between authority figures and oppressed minority subjects. The cultural validity of gangsta rap began to be compromised when record labels attempted to seize on its mainstream popularity and sign any rapper who claimed the gangsta aesthetic. The result was an influx in gangsta MCs and a parallel downgrade in the criteria of lyrical vision and artistic talent.

Paradoxically, the crack epidemic and black on black crime have decreased over the years. Statistics reveal that in 1991, 50.4 blacks per 100,000 were murdered. By 2000, the number had halved itself. Homicides committed by young black males declined from 244.1 per 100,000 youths in 1993 to 67.3 in 1999 (Coates 315). Even though drugs and violent crime are still serious problems in black communities, the intricacies and nuances behind them have changed over the course of two decades.

The traumatized survivors of the crack epidemic are the former addicts and descendants of addicts- uneducated, unemployable young black males. A true post gangsta narrative reflecting the lives of these individuals would, in Coates words describe “a deadbeat ex-con, fleeing mounting child support, unable to find work, and disconnected from his kids” (Coates 317). Such a mundane reading is about as far from a bold, glorifying, and conventional gangsta narrative as one can get.

In his piece, Coates attributes the cultural obsession with post gangsta rap to white America’s historical fascination with, and fear of, dangerous black men. The menacing, sexually insatiable black male has a legacy spanning *Birth of a Nation*, *Native Son*, and *Straight Outta Compton* (Coates 317). I find myself agreeing with a number of Coates’s observations about the post gangsta era’s chasm of representation and reality. I also feel that the mass distribution of negative representations and the racial stereotypes they imbue with meaning can be balanced by equally highlighting the vitality of more creative and uplifting hip-hop narratives.

The brand 50 Cent has lyrically cultivated as a self-proclaimed street hustler is valid. One of his peers, Jay-Z, has taken the same brand to unprecedented heights of commercial influence and critical respect. However, the gangsta brand becomes a problematic construction when it’s transformed into a discursive hip-hop norm- a norm available and replicated in all formats of mass media. It facilitates a situation where every up and coming rap artist will attempt to conform to the post gangsta/ street hustler norm, and effectively marginalize portions of black America. Once this happens, mainstream hip-hop will be much diminished in its goal of providing thoughtful sociopolitical critique.

The counter narratives to the violent and materialist representations exist in the hip-hop underground. The term underground is not meant to be a blanket statement. It designates

scenes of hip-hop activity and production less widely known and coveted than the presentations of gangsta rappers and bling rappers. Here I use the term underground to denote the work of artists and groups who promote socially conscious themes in their music.

One of the most acclaimed socially conscious hip-hop acts to emerge during the late 1990s was the duo Black Star. Consisting of rappers Mos Def (Dante Smith) and Talib Kweli, the group released its debut album, titled *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star*, in 1998. Their name, borrowed from that of black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey's 1919 Black Star Line, the first black-owned steamship, was the pair's way of paying homage to Afro-American history (Alridge 236). Unlike Public Enemy, Black Star's status as an independent act, signed to the small label Rawkus Records, no doubt afforded them a great deal of creative control. As lyricists, they explored the dynamics of everything from the music industry to juvenile crime.

One song "Astronomy (8th Light)" portrays blackness as a concept with infinite meanings. Mos Def peppers his rhymes with colorful allusions to Islam, racial conflict, and slavery: "Black like the veil that the Muslimina wear/ Black like the planet that they fear- why they scared?/ Black like the slave ship that later brought us here/ Black like the cheeks that are roadways for tears/ That leave black faces well traveled with years." In contrast to much of the gangsta and bling-rap of the era, Black Star made cerebral lyricism a premium in their work. They revived the abstract imagery, social critique, and conversational tone once used by Native Tongue artists like A Tribe Called Quest.

One of the most pensive tracks on the album is a song called "Thieves in the Night." Its lyrics contemplate the prevalence and corrosive influence of several social problems in black communities such as violence, greed, spiritual emptiness, and warped notions of black masculinity. Kweli touches on a few of these topics in the following lines: "Survival tactics

means busting gats to prove you hard/ Your firearms too short to box with God/ Without faith, all of that is illusionary/ Raise my son, no vindication of manhood necessary.” Mos Def dedicates his verse to excavating the gross hypocrisies and contradictions of hypercapitalist hip-hop production. In the song, he raps: “Same song, just remixed, different arrangement/ Put you on a yacht but they won’t call it a slave ship... I find it distressing’, there’s never no in between/ We either niggaz or kings/ We either bitches or queens.” These lyrics refer to salient dichotomies that exist in the hip-hop industry and the greater black community.

