THE BEAUTIFUL STRUGGLE:
AN ANALYSIS OF HIP-HOP ICONS, ARCHETYPES AND AESTHETICS

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by
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ABSTRACT

The Beautiful Struggle:
an Analysis of Hip-Hop Icons, Archetypes and Aesthetics

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Hip hop reached its thirty-fifth year of existence in 2008. Hip hop has indeed evolved into a global phenomenon. This dissertation is grounded in Afro-modern, Afrocentric and African-centered theory and utilizes textual and content analysis. This dissertation offers a panoramic view of pre-hip hop era and hip hop era icons, iconology, archetypes and aesthetics and teases out their influence on hip hop aesthetics. I identify specific figures, movements and events within the context of African American and American folk and popular culture traditions and link them to developments within hip hop culture, iconography, and aesthetics.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction, which includes a definition of terms, statement of the problem and literature review. It also offers a perfunctory discussion of hip hop as culture. Chapter 2 examines pre-hip hop American popular culture in the twentieth century such as America's World's Fairs, superhero mythology, popular culture iconography, etc. and illustrate the ways in which they served as cultural, social and historical precursors to hip hop aesthetics. Lastly, this chapter identifies Afrocentric cross-currents within hip hop culture, which I describe as the post-Afrocentric movement in hip hop culture, and illustrate the ways in which hip hop culture grappled with the efficacy and viability of Afrocentric motifs, theory and aesthetics Chapter 3 offers a

comparative analysis of blues and hip hop aesthetics. I explore gender dynamics within the context of inter-genre, call-and-response between male emcees and female neo-soul artists. Chapter 4 traces the development of hip-hop aesthetics and draws on African, American and African-American cultural practices and aesthetics to analyze its development. I focus on early characteristics of hip-hop culture, which are foundational components of hip-hop expression such as the influence of comic book super hero narratives. Hip-hop aesthetics are an amalgamation of post-modern, post-industrial, urban blues sensibilities filtered through African-American musical traditions. I utilize Bakari Kitwana's conceptualization of the hip hop worldview as a basis for highlighting hip hop attitudes, aesthetics, and expectations. Lastly, chapter 4 expands upon previous socio-economic discussions on hip hop culture with a focus on hip hop aesthetics and expression.

In chapter 5**,** I explore hip-hop iconography, iconology and archetypes. I identify specific pre-hip hop icons and explore their influence on hip-hop aesthetics. I examine African American iconology and its relevance to hip-hop aesthetics. I also identify more recent hip hop icons and archetypes (e.g. the hater and gold digger), which operate as signifiers in hip hop narratives and aesthetics.

Chapter 6 identifies specific characteristics of hip hop expression. I examine hip-hop aesthetics and archetypal influences, particularly notions of 'bad" and "cool" within hip-hop culture. Perhaps more than any other African-American archetype, the badman/bad nigga archetype has survived within African-American male narratives. I explore the evolution of bad within hip hop aesthetics and offer a socio-cultural analysis of 1984, identifying specific icons (e.g. Run-DMC and Mr. T), attitudes, values and trends that

shaped both hip-hop culture and American popular culture. I examine specific cross-currents within 1980s American popular media and explore the ways in which hip hop narratives and aesthetics reappropriate and engage specific popular culture texts. I assert that not the framework for hip-hop aesthetics was solidified during 1984. I identify key figures, icons, archetypes, and popular media, circa 1984, and their influence on hip hop aesthetics and discourse.

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This process has been intellectually, financially, emotionally, and spiritually draining. I encountered many obstacles along the way. Systemic racism and classism is alive and well in America. I have experienced first-hand the many challenges facing poor, African American men in academia and in society at-large. As evidenced by my experiences during the Ph.D process, I am convinced that for many African Americans, the American Dream is just that: a dream.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my maternal grandmother, Juanita Wilson, who was the family matriarch and leader. Her declaration, "once you get education 'they' can never take it away from you" echoed in my head throughout this process. She has undoubtedly guided me along my spiritual and academic journey. She was a woman of grace, dedication, and brutal honesty…Walk with me…

DEDICATION

To the ancestors for keeping going when the end appeared as if were eons away

To my grandma Mookie, Juanita Wilson,
whose spiritual guidance served as a beacon of hope

To my parents and sister, whose love and prayers kept me on track

To the "folk" of North Philadelphia,
who kept me focused and inspired and showed me mad love when I felt discouraged

To all the hip hop artists and lovers of the culture,

To all the African American and Latina men,
who have been victims of American racism,
HOLD YA HEAD!!!

This is for you

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Don't push me, cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under
Melle Mel, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message"

Since the release of Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" in

1982, struggle has been one of the most consistent and salient themes within hip hop

aesthetics. African Americans have engaged in myriad struggles in America. For African

Americans, music, in all its various incarnations, has been a driving force in overcoming,

resisting, and wrestling with these struggles. African-American musical traditions have

been both functional and therapeutic in this process. Music has been an anchor, providing

invaluable cultural capital and discursive space for African-Americans, oftentimes being

the only effective means of expression available. Individual and collective struggle is a

prominent theme within hip hop lyrics and discourse. As a form of cultural expression,

struggle—both external and internal—is utilized as a trope within hip hop discourse. This

dissertation examines the complex socio-cultural matrix that spawned hip hop culture, as

well as identify some pre-hip hop icons, archetypes, tropes and folk heroes that have

influenced hip hop aesthetics. I examine key figures (i.e. archetypes, icons, etc.) — in

the pre-hip hop and hip hop era— in order to illuminate the various struggles and

tensions within hip hop aesthetics and how they reflect struggles and contradictions that

are intrinsic to the American experience. These struggles play out within American

popular culture arena.

The title *The Beautiful Struggle* draws upon the work of hip hop artist Talib Kweli. It alludes to the blues sensibilities that are imbedded within hip-hop aesthetics. More specifically, I sample *The Beautiful Struggle* and utilize it as a representation of the existential tension and reconciliation of African oppression and celebration in post-industrial America. The title also refers to the struggle within hip-hop over hip-hop's symbols, aesthetics, icons, forms, and function(s). Additionally, *The Beautiful Struggle* refers to an aesthetic struggle within hip hop culture as it relates to hip-hop's post-industrial, post-modern emergence. Hip hop's aesthetic struggle, though, plays out along ideological, discursive, social, expressive and iconographic lines. In the twenty-first century, hip hop—like American popular culture and iconography—has become ubiquitous. Because consumers are bombarded with a wide array of iconographic symbols and figures, the full scope of these iconographic images are often misunderstood or understated. The influence of figures such as Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali, and Richard Pryor on hip hop aesthetics—for example—is often understated. Moreover, much scholarship on pre-hip hop icons is tangential and surface. This dissertation examines these icons and their influence on hip hop aesthetics, while tracking African America (e.g. the blues) and American (e.g. superhero mythology) popular and folk cultural traditions within the framework of hip hop expression.

The artistic value, cultural relevance, and musical validity of hip-hop have been debated since its birth in the early 1970s. Musically and commercially, hip-hop has in fact proven itself to be a viable form of artistic expression. Because hip hop has become ubiquitous within American culture, as with many African American musical forms, its cultural impact and African (American) origins are often misunderstood and/or

understated. For African Americans, hip-hop music specifically, and hip-hop culture in general, is one of the most candid and cathartic forms of African American expression to emerge in the twentieth century. I am not suggesting necessarily that hip hop is an authentic representation of African American experiences. Nonetheless, hip hop's non-judgmental nature offers an invaluable glimpse into African American attitudes. Aesthetically, hip hop builds upon earlier blues, popular and folk African-American cultural traditions. This dissertation discusses the significance of hip-hop icons, archetypes, and aesthetics and their relation to African American and American culture and aesthetics. It also illuminates the interactivity between African American and American popular culture and hip-hop culture, which can be loosely defined as a way of life rooted in the elements of B-boying, emceeing, DJing, graffiti, and knowledge.
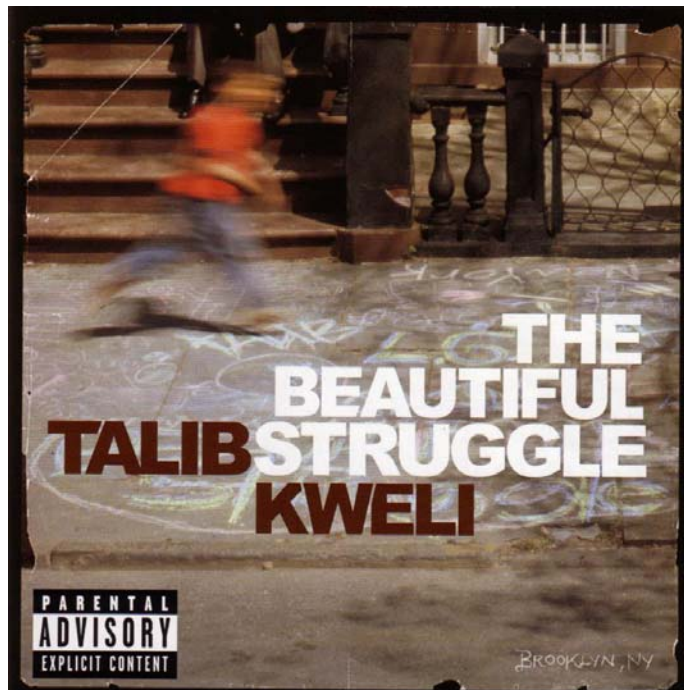
(Illustration 1.1) Talib Kweli Cover

This dissertation, besides examining pre-hip hop, African-American archetypes and icons and their influence on hip-hop aesthetics, seeks to: 1) identify African American and American tropes that have been absorbed into hip hop aesthetics and discourse; 2) illustrate that hip-hop is part of a continuum of African-American culture and not an abruption; 3) tease out the American influences of hip-hop aesthetics, particularly the superhero mythology; 4) further explore hip hop's engagement of twentieth century American popular culture texts—particularly during the 1980s—and 5) expand the understanding and analysis of hip-hop aesthetics and culture and gauge the extent to which they reflect African American attitudes, values, and expectations. I explore several theoretical and philosophical questions in this dissertation including: 1) What icons and archetypes has hip-hop embraced, reified and/or sampled? 2) What does hip hop's reappropriation of these icons reveal about the hip-hop generation? 3) What meaning and values are accrued through the selection of these figures in hip-hop culture? 4) How does hip-hop bridge the gap between cultural ideals/norms and socio-political and economic realities? 5) What is the significance of superhero mythology within hip hop aesthetics? 6) How has Afrocentric theory been utilized within hip hop aesthetics? 7) What events and developments in 1980s American popular culture influenced hip hop aesthetics, narratives and worldview?

I am also concerned with a deeper, existential question regarding how African-American men utilize hip hop aesthetics to navigate the twentieth century American popular culture landscape. I argue that Africans in America have yet to fully reconcile their "Americaness", which is inherently wrought with contradictions. Hip hop has acted as an agent in the expressive reconciliation of this tension. I explore the ways in which

African-Americans have reconciled American idealism with the realities of their American experience through the utilization of hip-hop cultural production, expression and performance. Lastly, this dissertation examines concepts such as "the classic" hip-hop album and what hip-hop purists describe as "real hip-hop". Even though this type of labeling can border on cultural elitism, these monikers are instructive in that they reveal much about hip-hop aesthetics and provide invaluable cultural markers for hip-hop scholars. Furthermore, I utilize the concept of "real" or "classic" hip hop as an aesthetic framework to identify the essential qualities of hip hop—that hip hop's cultural, social, and historical foundations and expressive boundaries. I use the theoretical framework "real" or authentic hip hop as a criteria and guide in the selection of hip hop texts in this dissertation. The hip hop artists I sample are all firmly rooted in hip hop culture. And aesthetics. Furthermore, the artists I sample are unanimously considered "hip hop" by critics, artists, and hip hop generationers.