The brilliance of “Thieves in the Night” lies in the artists’ insistence on questioning problematic representations in the context of black youth culture. They recognize the profound dilemma in one-dimensional identifications and perspectives. Black Star’s lyrics possess a strong component of moralism. They wanted listeners to pay closer attention to the attitudes and mentalities around them; and possibly work to amend those situations for the better.

Black Star’s views on hip-hop culture are progressive but not sanctimonious. Due to their familiarity with the ennui of disenfranchised urban communities, the two emcees comprehend the motivations of commercial rap artists, even if they openly contest marketplace values. Mos Def confirmed this awareness in an interview with the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*: “Most of the time, nowadays, when young black people are involved in hip-hop, it’s for economic benefit. [Hip-hop has] been modified into business” (Wang 3). Economic constraints are valid enough reasons for young blacks to conform to the industry. The irony for the hip-hop generation is that the material wealth emphasized by entertainers and athletes in the mainstream media skewers the real, persistent, and often intergenerational, poverty affecting young blacks and their families across the nation.

CHAPTER X
THE GENDER QUESTION

One of the most troubling aspects of bling-rap is its objectification of young black women. The predominant images of mainstream rap lyrics and music videos depict black females as barely clothed, hypersexual groupies, and models. Usually, these women are related as the objects of black masculine conquests. Symbolically, they represent the same connotations of black patriarchal power as do cars, guns, and various symbols of a luxurious lifestyle. In response to these images, many of hip-hop's strongest critics accuse artists, and the industry of, exploiting and dehumanizing black women.

Black feminists, in particular, decry the objectifying quality of sexual lyrics. Example of this objectification are plentiful. The following quote is a lyric from Snoop Dogg's song "Bring it on": "I'm qualified to knock a ho" (Crossley 507). Lines such as this describe a sexual act in highly degrading language. The use of such derogatory terms as ho, bitch, chickenhead, and gold digger in rap songs signify the direct, often antagonistic reduction of a black female, in human terms (Crossley 506). The parochial views some black male rappers hold in regards to black femininity are troubling, but the substance of these views appears to have its genesis in the civil rights generation itself.

Within the hip-hop generation, relations between black men and women can sometimes be awkward and strained due to overarching social pressures. Black women obtain undergraduate and graduate degrees at two times the rate as black males do (Crossley 507).

Black women find work in such advanced career fields as law and medicine, while black men have struggled to gain traction in these fields. It has been suggested that black men harbor a great deal of resentment over the imagined “social privilege” of black women, and this resentful attitude fuels the same patriarchal elements controlling the discourse of the hip-hop world. The hip-hop generation’s broad subscription to materialistic values has also been continually suggested as a contributing factor to dismal gender relations among young blacks. Generally, when people become wholly enamored with material wealth and luxury, the capacity for a more intimate understanding in relationships as well as profound identity construction becomes compromised.

Finally, it must be noted that a great number of hip-hop generationers were raised by single parents and other relatives. This is mostly the result of an increase in divorce rates during the 1960s among baby boomers, a trend which has continued for many years afterwards (Kitwana 116). The issue of child support has caused the gender divide to grow even more entrenched with time. The Child Support Program, established in 1975 under the Social Security Act, required states to create child support programs. These programs were responsible for locating parents, establishing paternity, and collecting payments (Kitwana 117). Despite the necessity of child support laws as a means of ensuring the financial security of single parent homes, they have placed an added burden on the economic livelihoods of working-class hip-hop generationers.

Many young black fathers struggle to make their child support payments. In some cases, the reasons are less than noble, indicative of laziness and negligence. However, the reality of a job market where young people of color are frequently underpaid and hired in smaller numbers than young whites cannot go uncounted as a social factor in discussions

concerning deadbeat parents. In general, the animosity stirred by young couples who raise children separately has manifested itself in the names men and women give each other. Expressions like “Baby Momma” and “Baby Daddy” are common colloquialisms in the hip-hop generation lexicon. The personal traits associated with these terms- irresponsible, trifling, troublesome- have spawned full-fledged caricatures and stereotypes, producing universal consequences as well as individual ones.