Statement of the Problem

Much of the research on hip-hop icons, archetypes and aesthetics does not adequately take into account the African American historical and aesthetic dimensions of their connection to hip-hop culture, particularly those icons, archetypes and aesthetics that pre-date hip hop culture. Many analyses of hip-hop aesthetics and icons cut African-Americans off from their historical legacy in regard to the art form, nor does it sufficiently assess the deeper meaning behind hip hop's reappropriation of certain American popular culture texts. Another issue within hip hop scholarship revolves around the sheer volume of American popular media. Because hip hop aesthetics and culture are often disseminated virally through hip hop's maximization of popular media and

technology and the fact that contemporary American popular culture, in general, bombards individuals with images, teasing out more contemporary influences on hip hop aesthetics can prove daunting. This dissertation expands the study of hip-hop's icons and archetypes to include Afro-diasporic discourse and African American culture and history to construct a theoretical model grounded in African-American socio-musical traditions. Blues, for example, has had a profound impact on hip hop aesthetics, yet much of the scholarship that links blues to hip hop aesthetics focuses on the discontinuity of blues aesthetics in hip hop. This dissertation explores the interface between hip hop aesthetics and American popular media. I begin with the premise that hip hop aesthetics borrow heavily from African American pre-hip hop iconography. However, because of hip hop's use post-modern pastiche, iconic, scholarly and popular culture texts are reappropriated, intermingled, reconfigured and redefined.

When dealing with African American phenomena, a multi-dimensional, wholistic approach is best suited. This dissertation seeks to better situate hip-hop into a more organic historical and cultural context by linking various twentieth century African-American popular and folk icons, archetypes, and mass movements to hip-hop aesthetics. Although many of hip hop's iconographic and archetypal influences have been identified in previous research, the nuances, contexts, and implications of these figures and their impact upon hip-hop culture have not yet been fully examined. By examining these figures and movements, for example, the bad man trope, I explore, identify, and interrogate hip hop's relationship to American popular media. In doing so, I attempt to unravel the social-cultural and aesthetic dimensions of hip-hop expression. By utilizing all available "texts" within popular media such as video, television, and film, I explore

the tension between these archetypes and icons (e.g. Bill Cosby/Richard Pryor, Jack Johnson/Joe Louis), as well as within African-American culture and mainstream American culture, all of which offer a site from which to examine the expressive, historical, sociological, and cultural contours of hip-hop.

I seek to fill gaps in the current literature, much of which makes only brief references to African-American iconographic and archetypal influences and their significance to hip-hop aesthetics. Furthermore, there remains an apparent lack of a clearly articulated model that evaluates the trajectory, origins and development of hip-hop iconography. Afrocentric scholarship on hip tends to focus on hip hop's lack of social and political value. Yet more recent scholarship by scholars such as Julani Cobb, Imani Perry and Jeff Chang has addressed hip-hop aesthetics. To know what something is one most also know what it is not. In this case, hip-hop—as with many African-American cultural forms (e.g. jazz, blues, et. al)—has been so thoroughly absorbed into the fabric of American popular culture that the whole (American culture) appears to be indistinguishable from the parts (hip-hop). The post modern nature of hip hop (i.e. pastiche, reappropriation, etc.) presents serious issues when scholars attempt to deconstruct and demarcate hip-hop aesthetics and its myriad influences outside Afrocentric scholarship. Much hip hop studies research relies too heavily on post modernist theory and multicultural models to formulate their arguments. Not that post modern theory is not useful in examining hip hop, but, if used solely, it often fails to tease out the many nuances of hip-hop culture, as well as its true essence.

Conversely, although this dissertation is grounded in Afrocentric theory, many Afrocentric scholars tend to deemphasize, discredit, disregard and/or discard evidence of

external influence and syncretism of European culture. This type of analysis often leads to misinterpretation when examining hip-hop culture and aesthetics. This creates an either/or dialect. Hip hop aesthetics do not always fit neatly into structuralist frameworks. This dissertation examines icons and archetypes in an attempt to better understand—socially, culturally, artistically and historically—hip-hop aesthetics, highlighting the various influences that have led to the formation of hip-hop aesthetics and worldview. Much is to be garnered from the discursive space between hip-hop culture and Black popular culture. This dissertation will focus on the cultural exchange, as well as the discursive space, between hip-hop and Black popular culture. Why, for example, have figures such as Malcolm X, Mike Tyson, Tupac Shakur, and Scarface been reified in hip-hop? Why have others such as Bill Cosby and Jesse Jackson been deemphasized, overlooked or omitted? What does this say about hip-hop culture? What does this say about the evolution of Black Popular culture? What does this say about the socio-economic and cultural landscape of African-Americans? To what extent do these hip-hop icons reflect trends amongst African-American within the hip hop generation? This dissertation also seeks to deconstruct (and unravel) the specific American historical context from which hip hop emerged.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine hip-hop icons, iconology, narratives, archetypes and aesthetics with a focus on broader trends in African American and American popular culture. By utilizing Afrocentric and Afro-modern theory, this dissertation explores the ways in which African-American icons and archetypes inform hip-hop-aesthetics. I investigate the link between African-American and American

archetypes, iconography and hip-hop aesthetics. Moreover, I seek to create a theoretical construct that takes into account the African American *and* American influence on hip-hop aesthetics. Oftentimes, many false assumptions are made concerning the meaning behind selection of icons and archetypes and their relation to African American culture. On the surface, such acultural analysis may appear superficial or inconsequential. Yet, because academic discourse on music and aesthetics is political (or at least its implications are), as well the fact that hip-hop is the product of a complex matrix of sometimes-oppositional attitudes/cultures, I attempt to peel away hip hop's socio-cultural baggage in order to identify its essential components.

This dissertation focuses primarily on African-American icons such as Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, and Richard Pryor. Hip hop culture interfaces with American popular media on numerous levels. I examine European-American icons, whether real or fictional, such as Donald Trump, John D. Rockefeller, Al Capone and Scarface and their influence on hip-hop culture. The centrality of icons within hip hop aesthetics is linked, partially, to the centrality of heroic figures within American and African American culture. Heroic figures are intrinsic to American historical and folkloric narratives. Superhero narratives such as Superman, Hercules, and the Justice League were foundational aspects to in the evolution of hip hop aesthetics. Yet, hip hop aesthetics pull from European American *and* African American folk hero traditions, which, though similar, were distinctly different. This shift toward depoliticized and upwardly mobile icons during the 1980s reflected shifts in African American attitudes and expectations. Socio-economic and cultural trends coupled with shifts in public policy brought on by the post-modern, post-industrial, post-Civil Rights, mass-mediated landscape are partially

responsible for these shifts. Levine makes a clear distinction between African American heroic narratives that were informed by the slave experience and European American informed by hegemony and white privilege:

> Secular slave heroes operated by eroding and nullifying the powers of the strong, by reducing the powerful to their own level. Central white folklore heroes triumphed through an expansion of the self-by inflating the individual rather than deflating the antagonistic forces he faced. (Levine 401)

It is hip hop's use of iconic heroes—similar to African American secular slave heroes, as a means to nullify the white power structure that— is significant to my discussion of hip hop iconography. Hip hop iconography samples from both traditions. Hip hop icons offer invaluable cues into hip hop politics, attitudes and sensibilities. Shifts in hip-hop aesthetics between the late 1980s and mid 1990s from superhero iconography to gangster iconography, for example, reflect major shifts in African-American and American sensibilities. By the 1980s, America, as a whole, became obsessed with consumption and celebrity. By 1984 trends in American popular cultural production and consumption effected and were affected by hip hop aesthetics. The study of American popular culture icons waned by the late 1980s. Scholarly disinterest in American iconology during the late 1980s and 1990s was partially due to the permeation of popular icons within American popular culture. In a sense, American icons experienced a hyper-visibility within mainstream American popular culture; yet, partially because of their hyper-visibility within American popular culture, their significance was largely ignored within scholarly discourse. This dissertation will discuss the significance of American iconography within in a hip hop context.

Many African-centered and Afrocentric scholars have focused on misogyny and violence in hip hop. By framing hip hop expression within a pathological framework, this type of research devalues hip hop's functionality as a social-cultural agent. As more recent hip hop studies scholarship has revealed, attacks on misogyny and hyper materialism in hip hop "need to be contextualized and examined with greater sophistication" (Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution* 135). Conversely, much Eurocentric scholarship fails to tease out the significance of hip hop's iconology, which tends to sever hip hop culture from its African American legacy. For African Americans, hip hop music is one of the most powerful media of expression to emerge within the last 50 years. Aesthetically, hip-hop builds upon earlier blues, popular and folk African-American cultural traditions. This dissertation discusses the issue of hip-hop aesthetics and its relationship to African (American) culture and aesthetics. In so doing, it illustrates the interactivity between African/African-American culture and hip-hop culture, which can be loosely defined as a way of life rooted in the five core elements of B-boying, emceeing, DJing, graffiti, and knowledge.

Significance of Study

The significance of this dissertation lies in its examination of hip-hop archetypes, narratives, aesthetics iconography and iconology, linking them to African-American cultural movements, traditions, and ideologies. This dissertation explores abruptions of African-American culture within hip hop and also examines the ways in which hip-hop—an African-American cultural production—has absorbed, reinterpreted and utilized various American icons and aesthetics. In this dissertation, I seek to explore several

theoretical and philosophical questions: 1) What major figures, events tropes and trends have led to the formation of hip-hop aesthetics? 2) In what ways do hip hop aesthetics reflect blues sensibilities? 3) What is the significance of superhero mythology within hip hop aesthetics? 4) What is the significance of hip hop's icons and archetypes to the hip-hop generation? And 5) in what ways have hip-hop aesthetics been utilized by African Americans men as counter-narratives to popular media texts?

An examination of hip-hop's icons and archetypes sheds light on the many contradictions and paradoxes concerning African American life in post industrial, post-Civil Rights America. An exploration of hip-hop's icons also exposes the shortcomings, successes, and failures of African American philosophical and political thought and American ideals. The icons hip hop has adopted, as well as the portions of these icons' narratives that hip hop has chosen to embrace, offer invaluable insight into hip hop aesthetics and discourse. Lastly, this dissertation seeks to cultivate and preserve hip-hop culture by creating a model to adequately examine the trajectory and development of hip-hop aesthetics.

The dynamic scope and body of hip-hop cultural and musical production presents myriad issues for any investigation of it. Since its inception in the South Bronx in the 1970s, hip-hop has rapidly expanded globally. The fact that hip-hop is a global phenomenon, and varies greatly in both content and form depending on geographic location, is of great concern when approaching hip hop academically. Spatial dimensions present serious limitations when examining hip-hop; new artists, CDs, slang, styles and subgenres emerge regularly. Nonetheless, I assert that there are essential characteristics or features of hip hop culture and music. These characteristics are present in hip hop

culture regardless of the geographic location, subgenre, etc. It must also be noted that mixtape culture is a driving force within hip-hop culture. The production of mixtapes has grown exponentially in the past ten years, contributing to the aesthetic development of hip-hop music. However, because mixtapes are produced and distributed in an underground market economy, they are extremely difficult to track and analyze, which limits this dissertation's thoroughness.

This dissertation focuses on East Coast hip-hop, specifically hip-hop from Philadelphia, New York and New Jersey. It is by no means exhaustive. However, because there is much syncretism in terms of influence and trans geographic dialogue, West Coast and southern influences on hip-hop aesthetics are covered perfunctorily in this dissertation. These intersections are precisely why research on hip-hop music must be done holistically and expeditiously. An additional limitation of this dissertation is the dearth of first-hand interviews, as well as the absence of quantitative analysis that examines hip hop lyrics and the sensibilities of hip-hop consumers. Though quantitative analysis is part of my future research plans, economic and time constraints have limited the empirical components of this research.

Theory and Method

This dissertation utilizes a multi-method research strategy, which relies on both traditional and vanguard research methods. The research method for this study is content and textual with a focus on the influences of and references to specific icons, archetypes and texts. I utilize all available "texts" (i.e. video, dress, concerts, language, popular print media, cinema, et al) in order to create a well-rounded and informed perspective.