Scholars and historians who document hip-hop culture have usually portrayed it as a male dominated arena where black patriarchal discourse reigns supreme. This is a fairly true assertion, but the contributions of black females to hip-hop should not go unheralded. Theoretically, female artists in hip-hop labored to create spaces for their unique and gendered truths and perspectives. The late 1980s witnessed a crop of female rappers coming to prominence. Many of them, including MC Lyte, Salt N Pepa, and Queen Latifah managed to communicate themes of empowerment to young black women and win acceptance from male audiences.

Brooklyn-bred MC Lyte established herself as a lyrical phenomenon in 1986 with her first single “I Cram to Understand U”; she was just sixteen at the time (Coleman 257). Well regarded by peers for her witty rhymes, Lyte (born Lana Turner) based her rapping moniker on the idea of light as a positive force: “Lyte is some positive wordplay. Truth is the light. The light shall lead you out of dark passages. Light is one of the many forces created by God. That kind of thing” (Coleman 257).

One of MC Lyte’s most popular songs is “Paper Thin.” Here’s a verse:

I’m not the kind of girl to try to play a man out
They take the money and then they break the hell out

No that's not my strategy, not the game I play
I admit I play a game, but it's not done that way.
Truly when I get involved I give it my heart
I mean my mind, my soul, my body, I mean every part.
But if it doesn't work out- yo, it just doesn't.
It wasn't meant to be, you know it just wasn't.
So, I treat all of you like I treat all of them.
What you say to me is just paper thin (Rose 159).

The most striking thing about the lyrics is the sense of maturity Lyte posits in regard to relationships. In the verse, she states that there's always the potential of a union not working out, but it does not stop her from taking a chance. Her paper thin rule is really just a strategy of lover's caution.

Salt N Pepa became the first female rappers to experience mainstream success. Their 1986 debut album *Hot, Cool, and Vicious* sold 2 million copies in its first year (Rose 154). Like MC Lyte, their lyrics stressed female independence and self love.

The song "Tramp" verbally criticizes dishonest and unfaithful men:

Homegirls attention you must pay to what I say
Don't take this as a simple rhyme
Cause this type of thing happens all the time
Now what would you do if a stranger said "Hi!"
Would you dis him or would you reply?
If you'd answer there is a chance
That you'd become a victim of circumstance.
Am I right fellas? Tell the truth
Or else I'll have to show and prove
You are what you are and I am what I am
It just so happens that most men are Tramps
(Rose 156).

These lyrics are notable for their utilization of a female perspective to invert traditional gender politics. Women rappers use their cultural agency to highlight male flaws in dating, relationships, and other social issues.

Queen Latifah, aka Dana Owens, captured the hip-hop world's attention in 1989 with her single "Ladies First." As implied by the title, the song, and its accompanying video, were evocations of feminine excellence and strength. In her rhymes, Latifah didn't shy away from the question of her gender. She celebrated it in lively language: "A woman can bear you, break you take you/ Now it's time to rhyme, can you relate to/ A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream" (Rose 164). Lyrical sharpness was only one of Queen Latifah's attributes. She also possessed a deep appreciation for her black cultural heritage.

The video for "Ladies First" paid tribute to black women on a historical level. Latifah and collaborator Monie Love performed against a backdrop featuring images of Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and Winnie Mandela (Rose 165). Her Muslim stage is another indication of Latifah's afrocentric leanings. The power behind Queen Latifah's presentation was her ability to conceptualize black femininity as a noble, benign, and incredibly graceful force in the world.

In the case of Queen Latifah, the term feminist is also applicable in describing her artistic sensibilities. A number of her lyrics addressed social issues relevant to women. Her tremendous success in music, movies, and media has made her a role model to legions of young women, generally, and black women especially. But Queen Latifah claims she is averse to any sort of label or dictate society would impose on her. "I'm defining what a woman is for myself," she says. "Simply put, I am not interested in subscribing to what society has decided for half of humankind. I am an individual" (Collins 96). Queen Latifah's reluctance to explicitly call herself

a feminist is not unusual. The relationship between hip-hop generationers and feminism has always been a confusing and disjointed one.

The path female members of the hip-hop generation take to feminism is very different from the one followed by their parents' generation in the 1960s and 1970s. In the earlier period, a variety of feminisms were available for black, Chicana, and white women. This was largely the result of a broad and rich context of social movements (Collins 189). The hip-hop generation has come of age in a time when feminism has been a much less visible presence in society. Nearly two decades of conservative, Republican governments have diminished its appeal and influence (Collins 190). Black feminists in the post civil rights age have to contend with the political gains of women activists from the past and the unique social conditions of the present, where race and class issues have become even more contradictory and fragmentary.