Early twentieth century African-American cultural criticism and scholarship by noted African-American scholars from the Harlem Renaissance (e.g. Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes) and Black Arts Movement (Addison Gayle, Amiri Baraka, and Larry Neal) provide the theoretical scaffolding upon which this dissertation is built. Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" published in 1934 set the tone for how African-American culture/art would be examined in an urban, technologically-advanced society. Hurston examined African American folk culture as it unfolded before her; she avoided the DuBoisian tendency toward bourgeoisie binaries of high and low culture, Hurston's analysis of African-American culture was brutally honest, yet accurate. Her work is both instructional and inspirational.

First published in 1934 in *Negro: An Anthology,* Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" offers an insightful analysis of Negro (artistic) expression at the turn of the 20th century. Hurston's identification of the culture hero as a characteristic of Negro expression is particularly useful to my discussion of hip-hop archetypes and icons. As a folklorist, Hurston's ethnographic research provides an extensive interrogation of African-American art in the twentieth century. Her work, as well the works of early twentieth century African American scholars such as James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, W.E.B Du Bois, and Richard Wright, sought to define and validate "Black Art" and the aesthetics that under girded its production. Furthermore, This dissertation utilizes Hurston's construct to frame and map hip-hop aesthetics within the context of African American male-centric expression.

Hip-hop is an African American art form; therefore, theoretical frameworks grounded in the experiences of African peoples prove useful. A multidimensional theoretical and research model is utilized for this dissertation. My theoretical framework is grounded in Afrocentric theory, yet it builds upon and engages Eurocentric and Anglophone texts. Molefi K. Asante's Location Theory is utilized as the theoretical anchor of this dissertation. I utilize Location Theory as a means to better understand hip hop aesthetics and to free them from Eurocentric socio-cultural projections. In *The Afrocentric Idea,* Asante explains the importance of reclaiming intellectual space and avoiding ethnocentric Eurocentrism performing cultural analysis:

> Unless they are subjected to severe criticism, the preponderant Eurocentric myths of universalism, objectivity, and classical traditions retain a provincial European cast. Scholarship rooted in such myths obviously lacks either historical or conceptual authenticity. The aggressive seizure of intellectual space, like the seizure of land, amounts to occupying someone else's territory and claiming it as one's own. When this occurs, cultural analysis takes a back seat to galloping ethnocentric interpretations of phenomena. (10)

Within this dissertation, then, I attempt to relocate hip-hop into a conceptual and cultural space that takes into account its African, African-American, *and* American influences respectively. However, hip hop aesthetics are not rigid nor are they structuralist. This can be problematic when utilizing Afrocentric theory to examine hip hop aesthetics. The hip hop generation embraces ambiguity in its avoidance of societal and cultural binaries. Therefore, I extend my analysis of hip hop aesthetics to include American cultural norms and sensibilities. This dissertation relies on Afrocentric

theory in that I seek to relocate hip hop aesthetics within an cultural-historical context that reflects its African *and* African American lineage. However, because hip hop is heavily-influenced by postmodern approaches to artistic production, construction and mediation, Afrocentric theory often obscures hip hop's more secular and profane features. Furthermore, although Afrocentric and African-centered theory has aided in the cultural grounding of this dissertation, as articulated in its current iteration, it is not didactic and often fails to approach hip hop culture wholistically and objectively.

Potter has identified hip hop culture as resistance postmodernism, which, though linked to postmodern theory, is more concerned with theoretical implementation:

> [Resistance postmodernism] is not simply a theorization of a more political postmodernist stance; it proposes (against the grain of many self-announced 'resistance modernists') that the material and social forms of *resistance* takes in a specific cultural context and may well be indifferent or even hostile to some of the academic formulations of postmodernism. (Potter 5)

Potter positions hip hop culture as post-apocalyptic art. He asserts that hip hop's elements "are not monuments to some romanticized "human spirit," but fundamentally anti-monumental arts" (Potter 8). Hip hop's use of tragic realism and its use of pastiche present a theoretical conundrum for this dissertation research. Nonetheless, I sample both post modern *and* Afrocentric theoretical frameworks in my analysis of hip hop iconography and aesthetics.

Review of the Literature

Hip hop studies literature dates back to the early 1990s. Though journalists documented the first twenty years of hip hop culture, three texts mark the beginning of the study of hip hop in the academy: Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* (1994)*, Droppin Science* (1995) edited by William Eric Perkins, and Houston Baker's *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy*. Hip hop has survived thirty years despite severe societal and academic criticism. In the twenty-first century, hip hop's commercial presence has resulted in increased scholarly attention. In the last 8-10 years, hip hop studies scholarship has—on one hand— moved away from grand historical narratives on hip hop toward more myopic analysis. Nonetheless, their remains a need for culturally-grounded research on hip hop, which is anchored by textual analysis of lyrics as well as popular culture texts such as videos, interviews, etc. As discussed, many post modern postulations of hip hop understate its African and African American origins. Conversely, many Afrocentric analyses of hip hop culture fail to properly contextualize and asses its functionality. Though I utilize both, I situate hip hop within a socio-cultural context that takes into account both hip hop's African/African American legacy *and* its Americaness.

I divide the review of hip hop studies literature into three waves. The first two waves of hip hop studies scholarship focused on creating a meta-narrative which documented the origins of hip hop culture. This body of literature was concerned primarily with validating hip hop as a an academic field of study or it focused on hip hop's primary (b-boying, djing, emceeing, graffiti, and knowledge) or its secondary elements (video, music production, etc.). The first wave of pre-hip hop studies scholarship begins with literary scholars such as Amiri Baraka, Eileen Southern and Henry Louis Gates. These

writers laid the theoretical and methodological groundwork for analyzing hip hop. They also were preoccupied with documenting hip hop's history. The second wave consists of scholars such as Tricia Rose, Nelson George, Michael Eric Dyson, William Eric Perkins, and Robin Kelley. The first two waves of hip hop studies scholarship was concerned with the cultural and scholarly validation of hip hop culture. The first two waves consisted primarily of meta-narratives of hip hop culture. The third wave consists of scholars such as Jeffery Ogbar, Bakari Kitwana, Murray Forman, Imani Perry, Joan Morgan, Tanya Sharpley-Whiting, Murray Foreman and also includes third wave Black feminists such as Joan Morgan.

The review of literature surveys various literatures on hip hop, American popular culture, and American icons. As stated in the precious section, this dissertation builds upon twentieth century theoretical frameworks that examined African American cultural practices. Since the mid-1990s, the study of hip hop culture has flourished in the academy and within journalism. Several texts published in the new millennium examine hip hop aesthetics, yet few texts focus on hip hop iconography and iconology, particularly pre-hip hop iconography, iconology and aesthetics and their link to hip hop. Because much research fails to address the tension between African-American, African, and American cultures in hip hop, the review of literature attempts to reconcile this tension by fusing various theoretical constructs across disciplines and fields of study.

The review of literature covers two major subject areas and two sub-areas, though the review of literature concentrates primarily on hip hop texts or texts that mention hip hop explicitly. First, I engage "traditional" texts that deal with African-American culture and music in general. These works range from cultural studies texts that examine popular

culture to texts that deal with African-American and African cultural production and phenomena to works that discuss hip-hop scholarship in the academy. Second, I examine traditional musical texts that reference both African-American and American musical forms, tradition and history. Third, I review literature that discuses popular culture in America. Note, that much of the literature on popular culture is produced in cultural studies. Last, I engage texts that deal specifically with hip hop culture and aesthetics. These texts fall into two broad categories: scholarly and popular press. The former includes primarily college professors from various disciplines; the latter is composed of hip-hop artists, (radio) personalities, artists, poets, reporters, critics, ghostwriters, aficionados, journalists, fans, etc. On the surface, this dichotomy appears to be merely an issue of historiography. However, because of differences in methodology, ideology, and theory there remains some tension between the two camps.

Because hip-hop so thoroughly embodies African-American oral traditions, literary criticism made up a large portion of early academic discourse on hip hop. African-American literary texts such as Gates *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* edited by Henry Louis Gates (1997), connect hip-hop culture to the African-American Oral tradition: jump-rope rhymes; competitive trickster toasts; chanted sermons of black churches, jazz singing of Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway, favorite disc jockeys, and "popular Black Arts Movement poetry" (60). For example, Gates states that hip-hop is "animated music that celebrates black verbal and musical style; but is also music that rejoices in the poetry of the human body in soulful, dance-hall-rocking motion" (60). *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* links hip hop to larger movements and trends within the African-American experience.

Call and Response, edited by Patricia Liggins Hill (1998), includes a section "Rap Lyrics". Like many of the literary-based texts that cover hip-hop, Hill's text focuses on the African-American Oral tradition. Hip-hop, according to Hill, is:

> the latest black folk music idiom… [which is] deeply rooted in African-American orature boasting, (signifying, and playing the dozens)…it has its major themes racial protest, violence, and sex, but the message is more strident, direct, and militant/the popular message parallels that of the black nationalist poetry of the sixties, including the work of Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, and Carolyn Rogers, though usually with less power of redemptive introspection and celebrated awareness of sacred values of African American people. (1382)

Literary criticism on hip-hop served to define hip-hop culture within an African-American cultural context. These texts provided scholarly commentary, discourse, and analysis on hip-hop within the academia.

Before the recent wave of hip-hop scholarship and discourse, texts that dealt with African-American music history were fundamental to the development of early hip-hop historical analysis. Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: a History* (1984) deals primarily with "traditional" or "folk" Black music. Though Southern makes no mention of hip-hop, her work does place hip-hop into a historical context within African-American musical traditions. I utilize Southern's analysis of African-American music in order to place hip-hop aesthetics and musical sensibilities within a musical continuum. Much of the literature on hip-hop either relies too heavily on post-modern interpretations of hip-hop or fails to properly locate hip-hop culture with African-American cultural traditions. This literature review attempts to reconcile the tension between hip-hop as

counter-cultural resistance/expression and hip-hop as artistic production, while constructing a theoretical framework by which to examine hip-hop icons, archetypes and aesthetics, avoiding binary interpretations of the hip-hop culture.

Black Studies, Rap and the Academy Houston Baker Jr. (1993) is important for both African American Studies and hip-hop scholarship. Baker convincingly makes a case for hip-hop being covered in the academy, specifically within African-American Studies. Baker's text represents, at the very least, the recognition of hip-hop as a valid field of study within African American Studies. Finally, Baker's work: a) places hip-hop into the context of scholarly discourse; b) creates a methodological framework from which to analyze hip-hop; 3) emphasizes the importance of examining African American popular culture criticism within African American Studies; and 4) interjects hip-hop into the consciousness of the academy, namely, so-called Black Studies.

Amiri Baraka's theoretical, historical and critical analysis of blues and jazz serves as a philosophical and methodological anchor for this dissertation. Baraka correctly linked African American music and content to African American experiences and attitudes. In his essay "Jazz and the White Critic" Baraka discusses the difference between understanding blues and jazz attitudes and music appreciation. Baraka places so-called Negro music into a larger socio-historical context, asserting "Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made "(181). By taking Negro music out of the realm of mere musical production, Baraka offers a more accurate, albeit nuanced, analysis of African-American music. In this dissertation, I borrow Baraka's framework in regard to African-American music being inextricably linked to worldview, experience,

and/or attitude. Hence, I explore hip hop aesthetics and icons as a barometer of African American attitudes and expectations.

Baraka's analysis offers a theoretical and philosophical framework upon which to explore hip-hop culture. However, this dissertation seeks to move beyond conceptual analysis and delve deeper into the sociolinguistic and cultural-historical implications of hip-hop aesthetics. In other words, I am interested in examining cultural cues within hip-hop texts in an attempt to add historical context and socio-cultural meaning to discourse and analysis. More recently, because hip-hop has been so thoroughly absorbed into popular culture, many scholars have come to false and/or faulty findings because of their misinterpretation of the meaning behind hip-hop lyrics, culture, et al.