Joan Morgan's essay collection *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* is one of the most honest, incisive, and comprehensive texts around for positing a critique of contemporary black feminist thought and practice. Published in 1999, Morgan's text attempts to reconcile the seemingly disparate worlds of hip-hop culture and feminism. The question formulated by Morgan throughout the chapters is how can a hip-hop feminism speak to twenty-first century black women in ways that differ from the white elitist feminist tradition of the past?

One of the primary arguments Morgan makes in her text is the desire for a feminism compatible with the times in which female members of the hip-hop generation are maturing into women. This feminism can no longer confine itself to the task of explicating gender oppression; it has to address multiple aspects of black womanhood. Morgan describes it as a feminist approach that is well-rounded and "claims the powerful richness and delicious complexities inherent in being black girls now- sistas of the post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post

soul hip-hop generation” (Morgan 57). The author doesn’t provide a full elaboration of the new postmodern black feminism, but she does characterize it as being marked by contradictions.

According to Morgan, the old paradigms of feminism are useless to the hip-hop generation. Our lives and culture are frequently conflicted and oppositional. At times, they even impel hip-hop generationers toward a new mode of hypocrisy. In the chapter “hip-hop feminist”, Morgan wonders if it is possible to call oneself a feminist and “admit out loud that there are some things you kind of dig about patriarchy” (Morgan 57). For women, some of these things may include not having to pay for dinner on a date; not having to engage in manual labor; having the freedom to wear makeup, dress provocatively, and fully welcoming the male attention such actions would incur. Morgan’s reading of feminism destabilizes the conceptual norm of patriarchy as wholly oppressive in its ideological manifestations.

Morgan’s desire for an unconventional black feminist methodology aligns with her suggestion of contemplating the unspoken advantages of patriarchal structures. Her argument elicits a highly eroticized tone. She asks the question- “[How] come no one ever admits that part of the reason women love hip-hop- as sexist as it is- is ‘cuz all that in-yo face testosterone makes our nipples hard” (Morgan 58)? Clearly Morgan does not negate the appeal or centrality of male sexuality in black female lives. Her vision of feminism appears to celebrate sexuality to an extent, and its connection to the presence of black patriarchy.

I find myself agreeing with Morgan’s assessment that her generation requires a feminism bold enough to convey black female realities in uncompromising terms, but flexible enough to accommodate a manifold black feminist perspective, and honest enough to realize human frailties. The nature of this feminism is transformative, even as its ultimate goals are undefined.

Morgan covers the perspective well in her book. She writes the following:

We need a voice like our music- one that samples and layers many voices, injects its sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative, and powerful. And one whose occasional hypocrisy, contradictions, and trifeness guarantee us at least a few trips to the terror-dome, forcing us to finally confront what we'd all rather hide from (Morgan 62).

Using the architectural genius of rap music as a metaphor, Morgan articulates the challenges posed by the new feminism. This description of black feminism is fairly open-ended. But what Morgan does outline is a feminist methodology useful in revealing human flaws, misperceptions, and failures. Perhaps, in recognizing the ways in which we as oppressed subjects might be compliant with, or internalize, structures of oppression, we will find ourselves in a better position for manifesting forms of healing and empowerment.

Morgan writes about her experiences as a hip-hop feminist causing her to view the music in a more circular fashion. Rap music continues to be a genre where the lyrics evoke misogynistic attitudes, female objectification, rampant materialism, and reckless violence. Instead of completely negating these factors, Morgan encourages paying attention to the artists and giving them the same level of legitimacy as more politically and socially conscious hip-hop artists. She defines the disconcerting lyrics of rap songs as being symptomatic of something else: deeply ingrained black male oppression. Along the same conclusion, Morgan writes "We can't afford to keep expending energy on banal discussions of sexism in rap when sexism is only part of a huge set of problems" (Morgan 76). Additionally, Morgan expounds on her image of the music as a canvas for reality by alluding to how the "bitches and hos" rappers sing are a composite of unpleasant gender relationships from their actual lives.