When studying African-American musical forms in general, meaning often supersedes technicality. Ramsey examines the "meaning" of musical practices *in Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (2003), Ramsey explains:

If music is a coherent, signifying system or cultural transaction, then we need to

understand more about various specific social settings in order to tease out what

this system or transaction might mean. As I have stated above, meaning is always

contingent and extremely fluid; it is never essential to a musical figuration. Real

people negotiate and eventually agree on what cultural expressions such as a

musical gesture mean. They collectively decide what associations are conjured by a

well-placed blue note, a familiar harmonic patter, the soulful, virtuoso sweep of a

jazz solo run…(25)

I utilize Ramsey's framework in that I am concerned with the myriad *meanings* of African-American artistic expression, in this case hip-hop, within particular socio-

historical contexts. Ramsey highlights the collective flexibility of African American artistic production and places a priori on the interpretation or meaning of musical transactions. This type of nuanced analysis is imperative to accurate hip-hop criticism and discourse. Moreover, it is scholars and critics misunderstanding of the "specific social settings" that spawned certain forms of hip hop expression that have lead to inaccurate readings and interpretations of hip hop texts. Context informs content. Music and human experience are inextricably linked. As discussed, music has been an important node of African American experience and expression within the context of Western modernity. The "sonic", as Weheliye asserts, becomes an invaluable resource to theorize on African American attitudes, sensibilities, etc:

> The sonic remains an important zone from and through which to theorize the fundamentality of Afro-diasporic formations to the currents of Western modernity, since this field remains, to put it bluntly, the principle modality in which Afro-diasporic cultures have been articulated though clearly it has not been the only one. (Weheliye 5)

Weheliye correctly links African identify formation African music texts. He pushes "the sonic" to the forefront of analysis on African (Americans). Warren Swindell's (1993) "Aesthetics and African American Musical Expression" reinforces Alaine Locke's premise that black music by the 1900's had become "the most basic American prototype" (175). Hip-hop is an extension of Locke's premise of African-American music being an "American prototype." Not only is hip-hop an American prototype, hip-hop culture has in turn reified numerous pre-hip hop archetypes and icons, which are both foundational and functional within hip hop aesthetics.

Inherent in Locke's notion is the recognition that African American music in the United States is an amalgamation of both American and African culture. It is my position that African American music is much more. It is an Africanized response to an American reality and phenomena. Moreover, the issue of aesthetics and its relation to African American musical output has been debated since the 1800's. Swindell formulates a model that challenges the inaccuracies of America's musical canon, while simultaneously striving to create an African American aesthetic base from which to operate. In doing so, he iterates the intimacy between art and experience. Swindell's critique of African-American musical aesthetics situates this dissertation within an intellectual and theoretical context that utilizes early African-American scholarship.

Alexander, G. Weheliye's (2005) *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* explores the intricate relationship between Afro-diasporic discourse and technology, more specifically the phonograph. Weheliye explains that hip hop operates as a discursive and cultural space that Africans throughout the Diaspora utilize as a "forum" to negotiate identity issues:

> [Hip hop] serves as a global forum through which different black diasporic subjects negotiate shifting meanings of blackness, as well as other forms of social and political identification. This negotiation, far from being uncomplicated or uncritical, entails facing the prominence of African American cultural practices such as hip hop within the continuum of the African diaspora (146)

Weheliye highlights the trans continental dialogue between African peoples, while teasing out the complexities of such interaction. Furthermore, he asserts that politics *and*

culture serve as a surrogate for disseminating conceptualizations of Blackness. He explains:

> Afro-diasporic identity relies not only on political but on cultural channels of membership, because of the increased accessibility of African-American cultural productions within the global marketplace. Hip-hop provides one of the most obvious examples of the tendential shift from the political to the cultural as it offers Afro-diasporic subjects an omnipresenent cultural form through which to identify as black without having to fall back on a strictly racialized ways of belonging, at least exclusively. (148)

Popular culture icons within the context of a post-modern, technological and global society, often trump political figures. Stated differently, popular culture icons such as Spike Lee, Bob Marley, and Richard Pryor have been far more influential in the process of shaping identity within hip hop than, say, political figures such as Al Sharpton or Jesse Jackson. However, because hip hop emerges in the post-Civil Rights era, purely racialized identifiers have been deemphasized. Weheliye's work challenges structuralist, binary notions of African-American cultural production. I focus on hip hop as a cultural—as opposed to political—channel of African American identity. Lastly, from a theoretical perspective, Weheliye's work links post-Afrocentric and post-modern theory and sound technologies.

Because of the performative, hands-on nature of hip-hop research, both popular texts (i.e. magazines, websites, etc.) and scholarly texts are equally informative and necessary. More importantly, though, the distinction between the two categories is not always discernible. But again, particularly during the first twenty or so years of hip-hop culture,

lay works, such as the *Source* and *XXL*, provide invaluable archival data, which undoubtedly inform and shape current academic discourse on hip-hop.

Afrocentric perspectives on hip-hop are scant (and skewed). Maulana Karenga, Jawanzaa Kunjufu, and Oware Osayande, for example, are extremely critical and conservative in their coverage of hip-hop. In *Misogyny and the Emcee,* Osayande (2008) opens his critique of misogyny in hip hop by positioning himself as an activist, " I come to this work not as an academic seeking to publish a dissertation; I come to this work as an activist seeking justice" (14). Osayande's role as social/cultural critic, as with much Afrocentric/African-centered analysis of hip hop, obfuscates his purview of hip hop culture. Unfortunately, Osayande, by his on admission, focuses on "commercial rap music" (14). Such comparative analysis is analogous to examining commercial jazz (e.g. Kenny G) and using it as an indicator or representation of bebop or "real" jazz. "Unfortunately, rap appears much more monolithic in mainstream media coverage and as portrayed by the most prominent critics of rap, due in no small measure to the market dominance of gangsta rap" (Ogbar 137). Though there is much overlap in hip hop music's infinite subgenres/cultures: commercial hip hop, backpack hip hop, hipster hip hop, et al; by focusing on "commercial rap", many African-centered scholars such as Osayande strip hip hop culture of its sociopolitical value:

> Commercialized rap music is no more "Black" than the "Amos and Andy" show from back in the day. It is a mockery of Blackness. It is a pejorative parody of Blackness. Hip hop has been disemboweled of any real sociopolitical value and stuffed with materialism, sexism and violence now sits on the shelves of its corporate masters like the prized game that it is. (14)

As with much scholarship on hip hop, Osayande fails to recognize African American agency. How does he define and quantify "real socio-piltical value"? Hip hop is utilized as artistic, cultural, and socio-economic currency as well as a mode of expression, as much as it is utilized as a political tool. Furthermore, hip hop's focus on social mobility, through the process of cultural and socioeconomic alchemy—a process that transforms experience via hip hop lyrics, narratives, and style into capital—is an important and central feature of hip hop expression. African Americans consume popular cultural production such as *Amos n' Andy, The Cosby Show*, Michael Jackson and 50 Cent. As Amiri Baraka alludes, the question is: why? Osayande fails to tease out the myriad and complex reasons *why* African Americans consume these images en masse. American popular culture has never been a facsimile of Blackness. In other words, what social, cultural and expressive function does hip hop play in the lives of the hip hop generationers? Black Popular culture production and consumption has always reflected, on some level, African American attitudes, sensibilities, aspirations, etc. Likewise, why and how hip hop is consumed is just as important as why it is produced. Cultural critics are often patronizing in their deconstruction of hip hop's sociopolitical value.

In Chapter 1, Osayande examines the work of R. Kelley to support his claims of misogyny in hip hop. Osayande's use of R. Kelley, an R&B singer, as an example of misogyny in hip hop is problematic. Though R. Kelley is heavily influenced by hip hop aesthetics and has collaborated with a number of hip hop artists, most notably, Jay-Z, R. Kelley is not an emcee nor is he grounded in hip hop aesthetics. R. Kelley is not representative of hip hop aesthetics; he represents the New Jack Swing strain of R&B. In fact, the hip hop community has been outwardly critical of R. Kelley's sexual behavior.

Short of ostracizing Kelley, many emcees in hip hop have ridiculed Kelley. By stretching his analysis to include figures outside of hip hop such as Kelley, Osayande misses the opportunity to examine intra-hip hop discourse, —for example , the discursive space between African American male emcees and African American, female neo-soul artists— which would provide a more wholistic and accurate analysis of hip hop culture.

Maulana Karenga provides a cultural nationalist critique of hip hop culture. His heavy-handed critique of Black popular culture and hip-hop elucidates the disconnect between some Afrocentric and African-centered scholars contemporary African American culture. Karenga, for example, admits that hip hop reintroduced "political discourse in African American music" (482). However, he ultimately discounts hip hop music because it has "neither socially or aesthetically redeeming value" (483). Karenga even reduces "political rap" to baseless, ahistorical, acultural art:

> Negative forms of rap pretend a *sui generis* origin of rap, dismissing a rich
> cultural history and drawing generational lines so typical of the European society
> these rappers claim to reject…Even political Rap has a tendency to claim a
> knowledge it does not have, a link with struggle it does demonstrate, and political
> relevance it still must prove. (Karenga 483)

Karenga's analysis of hip hop culture is representative of a large body of Afrocentric analysis on hip hop culture. Karenga examines hip hop culture but overlooks its aesthetic value. Afrocentric theory does in fact have the potential to relocate hip-hop into its proper cultural context. However, Afrocentric theory fails to account for the unique Americaness of the African-American hip-hop, particularly in a post-modern, post-industrial, global, patriarchal mass-market culture. The absence of wholistic and nuanced

Afrocentric/African-centered analysis on hip hop, which often fails to take into account hip hop's complex socio-cultural context, has resulted in acultural analysis of hip hop narratives, separating hip hop culture and aesthetics from their African and African American legacy.

Hip-hop emerges in the fading milieu of soul music production, consumption and aesthetics. Thematically, hip-hop marks a divergence from soul aesthetics. This is due partially to shifting trends in African-American ideological and political thought. It should be noted that "neo-soul" music and aesthetics—in many ways— bridge the gap between the soul and hip-hop aesthetics. Many of the issues that have been problematized within hip-hop culture are resolved, or at least addressed, within the discursive space between hip-hop and neo-soul music. Mark Anthony Neal places hip-hop into a post-soul, American cultural context. In *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* Mark Anthony Neal (1999) takes a cursory, yet terse look at hip-hop's origins. Chapter five, "Postindustrial Soul: Black Popular Music at the Crossroads", links hip-hop's origins to the blight and poverty of postindustrial city, "Intense poverty, economic collapse, and the erosion of viable space were part and parcel of the new urban terrain that African-Americans confronted. Culled from the discourse of the postindustrial city, hip-hop reflected the growing visibility of a young, urban, and often angry so-called "underclass." Neal explains:

> Aesthetically the new genre drew on diverse musical sensibilities like James
> Brown and the Parliament Funkadelic collective, oral traditions like prison
> toasts…As the genre represented a counter narrative to the emergence of a
> corporate –driven music industry and the mass commodification of black

expression…hip-hop may represent the last black popular form to be wholly

derived from the experiences and texts of the black urban landscape. (126)

The significance of Neal's treatment of hip-hop lies in the connections he makes between

soul music and hip-hop. Though posited before, Neal's analysis offers a new perspective

of African American music culture. Neal's *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the

Post-Soul Aesthetic* discusses the post-soul era as a precursor to the hip-hop generation's

sensibilities. The neo-soul movement and post-Afrocentric hip hop discourse illustrate

the efficacy of Neale's post-soul construct.

Tricia Rose's (1994) *Black Noise* was a ground-breaking texts amongst the first wave

of hip-hop scholarship. *Black Noise* supplies a historcal and theoretical framework from

which to analyze hip-hop. Though Rose over emphasizes post-industrial New York as a

primary factor responsible for hip-hop's birth, she creates a critical framework to critique

hip-hop culture that challenged the media's negative coverage of hip-hop. From an

academic standpoint, Rose provides a foundational text with both social and cultural

implications. However, Rose places too much influence on technology in reference to

hip-hop's creation, yet she reconciles this theoretical lapse by connecting hip-hop to its

folk rigins. She declares:

> Hip-hop culture originated during the mid-seventies as an
>
> integrated series of lived community-based practices. It remained
>
> a function of live practice and performance for a number of years,
>
> exclusive to those who gathered together along New York City
>
> blocks, in parks, and in select clubs such as the now-famous
>
> Harlem World or T-Connection. Early MCs (or rappers) and DJs,

> graffiti artists, and break dancers forged a scene entirely
>
> dependent on face-to-face social contact and interaction. (1)

Rose's work is important because she examines the post-industrial, post-modern landscape that spawned hip-hop. Rose also identifies important archetypes icons and historical/cultural markers that helped to shape and define hip-hop scholarship and discourse.

Murray Forman's *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop,* identifies the significance of space within hip hop culture. More generative than innovative, Forman's thesis is supported by a spatial construct, which asserts that hip-hop lyrics place "a pronounced emphasis on place and locality" (xvii). He goes further by stating that hip-hop artists are inspired by their regional affiliations and "a keen sense of…*extreme local"* (xvii). Forman's analysis sheds light upon the significance of space (i.e. region, neighborhood, state, etc) effect hip hop expression. Forman's work informs this dissertation's discussion of hip-hop aesthetics, highlighting hip-hop's community/communal thrust, linking hip-hop to African cultural norms.

Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar's article "Slouching toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music" responsds to right-winger cultural critics such as Newt Gingrich and Robert H. Bork. Ogbar reduces such claims to nothing more than "race baiting" (181). Ogbar counters with the concept that "hip-hop is perhaps more diverse in cultural expression than any other form of music in the United States. Unfortunately, rap appears much more monolithic in the coverage provided by mainstream media and the most prominent critics of rap" (181). Self-critique and the Hater ante type are both core components of "Characteristics of Hip-Hop Expression," which is outlined at length in

chapter 6 of this dissertation. More recently in *Hip Hop Revolution: the Culture and Politics of Rap,* Ogbar extends his analysis to include social and political developments that have impacted hip hop culture. Ogbar highlights the heterogeneity of hip hop culture, which is often obfuscated by the proliferation of mainstream hip hop culture.

Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood* offers the most salient interpretation of hip-hop since Rose's *Black Noise.* Perry expands on the notion that hip-hop should be viewed as art. She correctly argues that hip-hop should be viewed as art. Perry also warns against relying too heavily on deficiency models when examining hip-hop culture. Perry's work contributes to this dissertations discussion of hip-hop aesthetics. Though hip-hop originated as African-American and Latino folk culture, because hip-hop as evolved into an art form and, conversely, a commodity, it is important that artists are given latitude in their renderings of reality. This is precisely why hip-hop scholarship must place an emphasis on viewing hip-hop music, at least on some level, as art.

Perry states that hip hop artists are "often self-proclaimed contemporary prophets, their work constructed of truth-revealing parables and pictures. That truth may be spiritual, cultural, personal, beautiful, and it may resonate with inspiration or tragedy" (2). Her work "departs from the primacy of historical and sociological interpretations of hip hop and concentrates instead on the aesthetic, artistic, theoretical, and ideological aspects of the music, working from the premise that it has been undervalued as art per se, even as its cultural influence has often been noted"(3). I take up Perry's discussion of hip hop as art, operating from a similar premise approaching hip hop as undervalued art. Perry's analysis of hip hop utilizes:

an analytical framework of beginning with artistic and aesthetic analyses that then
move into cultural inquiry. I am interested in exploring the artistic requirements
for hip hop as an art, in understanding what philosophies and assumptions on e
finds in the spaces between the poetry of the lyrics and the music of the beats, and
in examining philosophies interplay between the artists and an audience that
receives he music as one deriving from its own community and experience. (4)

The nexus between 1960s Black Power/Black Art ideology is crucial to a thorough
understanding of hip-hop culture, aesthetics, and iconology. Patricia Hill-Collins' *From
Black Power to Hip-Hop* offers an assessment of the transition from the Black Power
Movement of the 1960s to the Hip Hop generation. I use Hill-Collins' work as a
theoretical lynchpin, connecting hip-hop to the Black Power movement. Her work
highlights the successes and failures of 1960s Black Power ideology, which is crucial to
gaining a wholistic understanding of hip-hop's emergence. Hill-Collins challenges
revisionist historical accounts of African-American political thought circa the 1960s. By
tracking the continuity and discontinuity of Black Power rhetoric and politics by the hip-
hop generation, I illustrate how hip-hop represents a renegotiation and redefinition of
1960s Black Power politics.

Some recent scholarship on hip-hop has attempted to deal with hip-hop aesthetics
explicitly. Jelani Cobbs' *To the Break of Dawn: a Freestyle on the Hip-Hop Aesthetic*
links hip hop aesthetics to its African American musical roots. He connects hip hop
aesthetics to blues iconography such as the trickster (30). Cobb correctly mentions the
blues as an early influence on hip hop aesthetics. However, Cobb's treatment of blues'
impact on hip hop aesthetics is tangential. This dissertation will fill gaps in their analysis

of aesthetics, linking aesthetic interpretation to hip-hop icons and archetypes and African American and America cultural traditions.

Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* offers a historical analysis of hip-hop culture, with a focus on socioeconomic and historical factors that led to the emergence of the hip-hop movement. Chang's work is perhaps one of the most exhaustive historical texts that deal exclusively with hip-hop culture. He tracks developments within the record industry, hip-hop folk culture, and the socioeconomic factors that influence it. Chang also references Afrocentricity. He asserts, for example, that Afrika Bambaataa was "a kind of proto-Afrocentrism" (191). This period of hip-hop culture marks the beginning of post-Afrocentric public discourse. As will be discussed in further detail in this dissertation, the Native Tongue Movement within hip-hop is an extension of Bambaaata's "proto-Afrocentricism.

Chang intertwines popular culture texts (e.g. magazine articles, newspapers, film, etc) with academic scholarship. Even though Chang's analysis of hip-hop is parochial and at times does not fully take into account folk discourse among African-American men and women across geographic regions (i.e. outside New York City), it does connect New York public policy, public opinion, and news coverage to hip-hop's emergence. Chang's use of multimedia texts serves as a methodological instructive for this research.

Bakari Kitwana's (2002) *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* highlights class divisions amongst African-Americans as they relate to hip-hop culture. He concludes that hip-hoppers are materialistic and have little integrity. Kitwana's construction of a hip-hop worldview is extremely important in this dissertation, as well as his treatment of the formation of the "hip-hop generation". His

work explores the distinct worldview held by the hip-hop generation. He asserts that the hip-hop worldview "stands in close contrast to [their] parents' worldview" (7). His analysis highlights the generational gap between baby boomers and hip-hoppers within the African-American community. I extend Kitwana's framework to include a distinct hip-hop aesthetic. I explore the intricacies, meanings, and origins of hip-hop aesthetics, paying close attention to specific socioeconomic and cultural factors that aided in its development.

Kitwana lists several phenomena that have led to this divergent worldview: 1) the growth and proliferation of popular culture; 2) globalization (post-industrial/jobs); 3) corporate involvement; 4) persisting segregation; 5) public policy regarding criminal justice; 6) the banning of hip-hop fashion in schools; and 7) a shift in the quality of life (unemployment homicide). His work "explores new attitudes and beliefs of young Blacks, examines where we are going, and analyzes the sociopolitical forces. Kitwana also introduces the notion of viewing the hip-hop generation as a political force (211). Unfortunately, as with much scholarship on hip hop, Kitwana does not sufficiently utilize actual hip hop lyrics and discourse to support his assertions about the hip hop generation.

Third wave Black Feminist discourse and criticism informs this dissertation. However, a portion of Black Feminist critiques of hip hop have focused on hip hop's surface structure. Prior to the publication of Joan Gordon's *When Chickenheads Come to Roost: a Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (1999), Black Feminist critiques tended to focus on the objectification of women in hip-hop videos, as well misogyny, homophobia, and violence. Joan Gordon highlights divisions within the feminist movement in terms of the significance, meaning and interpretation of hip-hop. Morgan's first person narrative

critiques misogyny in hip hop's, the growing violence amongst the hip-hop generation, class conflict in the African American community, and the use of pejoratives such as "bitch" and "ho" among hip-hoppers. Morgan uses feminist discourse theory as a means to reconcile these disparities, moving beyond superficial, status quo feminist critiques of hip-hop in an attempt to tease out hip-hop's complexities. Morgan's analysis informs this dissertation's discussion of female archetypes and icons, juxtaposing new female archetypes such as the wifey/queen, the "bitch," gold digger and the video vixen with hip-hop icons such as Foxy Brown, Jackie-O. I assert that these icons and contemporary archetypes signal shifts in African American sexual politics, changing sensibilities among women, and an engagement of and resistance to misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy. Morgan's analysis from the perspective of a self-proclaimed hip hop head, because she attempts to engage and explore hip hop narratives not vilify them.

By the 1960s, Black athletes such as Jim Brown, Muhammad Ali, John Carlos and Kareem Abdul Jabar became spokespersons for African-American communities. These figures, because they so accurately embodied the sentiments of young African-Americans of the time, became iconic. Aesthetically, by the 1970s, professional basketball players became ambassadors of the burgeoning urban culture that would spawn hip-hop. Even today, NBA basketball icons such as DR. J, Michael Jordan, and Allen Iverson occupy a revered place within hip-hop culture. Furthermore, professional and college basketball has had an influence on hip-hop's sensibilities, aesthetics, and worldview. Aesthetically, basketball in general and the NBA in particularly has enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with hip hop culture. However, the 1990s signaled a shift in the types of sports iconography that hip hop culture appropriated. Because of the intimate interconnectivity

between hip hop and basketball in the 1980s, professional sports-based, hip hop icons reflected the emergence and development of a distinct hip hop worldview.

NBA basketball and hip-hop culture have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. Sneaker culture—which emerged out of basketball culture, for example, has been informed and been informed by hip-hop culture. The way race is processed in America within professional sports culture today is undoubtedly filtered through popular cultural representations of Black men, most notably hip-hop culture. Todd Boyd's (2003) *Young Black Rich and Famous: The Rise of the Hip-Hop Invasion and the Transformation of American Culture* explores the interface between hip-hop culture and the NBA. Boyd's work makes crucial connections between the hip-hop generation at-large and the hip-hop generation within the NBA. Boyd uses hip-hop culture as a lense through which to examine race, class and gender in American society and sports culture. *Young Black Rich and Famous: The Rise of the Hip-Hop Invasion and the Transformation of American Culture* is important because it explores the discursive space between young Black professional athletes—in this case NBA players—and the community. Boyd examines the interactivity of NBA and hip hop aesthetics:

> Basketball has been most closely connected to the culture of hip hop. This unique relationship has evolved over time and is fueled by the social and economic conditions that have specifically beset Black urban communities since the dawn of the Reagan era in the early '80s. (12)

African-American athletes in the twentieth century have undoubtedly shaped African-American male identity and have challenged assumptions and stereotypes held by white society. Besides boxing icons, NBA icons, both pre-hip hop era icons and hip hop era

icons, are the most sampled sports figures within hip hop aesthetics. This is largely due to the fact that basketball and boxing offer more creative space than say baseball.

Basketball since the 1970s has provided an aesthetic space for players to express themselves in such a way that the NBA, in many ways, up until the twenty-first century, has been a purveyor of African American culture. The aesthetic overlap is most apparent in the 1990s. The 1980s Georgetown Hoyas and the Fab Five for the University of Michigan's basketball team ushered in a new era of interaction and exchange between African American culture and organized basketball. Speaking about the Fab Five, Boyd explains, "[they] embodied a new style that was already in place on the streets, but was now available for mainstream consumption. They were the first *hip hop team*" (141). He goes further proclaiming "the Fab Five had translated hip hop through basketball, and 'ball was one of many vehicles through which hip hop would spread to society at large" (143).