Morgan's portrayal of rap's diversity is clever and truthful. However, she should focus more on how black feminist readings of contemporary hip-hop music and videos could benefit African-American gender relations and challenge negative stereotypes of young black females. Morgan appears cognizant of misogyny's corrosive influence on hip-hop culture, but she avoids a full confrontation with the misogynistic attitudes of her male peers.

Hip-hop's first class of popular female artists, such as Salt N Pepa, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, and Roxanne Shante appeared in an age when the music was relatively new and fresh in the minds of consumers. The commodification of rap music that began in the early nineties with gangsta rap and continued through the decade had a palpable impact on black women inside and outside of the music industry. The number of big-name female rappers dwindled considerably as more rap videos featured hypersexualized models playing a subservient to male hip-hop artists. By 1999, the two most commercially successful women rappers were Foxy Brown and Lil Kim, both of whom subscribed to the bling era values of heavy materialism and hedonistic lyrics.

One exception was Lauryn Hill. Originally a member of the rap trio Fugees, Hill released her epochal solo album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* in 1998. Musically, the album was a mixture of rap, reggae, and classic soul; it was an album demonstrative of Hill's versatility as a singer and songwriter. Additionally, one track, "Doo Wop (That Thing)" delivered a subtle postmodern feminist message.

In the song's first verse, Hill playfully chastises a girlfriend for sleeping with an unfaithful male lover. Hill's links her friend's inability to acknowledge her own pain to the latter's reliance on superficial standards of beauty and "showing off your ass 'cause you're thinking it's a trend." Though she admonishes her friend, Hill encourages the woman to embrace her own intrinsic

value instead of adopting outer facades: “Don’t be a hard rock when you’re really a gem.” Hill’s willingness to admit her own misgivings in relationships could be interpreted as an acceptance of vulnerability. The core voice of these lyrics is that of a girl talking to a friend about the importance of self-respect: “It’s silly when girls sell their soul because it’s in.” An apparent theme of female empowerment comes through in the song.

Hill’s second verse excoriates certain men for their behavior. Here’s a sample:

The second verse is dedicated to the men/ more concerned with his rims and his
Timbs than his women/ Him and his men come in the club like hooligans/
Don’t care who they offend popping yang like you got yen/ let’s not pretend
They wanna pack pistol by the waist men/ cristal by the case men, still in they
Mother’s basement/ the pretty face, men claiming that they did a bid men/ need
To take care of their three and four kids men/ they facing a court case when the
Child support’s late/ money taking, heart breaking now you wonder why women
Hate men/ the sneaky silent men the punk domestic violence men/ the quick to
Shoot the semen stop acting like boys and be men.

Many of the offenses singled out by Hill are typical points of gender conflict in the hip-hop generation. Hill’s vivid rebukes of male trifeness are complemented by the stern folk wisdom implicit in the line “how you goin’ win when you aint right within,” repeated three times. This song is unique because it uncovers male and female flaws equally. As opposed to earlier rap and hip-hop songs that took a distinct side in the gender debates, “Doo Wop (That Thing)” works as a gender intermediary. Hill is the neutral confidant who warns both her female and male listeners of the other sex’s mutual predilection for carrying out “that thing”- i.e. deception.

Hill’s song shares Morgan’s goal of achieving blunt honesty in black feminist analyses. The buoyant musical tone of the song makes it an engaging piece to listen to. It is, in the words of hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose, a work created to “sustain dialogue with and consequently encourage dialogue between young men and women that supports black women and challenges

some sexist male behavior” (Rose 249). “Doo Wop (That Thing)” manages to do this by communicating the most troubling realities of the young black gender divide. Therefore, the song functions effectively as a feminist text.

In the ten years since Morgan’s book was published, sexist imagery and the objectification of women in rap videos has only increased. I believe that as the twenty-first century progresses and various forms of visual technology (especially Youtube) gain a more entrenched immediacy, cultural representations of black women will increase in number and significance. Any discussion of black feminism will have to include a debate over the authenticity of cultural representations and their impact on African-American communities.

The strength of a black feminist critique rests on its capability of redefining and undermining harmful stereotypes and pop cultural imagery. Contrary to popular opinion, black girls struggle with the same self-esteem issues as their white peers. The behavior of black girls, however, is different. While they are less likely to develop eating disorders, black girls are more likely to become sexually active at an early age. Increased exposure to pornographic images and themes in rap videos compels teen girls to experiment with sex. One of the most alarming AIDS statistics emphasizes the danger: among blacks, young women aged thirteen to nineteen account for 64 percent of HIV cases (Watkins 222). AIDS is one of the hip-hop generation’s most pressing crises. Prevention and education programs have been targeted towards all genders and backgrounds. Recent AIDS awareness efforts have focused on young black females since they are designated as a high-risk population.