The 1990s also signaled major shifts in mainstream basketball aesthetics. The connection between mainstream basketball culture and hip hop culture culminated in the creation and commodification of the AND1 mixtape and street ball enterprise. Of course, players such as Julius Erving, Earving Magic Johnson, and Michael Jordan left an indelible imprint on American and African American popular culture; they were the iconographic and stylistic precursors to mainstream NBA hip hop icons such as Latrell Spreewell, Allan Iverson, and Ron Artest, which were steeped—more than ever—in African American cultural production.

The last section of literature I review deals with American icons, superheroes and iconography. American icons have been largely overlooked by the scholarly community.

Partially because of the ubiquity of American icons within the modern American existence as well as an obvious reluctance to examine popular culture, the significance of American iconography has been obscured. *Icons of America* edited by Ray Browne and Marshall Fishwick (1978) is one of the most exhaustive texts that explore American popular culture iconography. Fishwick discusses icons within a contemporary context, focusing on the shift in iconic meaning in the twentieth century from the religious spaces to secular spaces. Whereas religious iconography "connote fixity and permanence…pop icons deal with flux and impermanence of contemporary Protean Man" (4) Fishwick reestablishes modern icons as figures that have retained and gained much cultural currency in twentieth century:

> Icons are symbols and mindmarks. They tie in with myth, legend, values, idols, aspirations…We seek to revitalize the word [icon] and relate it to popular culture. Icons still move [wo]men, even when they are not recognized as such in supermarkets, discotheques, used car lots, and funeral parlors. They pop up on billboards, magazine covers, and TV commercials. (4)

Fishwick's "revitalization" of the term icon is crucial to my analysis of the importance of icons within hip hop aesthetics. Mickey Hess's *Icons of Hip Hop: an Encyclopedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture* stands as the definitive text on hip hop icons. Hess features twenty-four hip hop artists beginning with hip hop pioneers Kool Herc and Run-DMC and ends with an entry on Kanye West. I use Hess's work as a rubric to identify "true" hip hop artists. I engage many of the emcees that Hess identifies as hip hop icons (e.g. The Native Tongue, Tupac, Snoop Dogg, etc.). Though this dissertation is not limited to Hess's iconic selections, Hess's hip hop icons aid in establishing consistency

and consensus as to which hip hop artists can be considered authentic emcees. *Icons of Hip Hop* effectively identifies hip hop icons and some of the more contemporary socio-cultural influences of hip hop music. Nonetheless, Hess does not sufficiently link hip hop to its historical antecedents, nor does he properly consider hip hop within an aesthetic context. The significance of African American folk cultural heroes has been discussed by a number of scholars including Lawrence Levine and Zora Neale Hurston, however few scholars have linked African American folk hero narratives to African American popular culture iconography, in this case hip hop iconography.

Definition of Terms

Because this dissertation is grounded in cultural analysis, I offer a brief discussion of culture in an attempt to operationalize the term, as well as to reconcile some of the conceptual tension that exists between Afrocentric scholars and Eurocentric scholars and between hip-hop scholars and lay scholars. As an African-American Studies scholar, cultural location is at the very core of my intellectual process. That said there are many definitions of culture. I will engage what I consider both Afrocentric and Eurocentric definitions of culture. Again, this is an attempt to take some of the political and ideology sting of the term culture.

It must also be noted that hip-hop purists, participants, and many scholars generally speak of a distinct hip-hop culture. This is reason enough to seriously consider notions of culture as they apply to hip-hop. I also offer definitions of aesthetics, hip-hop, archetype and icon. Lastly, because hip-hop exists and was created within a post-modern context, I attempt to understand hip-hop culture by exploring new definitions of terms such as culture, hip-hop and icon.

My goal is to break free from the more conceptually claustrophobic definitions of culture. Afrocentric scholars have identified many distinctions concerning African and European conceptualizations of culture. For me, annotated definitions of culture serve merely as a starting-point. Linda James Myers makes the distinction between surface and deep culture in relation to Afro-Diasporic cultural phenomena. Maulana Karenga rightfully warns against the use of deficiency paradigms when analyzing African-American culture. Furthermore, according to Kawaida theory, Karenga identifies seven core areas of culture: History, Religion, social organization, economic organization, political organization, creative production, and ethos (*Introduction to Black Studies* 314-317).

The Hip-Hop Dictionary by Alonzo Westbrook (2002) teeters between the scholarly and lay text delineation. Westbrook's definition of hip-hop, though valuable, is concise, but not exhaustive. In short, Westbrook's definition of hip-hop identifies hip-hop as "an artistic response to oppression"(64). Westbrook's definition focuses on language and aligns hip-hop with the African-American Oral tradition. My definition of hip-hop is more explicit in regard to race.

Westbrook defines hip-hop as**:** the artistic response to oppression; a way of expression in dance, music, word/song; a culture that thrives on creativity and nostalgia; as a musical art form it is stories of inner-city life, often with a message, spoken over beats of music; the culture includes rap and any other venture spawned from the hip-hop style and culture (Westbrook). I assert that hip-hop is: 1) a cultural and artistic movement consists of five foundational elements (B-boying, emceeing, graffiti, DJing, knowledge; 2) a way of life; 3) a form of creative expression based in brown and black communities;

4) the voice of the have nots; 5) rooted in Afro-diasporic oral and artistic traditions; 6) a post-modern creation; 7) a reflection, albeit a sometimes distorted/contorted reflection, of inner city life; 8) an embodiment of African-American sensibilities and tropes; and 9) an extension of the bad nigga archetype (e.g. Stagolee, Shine, Nat Turner, et al.)

Feagin describes an aesthetic as reflecting "a psychologically, culturally, or even politically distinctive point of view"(Feagin 14). This dissertation focuses on the cultural dimension of aesthetics. *The American Heritage College Dictionary* defines aesthetic as "a conception of what is artistically valid or beautiful"(22). *The Dictionary of Art* takes the definition of aesthetics even further, stating:

> The primary subject-matter of aesthetics is the complex cultural institution in which works of art are embedded, including artistic creation, performance, appreciation, interpretation, criticism, judgment, and the various roles the arts play in people's lives and society. (Walton 172)

This dissertation examines hip hop discourse and aesthetics and their relation to pre-hip hop and hip hop era popular culture iconography. Because African American masculinity in the latter part of twentieth century has been effected by African American and American popular and folk culture (i.e. icons and archetypes). *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms* defines archetype as 'the original model from which others are formed" (Lucie-Smith 20). I utilize the term archetype to connote a cultural model that informs aesthetic expression. As foundational figures, hip hop archetypes—which extend earlier tropes and archetypes— are influenced by myriad socio-economic, political, and artistic. The *Encyclopedia of Folklore and Literature* explains archetypes in folkloric terms:

For adherents of historio-geographic school of folklore methodology, archetype

refers to the original text of a tale-type that was created in a particular place and

time. The single beginning (monogenesis) generates multiple variants as the tale

is told over and over again and transmitted over time and through many cultures

until it appears to be universal or widespread. The aim of folklore research,

according to this school of thought, should be to track down the history of every

variant of a given narrative type in order to reconstruct a hypothetical ur-form,

the original tale or the archetype. (19)

The *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines an archetype as "the original

model, form or pattern from which something is made or from which something

develops; one of the ideas of which existent things are imitations" (112). I assert that

African American archetypes serve as foundational figures in the development of hip hop

aesthetics, which, in turn, serve as base models for hip hop archetypes. In this dissertation

I examine the ways in which African American icons and archetypes have contributed to

the development of hip hop aesthetics.

Many definitions of the term icon deal with representations of religious figures. I will

utilize a definition of icon that conflates several conceptualizations of the term. I move

away from the religious connotations and extend my discussion of hip hop icons to

include popular culture icons. *The American Heritage College Dictionary* defines an icon

as "an important or enduring symbol; the object of great attention and devotion; an

idol"(168). *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines icon as "an image, figure, or

representation; b) an image in the solid; a monumental figure; a statue" (Simpson 608).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines iconic as being "applied to the ancient portrait

statues of victorious athletes commonly dedicated to divinities, and hence to memorial statues and busts executed according to a fixed or conventional type." Fishwick explains popular culture iconography as markers of societal attitudes:

> Icons do objectify deep mythological structure of reality, revealing basic needs which go from age to age, media to media, generation to generation. Cultural ciphers, these admired artifacts help us to decipher, to unlock, the mystery of our attitudes and assumptions. As objects they can be approached objectively; but those who believe in them also operate on an emotional level—the level of love and reverence. (Fishwick 3)

This dissertation, then, is concerned with the ways in which hip hop icons "objectify deep mythological structure of reality" and reveal how they fulfill a "basic need…[and how] these admired artifacts help…to decipher, to unlock, the mystery" of the hip hop generation's attitudes and assumptions. Not only does this dissertation examine hip hop iconography—the study of symbols in art--, it also explores hip hop iconology, which is the study of the study of the meaning behind the symbols in a work of art.

Merriam-Webster defines aesthetics as "a particular theory or conception of beauty or art; a particular taste for or approach to what is pleasing to the senses and especially sight." In this dissertation, then, I am concerned with the ways in which hip hop culture approaches and views the world via artistic and stylistic expression. What does hip hop culture and the hip hop generation find appealing and functional and why? Nonetheless, the politics and history of Black aesthetics are more complex. During the 1960s, discussions surrounding African American art referred to a singular, unified Black aesthetic, which is a bit misleading. African Americans have never been monolithic,

therefore, the plural, aesthetics, which infers several Black aesthetics, would be more accurate and representative.

The form, context, function and content of Black Aesthetics, or the Black Aesthetic as it was often referred in the 1960s, has been debated since the Harlem Renaissance. Because the politics of Black aesthetics has been a driving force in the development and evolution of African American art, I offer a brief discussion of Black aesthetics here in order to tease out some of the theoretical and nomenclatural challenges that are sometimes linked to analyses of hip hop aesthetics. Previous formulations of Black, African, and African American aesthetics prove inadequate when examining hip hop culture and aesthetics. Vanguard theoretical and methodological models are necessary when examining hip hop culture and aesthetics due to the fact that hip hop pulls from so many cultural and aesthetic traditions. Nonetheless, because hip hop culture is rooted in African American aesthetics, I offer a cursory engagement of the concept of "the Black Aesthetic."

I avoid nostalgic, revisionist interpretations of 1960s cultural politics in my discussion of hip hop icons, archetypes and aesthetics. The 1960s encapsulated two similar, often competing and contradictory, socio-cultural, aesthetic and political currents that ran concurrently. Both movements illustrate African American philosophical heterogeneity. Both the Black Nationalist and Blaxploitation movements were influenced by Black Power and Black Arts politics and aesthetics, which represent the complexity and contradiction of the African American experience. Moreover, both movements played out—to some degree—in the popular cultural sphere. Hip hop culture samples from both movements. The ideological tension between the Blaxploitation era of the

1960s and Black Nationalist rhetoric was never fully resolved within the African American community. Hip hop aesthetics represent a coalescence of both movements. In other words, hip hop culture exploits the commercial *and* resistance value of the Blaxploitation era, while incorporating 1960s Black Nationalist tenets of self-definition, self-help, community, and institution-building. Iceburg Slim's works such as *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967), *Trick Baby: The Story of a White Negro* (1967), which are heavily sampled in hip hop culture, represent the diversity of 1960s Black Aesthetics. Hip hop aesthetics and culture sample the most functional and valuable aspects of these movements, discarding those features that have become anachronistic and/or dysfunctional.

Scholar activists and artists from the 1960s picked up on previous conversations on Black aesthetics, which had their roots in the early 1900s via the Harlem Renaissance movement and writers such Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B DuBois, and Langston Hughes. During the 1960s, Black Arts scholars attempted to redefine and solidify African American aesthetic boundaries. Addison Gayle grounded the Black Aesthetic within the context of pro-Black liberation rhetoric and the creation of new models by which to understand African American art:

> The proponents of a Black Aesthetic, the idol smashers of America, call for a set of rules by which Black Literature and art can be judged and evaluated…The acceptance of the phrase "Black is beautiful" is the first step in the destruction of the old table of the laws and the construction of new ones, for the phrase flies in the face of the whole ethos of the white aesthetic. This step must be followed by serious scholarship and hard work; and Black critics must dig beneath the phrase

and unearth the treasure of beauty lying deep in the untoured regions of the Black

experience-regions where others, due to historical conditioning and cultural

deprivation, cannot go (Gayle 46).

The 1960s was the era of new ideas. The 1970s introduced a new set of experiences for

African Americans impacted by integration, an increase in mass media dissemination and

branding and an expanding global economy.

The 1980s saw the emergence of a new racial politic, a politic that eschewed,

transcended, and fed off of post modern and post structuralist notions of race. In other

words, African American icons such as Clarence Thomas, Prince, Michael Jordan and

Michael Jackson could *choose* not to identify with the "untoured regions of the Black

experience." These figures were able to leverage their iconic status into social and

economic capital in such a way that their public personas—for the first time in American

history—could be presented in such a way that their race and politics could be

minimized. From the early 1900s to the present, have been both enigmas and paradoxes.

In other words, how can a racist society produce and reify a figure that that represents an

anathema? During the late 1980s, the hip hop generation had moved beyond racial uplift

and Black Nationalism via Black Power rhetoric. African American hip hop

generationers had accepted the truth that although "Blackness" could be beautiful,

"Blackness" as a socio-cultural construct also embodies less savory elements of African

American culture. Hence, hip hop aesthetics and texts rally around social mobility instead

of race solidarity as a focal point. Moreover, "the blurring of the clear lines that

demarcated black spaces is one of the legacies of the civil rights movement (Iton 21).

Aesthetically, this had lead to a hypersensitivity and ambivalence amongst the hip hop generation.

Many 1960s critics and scholars were preoccupied with evaluating and defining "Black Art." Hence, criticism of Black art was the foci of many discussions concerning Black aesthetics during this time. Hoyt Fuller, for example, addressed "new black critics" in "Toward a Black Aesthetic," explaining "the emergence of new black critics who will be able to articulate and expound the new aesthetic and eventually set in motion the long overdue assault against restrictive assumptions of white critics" (10). Nonetheless, in Fuller's attempt to articulate the Black aesthetic, he inadvertently forecasted the emergence of hip hop:

> The "great bard of Avon" has only limited relevance to the revolutionary spirit raging in the ghetto. Which is not to say that the black revolutionaries reject the "universal" statements inherent in Shakespeare's works; what they do reject, however, is the literary assumption that the style and language concerns of Shakespeare establish the appropriate limits and "frame of reference" for black poetry and people…The young writers of the black ghetto have set out in search of a black aesthetic, a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience. (9)

Hip hop culture has created a new frame of reference for African American *and* European American youth. The art—hip hop—has itself become the politic. The Afrocentric movement in hip hop provided a platform to engage and, subsequently reject, European universalism via hip hop iconography. However, racial politics are not the driving force

of hip hop aesthetics and culture. Conversely, what are the constituents of African Americans' "special character" as Fuller articulates it? Is "isolation" even possible in a mass mediated, semi-integrated, global environment?

Many of the aesthetic and philosophical issues concerning Black art—in terms of its form and function—leaked into the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Iton builds upon 1960s methodological and theoretical frameworks put forth by scholars such as Addison Gayle, Amiri Baraka, and Larry Neal. Iton points out that aesthetic "perspective" is inextricably linked to politics and political thought; furthermore, "aesthetic judgments should not be confined to the artistic realm and cannot be detached from political considerations" (Iton 9). He iterates: "The blurring of the clear lines that demarcated black spaces is one of the legacies of the civil rights movement. There is currently a limited ability for blacks to discuss issues in arenas not accessible to others" (21). Iton teases out socio-historical significance, aesthetic complexities and philosophical issues surrounding examinations of African American popular culture texts:

> The ways popular culture can mobilize or demobilize—for instance, the way much of turn-of-the-century black pop (ranging from rapper Jay-Z's "Hard Knock Life [Ghetto Anthem]" to gospel vocalist Donnie McClurkin's "We Fall Down") naturalized economic hardship and specifically black poverty—need to be integrated into any effective framework for understanding the development of black politics. If we are to understand black politics fully, from an empirical or academic perspective, we cannot overlook those spaces that generate difficult data. Similarly, those committed to progressive change must engage with those arenas and voices that promote regressive and discomforting narratives. (19)

I integrate the African American and American popular culture sphere into my analysis of hip hop aesthetics. Though heavily-influenced by 1960s approaches to Black Aesthetics, hip hop aesthetics demand a new theoretical framework that takes into account the functionality and politics of contemporary American popular culture.

In "Introduction to Black Aesthetics in Music", Jimmy Stewart focuses on the functionality of Black Aesthetics:

> Let us consider some of the factors in the past that, retrospectively, indicated the necessity of consciously moving our music ahead ideologically. These factors in the past have been the relationship of the music to function, to our social functions. And in that assessment, the form of our instrumentation then was governed by the function the music served in our social framework. (Stewart 89)

Hip hop aesthetics are functional for many contemporary African American youth. This functionality is inextricably linked to the relationship between hip hop's modes of production and the context in which it is created. Like African art, though, entertainment has been a primary function of Black art:

> Changes in the manner and make-up of the aesthetic product reflect the changes in the relationships of the product to its social activities, its place, and its function…The music that accompanied the parades and the dances, the music played in the bawdyhouses, the music played in the bars situated our art as a function in our communities, and as art it had also a function as entertainment. (91)

Nonetheless, Stewart adds another dimension to 1960s African American musical aesthetics. During the 1960s, musical apprenticeship and artistic democracy was no

longer a primary feature of African American music aesthetics. The "new Black music" of the 1960s represented a departure from these earlier approaches to music production and aesthetics:

> The music of the sixties represents a cleavage with the past in this essential and fundamental sense, in that Ornette and those who are considered as forerunners of the new Black music did not "earn" their leadership status in any of the ways by which leadership was "earned" in our music previously, from New Orleans to the present. (94)

Discussions on hip hop aesthetics must take into account the fact that African American popular culture is: 1) functional; and 2) a much utilized and politically charged sphere of African American expression:

> Hyperactivity on the cultural front usually occurs as a response to some sort of marginalization from the processes of decision-making or exercising control over one's own circumstances; what might appear to be an overinvestment in the cultural realm is rarely a freely chosen strategy (Iton 17)

African American's hyperactivity on the cultural front during the 1900s crystallized, creating the cross-cultural synergy that served as a cultural-racial incubator for the emergence of hip hop culture. This dissertation examines hip hop icons, archetypes and aesthetics, taking into account the legacy of African American aesthetics, while also taking into consideration the wellspring of data available within the popular culture sphere. Stated differently, hip hop aesthetics fall along the continuum of African American artistic production; however, the complex socio-cultural matrix that is the

American experience, which is compounded by mass media, is also utilized in this dissertation's analysis of hip hop.

Hip-hop as Culture

A major issue among hip hop scholars surrounds the question of whether or not hip hop culture is actually a culture. Many hard-line Afrocentrics declare that hip-hop is not in fact a culture, but a subculture. Hip-hop scholars, such as Michael Coard, Eware Osayende, Chuck D, and Sista Souljah, reiterate this point. The very notion of culture is influenced by German and French European thought and is synonymous with the idea of civilization (Eagleton, 9).

Many of our current conceptualizations of culture are grounded in European scholarly traditions. Numerous African-American scholars from W.E.B DuBois to Marcus Garvey to Amiri Baraka have discussed culture and its importance to African (American) liberation. Some hard line Afrocentrists appear to look at culture as if it were static. Unfortunately, this view of culture is anachronistic. Both Eurocentric and Afrocentric constructs of culture can prove inadequate when examining hip hop. A more progressive conceptualization of culture does not only recognize new cultural forms, as well as old forms, but it also allows for overlay and evolution.

Linda James Myers has constructed an elaborate model for cultural analysis. Meyers' deep structure/surface structure paradigm is partially applicable to my analysis of hip aesthetics. Because hip hop is post-modern, the divide between deep structure and surface structure is often obfuscated. However, Amiri Baraka's minimalist take on culture will suffice, since hip-hop emerged in urban African America's middle and lower–class communities. Baraka explains, "For the poor…'culture' is simply how one lives, and is

connected to history and habit" (181). On the surface, Baraka's definition appears reductionist. Baraka attempts to deal with the class implications of culture. For "the folk" culture is functional. A perusal of Dubois's Talented Tenth Theory or *The Philadelphia Negro* will highlight the class conflicts within the African-American community concerning culture. African-American Studies has borrowed much from the great thinker W.E.B. DuBois, both theoretically and practically. Unfortunately, some of Dubois's high-browed notions of culture have been adopted by African-American Studies scholars. DuBois' analysis in *The Philadelphia Negro* is an example of how culture is constructed within a Eurocentric framework. DuBois' work is not Afrocentric, yet it does illustrate the inferior/superior, high/low binary. My intention here is to avoid an in-depth discussion of DuBoisian philosophy. I utilize Dubois merely as a jumping-off point to examine ethnocentricity within (African) American conceptualizations of culture. DuBois highlights this point in his commentary on the role of upper class Blacks within the context of collective racial mobility:

> Above all the better classes of the Negroes should recognize their duty toward the masses. They should not forget the spirit of the twentieth century is to be the turning of the high toward the lowly…[The Negro's} social evolution in cities like Philadelphia is approaching a mediaeval stage when the centrifugal forces of repulsion between the social classes are becoming more powerful than those of attraction. (392)

Dubois' tone and language, though a byproduct of the time, points to the class tensions within the African-American community. How would DuBois have viewed hip hop based on his hierarchal view of culture? In terms of cultural analysis, European, ethnocentric

notions of culture can taint analysis. When discussing popular culture, such definitions prove inadequate. Eaglton warns against constructing "cultural truths", which is an exercise in scholarly politics:

> Cultural truths—whether high art or the traditions of a people—
> are sometimes sacred ones, to be protected and revered. Culture,
> then, inherits the imposing mantle of religious authority, but also
> has uneasy affinities with occupation and invasion; and it is
> between these two poles, positive and negative, that the concept
> is currently pitched. It is one of those rare ideas which have been
> as integral to the political left as they are vital to the political
> right, and its social history is thus exceptionally tangled and
> ambivalent". (2)

As Eagleton explains, social history is closely tied to definitions of culture. A socio-historical framework creates a positive/negative binary. Such an analysis can be problematic when investigating hip hop's cultural practices. When discussing hip hop culture, this binary tends to obfuscate one's analysis. Based on Eagleton's analysis, cultural discourse is politically charged:

> [Culture] can also suggest a division of ourselves, between that part of us which
> cultivates and defines, and whatever within us constitutes the raw material for
> such refinement. Once culture is grasped as *self*-culture, it posits a duality
> between higher and lower faculties, will and desire, reason and passion, which it
> then instantly offers to overcome…Culture is thus a matter of self-overcoming as
> much as self-realization. (5)

Clearly, Eagleton, a professor from Oxford University, is operating from a European world view. His focus on the *self,* as well as his conclusion that the cultural distinctions will necessarily cause division, is not in line with the Afrocentric notion of community and harmony. However, Eagleton's analysis is useful to the extent it promotes a more progressive, contemporary view of culture. It is not homogeneous or absolute; culture is fluid and porous, not static.