The social efficacy of contemporary black feminism seemed destined to reach new heights in 2004. That was the year of female students at historically black Spelman College organized a wave of protests against a planned appearance at the school by rap artist Nelly.

Nelly, a rapper whose material reflects the bling-rap aesthetic, generated over the music video for his song “Tip Drill.” In the video, women are shown simulating sex with each other, dancing nude, and featured in a series of sexually explicit poses. The video shows a male actor swiping a dancer’s bare backside with a credit card (Watkins 217). The reaction from Spelman students was one of collective disbelief and anger. Subsequent student protests prevented Nelly from making an appearance at the school.

Ironically, the title of an AP news article on the topic, “Angry black women take aim at rappers,” underscores the patriarchal stereotypes and tropes black females encounter in the mainstream media. In the article, male and female students clash over the fact that many of the models make a conscious choice to appear in the videos as a means of acquiring financial profit and public exposure. Spelman student Zenobia Hikes surmised the cultural consequences posed by “Tip Drill” in the following quote: “Black entertainers have become the new myth makers, showing gangsters and bikini-clad women with hyperactive libidos...For non-black children it creates a gross misrepresentation of the black experience” (AP 2). These words validate my previous explanation of how distinctive images, often of a racial inflection, are gaining a power that can only be mediated by public resistance.

Nelly’s reason for coming to Spelman was to host a bone marrow drive for his sister, who was afflicted with leukemia. Nelly hoped the event would result in a higher number of African-Americans registering as bone marrow donors. In carrying out their protest, Spelman students reinforced the idea of their stance on misogynist images being as vital a concern as the broader issue of black health. “Nelly wants us to help save his sister, but he’s degrading hundreds of us,” explained Sasha Jenkins, co-organizer of the protests (Watkins 217). Even

though the students supported the bone marrow drive in principle, they did not suppress their antipathy for the “Tip Drill” video.

Black feminist methodology must be flexible in tone and applicable to concrete situations in black women’s lives. It must speak to black women from all class, educational, sexual, religious, and transnational backgrounds. Essentially, all feminist movements supporting women of color have the same objective: economic, political, and social liberation. In a time when racial and sexual categories are becoming increasingly blurred, black feminist methodology has the task of delineating the issues most crucial to the fruition of female self-actualization. The need for inclusiveness is a challenge, but an ideal black feminist methodology embraces challenge. It has to make representational room for Queen Latifah and Lil Kim; Oprah Winfrey and Lauryn Hill.

The tenets of any black feminist methodology must be conducive to the demands of new technology and avenues of dissemination. The easier the information is conveyed through channels of communication, the more people it will reach. This can be helpful in changing the flood of negative black female representations in the media. It also makes feminism more accessible to populations beyond the confines of the academy. Morgan’s text was very important because it exposed legions of non-academic black female readers to the feminist question. Other texts worthy of this status include Lisa Jones’s *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (1994) and Veronica Chamber’s 1996 memoir *Mama’s Girl*. Thanks to technological advancement, more black feminists have the opportunity to fashion individual strategies for formulating and distributing their expositions in the public arena.

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION

The hip-hop movement is no longer an easy entity to define in concrete terms. The global appropriation of rap, and other hip-hop elements, has led to the creation of innumerable definitions. However, each hip-hop movement reflects the core aspirations, hopes, and beliefs of its producers and consumers. In America, the inception of hip-hop, as a cultural art form, provided a new generation of African-Americans with a political, social, and economic vehicle all their own, and one qualitatively different from that of their parents. As evidenced by the generational clash of values, the civil rights generation and the hip-hop generation don't always see eye to eye on the state of the world. But, they share many of the same collective goals. Chief among them is the realization of a more just and harmonious society.

The hip-hop generation, like the vibrant music which characterizes it, has gone through many changes and representations. The restructuring of U.S. and international economic systems, linked to the increased use of technology and automation, has greatly affected the job market. The more advanced a worker's training and skills are, the higher their wage potential is likely to be. Steady employment is a key issue for many young blacks. The challenges facing the hip-hop generation are complex and profound, but its destiny continues to be shaped with time.

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