Cultures are, by nature, syncretic. This is especially true in today's global Information Age. The debates within African-American culture go back at least 100 years, first with W.E. B. DuBois, and later with the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and even later in the 1960s with Black Power/Black Arts Movement. What can hip-hop studies scholars glean from these debates on the appropriateness of African American cultural practices?

Afrocentric theory rests upon the notion that individuals and groups have the right to name and define themselves. For my purposes, I posit that hip-hop is in fact a culture. My conclusion is based on two overriding points: 1) hip-hop is indeed a subculture, but subcultures are also cultures, often times with distinct modes of expression, dress, worldview, etc.; and 2) many hip-hop heads, artists, participants, gatekeepers, etc. identify hip-hop as a distinct culture. My analysis falls somewhere between the two poles. Lastly, two major hip-hop icons, KRS-One and Russell Simmons, declare that hip-hop a distinct culture. Russell Simmons, a hip hop icon, spokesperson and businessman discusses how hip hop culture, though similar to other African American and American music genres—partially because of its use of pastiche—is distinct:

> hip hop is modern mainstream, young urban American culture…Like rock and
>
> roll, blues and jazz, hip-hop is primarily a musical form. But unlike those forms
>
> of black American music, hip-hop is more expansive in the ways it manifests
>
> itself, and as a result, its impact is wider. The ideas of hip-hop are spread not just
>
> through music, but in fashion, movies, television, advertising, dancing, slang and
>
> attitude. (Simmons 4)

Russell Simmons, who must definitely be considered a hip hop cultural insider, icon and

trendsetter, highlights the complexity of hip hop culture as a mass-mediated, post-Civil

Rights strain of African American, urban culture. Because hip hop culture is lived

practice, obtaining a concise definition of hip hop can prove difficult. Though I focus

primarily on hip-hop music and hip hop musical icons in this dissertation, I utilize a

wholistic framework to operationalize hip hop. Alonzo Westbrook describes hip hop as:

> The artistic response to oppression; a way of expression in dance, music,
>
> word/song; a culture that thrives on creativity and nostalgia; as a musical art
>
> form it is stories of inner-city life, often with a message, spoken over beats of
>
> music; the culture includes rap and any other venture spawned from the hip-
>
> hop style and culture. (Westbrook 64)

I expand on Westbrook's definition of hip-hop within a cultural context, opting for a

more traditional (and artistic) definition of hip hop. I attempt to avoid ideological and

theoretical trappings. In other words, issues of nomenclature, ideology, and theoretical

analysis can become obstacles when studying hip-hop culture. Hip-hop is:

1) a cultural form which consists of five elements (b-boying, emceeing, graffiti, DJing,

   knowledge a way of life;

2) a form of creative expression based in brown and black communities:

3) the voice of the have nots;

4) rooted in Afro-diasporic oral and artistic traditions;

5) a post-modern creation, which relies heavily on pastiche via sampling;

6) a reflection, albeit a sometimes distorted/contorted reflection, of inner city life;

7) an embodiment of African-American sensibilities and tropes;

This last point is central to my thesis: I am concerned with African-American and American tropes, attitudes and aesthetics and their effect on hip-hop. African-American attitudes are embedded in the selection and rejection of certain icons, archetypes, and artistic traditions within hip-hop. Hip iconography and iconology serves as an index of African American attitudes, expectations, and values. I examine these attitudes within the context of hip hop aesthetics that support this selection process while highlighting their connection to grand narratives and public discourse within African-American and America popular culture.

CHAPTER 2
AMERIKKAS MOST WANTED: AN ICONOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF
AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURAL PRACTICES AND THEIR IMPACT ON
HIP-HOP
Twentieth Century African American Manhood, American Popular Culture
and the Early Roots of Hip Hop Aesthetics

Hip-hop is a uniquely American phenomenon. Because hip hop utilizes post modern pastiche, it samples all available media. Hip hop engages iconic figures and symbols from almost every era of twentieth century cultural history. Furthermore, hip hop continues to wrestle with many racial-cultural issues that have their roots in early twentieth century American popular culture. Pre-hip hop figures, narratives, events, etc that influenced hip hop aesthetics are mentioned tangentially, or are overlooked, in much hip hop studies scholarship. I examine twentieth century, pre-hip hop American popular culture as a socio-cultural pretext for the emergence of hip hop aesthetics. This chapter examines African-American and American pre-hip hop icons and archetypes within the American popular culture sphere. Gun culture, sports culture, comic book superhero narratives, Hollywood westerns and the culture of capitalism have all contributed to the development of hip-hop aesthetics. Collectively, they laid an expressive and polemical foundation for hip hop aesthetics.

Scholarship on hip hop's aesthetic influences is often myopic. I expand the discussion of hip hop's aesthetic foundations and explore the development of American music and popular culture in the pre-hip hop era and link them to the emergence of hip-hop aesthetics, focusing on specific movements, icons, epochs, and ideologies. I explore the uniqueness of the American experience and African American manhood as they relate to hip-hop aesthetics and the ways in which hip-hop has been influenced by American culture and vice versa.

Between the early 1900s through the 1970s, American popular culture went through many transformations**.** Between the 1870's and 1930's "black people were molded into a definite nationality" (Swindell 179). African-Americans played a major role in the growth and proliferation of American popular culture. Black manhood—as it was referred at the turn of the twentieth century— and its portrayal in popular media helped define American popular culture. I examine the convergence of Black masculinity and American popular culture and their impact on hip-hop aesthetics. The emergence of hip-hop culture is both indebted to and resistant to dominant American culture narratives. Because hip hop is post-modern in its construction, I am examine the interaction between pre-hip hop, early twentieth century American popular culture and hip hop aesthetics. American popular culture has been a site of African American assimilation, resistance, upward mobility, as well as a contested site by which race, gender, and class oppression was engaged publicly. In short, I am concerned with a fundamental question: What are the ways in which early twentieth century, pre-hip hop American popular culture— particularly African American public discourses—has influenced hip hop aesthetics?

I discuss early twentieth century, African American manhood within the context of early twentieth century American popular culture, linking both as precursors to hip hop aesthetics. I view hip hop as a mode of aesthetic expression for African American men in particular. Because of hip hop's fragmented historical awareness, early twentieth century notions of manhood, then, inform hip hop narratives. Bederman positions manhood within a complex matrix of historical, physiological, and ideological realities, an existential and cultural project. She defines manhood as:

A continual, dynamic process…Through [this] process, men claim certain kinds

of authority, based upon their particular type of bodies…[It] is the cultural

process whereby concrete individuals are constituted as members of a pre-existing

social category—as men. The ideological process of gender—whether manhood

or womanhood—works through a complex political technology, composed of a

variety of institutions, ideas, and daily practices. Combined, these processes

produce a set of truths about who an individual is and what he or she can do,

based upon his or body. (7)

Approaching African American manhood within the context of the Black male body as

commodity shifts the discussion on hip hop aesthetics from the theoretical realm to the

existential. Hence, African American manhood in the twentieth century was inextricably

tied to the Black male body. Africans in America endured the physical horrors of

American slavery, which is the epitome of physical and psychological oppression. The

Black male body, as both threat and commodity, was central to--while constructed in

dialectal opposition to—white manhood. At the turn of the twentieth century, white fears,

desires, and phobias were projected onto the collective subconscious of American

popular culture. In the early 1900s, authority was equated with bodily strength. White

notions of white, male superiority played out in popular media. Hip hop aesthetics

emerge within the context of the suppression of not only the African American male

voice and mind, but also the Black male body. As Bederman correctly argues, manhood

was constructed as an ideology (10).

Patriarchy, violence, and capitalism work in tandem to create American male

identity. These American sensibilities under gird American and African American

musical aesthetics. Hip hop aesthetics absorb much of this cultural baggage. In a 1996 interview with jazz trumpeter Donald Byrd on hip-hop culture, Byrd declared that America was built upon guns, gold, and glory (in that order). Byrd's analysis points to the inextricable link in American culture between conquest, material wealth, celebrity and music production. This complex socio-cultural matrix of material gain, violence and group oppression has laid the foundation for American cultural ideals. Moreover, it is upon this tenuous foundation, which is wrought with contradiction, that American popular culture and, as a result Black popular culture, in this case hip-hop, has been laid.

White conceptualizations of civilization were at the heart of early formulations of American popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century. African savagery and barbarism were juxtaposed with white intelligence and moral authority. American popular media supported claims of white male superiority. An emerging popular print media culture, buttressed by scientific analysis and pulp fiction, intermingled white fears and phobias with empirical analysis and projected them onto the masses for consumption:

> [Popular magazines] offered a mixture of fiction and 'reportage', or reporting on current and human affairs; they thus extended the admixture of entertainment and information that characterized the daily press. Their circulation was enormous, both reflecting and promoting the rise of the middle-class. (Vasey 237)

During the early 1900s, popular media supported racist trends already gaining momentum and cultural capital via social Darwinism and anthropological theories on human progress and evolution. Popular fiction at the turn of the century extended these ethnocentric notions by creating superhero narratives that reified white male superiority and invincibility. Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes,* published in 1914, for example,

reinforced white ethnocentrism through popular fiction. Burrough's work, similar to D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* did much to sway public opinion. Burrough's civilization discourse projected the white male as a heroic figure. Tarzan was the precursor to future heroic representations of twentieth century white masculinity in popular media. Because hip hop is post modern in its construction, many pre-hip hop icons are adopted as rhetorical, polemical, and aesthetic critiques of lopsided renderings of Africans and African Americans culture by whites. Tarzan was constructed within the tradition of the white male superhero figure:

> He is the most resourceful, powerful, courageous man imaginable. Combining the ultimate in Anglo Saxon manliness with the most primal masculinity, Tarzan is violent yet chivalrous, moral yet passionate. Above all, he has a superb body. If manhood is a historical process that constructs the male body as a metonym for power and identity, Tarzan's cultural work was to proclaim that "the white man's" potential for power and mastery was as limitless as the masculine perfection of Tarzan's body. (Bederman 221)

European racial ideals influenced public narratives and, in turn, white public opinion. Because popular media in America has become so ubiquitous, as far back as the early 1900s, narratives such as Tarzan were inescapable. The Tarzan narrative also condoned violence against African peoples. Thus, the work simultaneously encourages violence against people of color while providing aesthetic pleasure for its white consumer-base. Tarzan existed in direct contrast to the African characters in the work. Africans are, in turn, constructed as anti-heores.

Several emcees such as Lil Wayne, the Alkaholiks and Nas reference Tarzan in their lyrics. Hip hop's use of Tarzan as a creative device illustrates the complexity of hip hop iconography and iconology. Some emcees utilize Tarzan as metaphor or simile; other emcees deconstruct and critique the Tarzan figure. On "Tick Tock" from Alchemist's *1st Infantry* (2004), Nas institutes the Tarzan narrative as a metaphor for uncivilized, violent behavior:

> Ambulance came and got 'em they start calmin' down
>
> Now it's back to the same old shit, you know, the Tarzan and Jane-o shit
>
> In the jungle swingin' on vines, I saw the gat with the same old clip
>
> Another nigga layin' the hit, bloodied up, scream that I'm dyin
>
> I be in Queens where the famous hood rats and ghetto stars are
>
> Pimps do the shuffle at night with slutty bars pah

On "Wu-Tang Clan Ain't Nuthing Ta F' Wit", the Wu-Tang's RZA intermingles the Tarzan signifier with kung-fu iconography as an extension of his badman narrative:

> Wu-Tang Clan Ain't Nuttin Ta Fuck Wit
>
> Wu-Tang Clan Ain't Nuttin Ta Fuck Wit
>
> Wu-Tang Clan Ain't Nuttin Ta Fuck Wit
>
> There's no place to hide once I step inside the room
>
> Dr. Doom, prepare for the boom
>
> BAM! Aw, MAN! I SLAM
>
> JAM, now scream like Tarzan

The Tarzan narrative is important to my discussion of hip hop culture because, as a post modern construction, hip hop aesthetics are filtered through the lense of American popular culture. The hip hop and post-hip hop generations are keenly aware of pre-hip
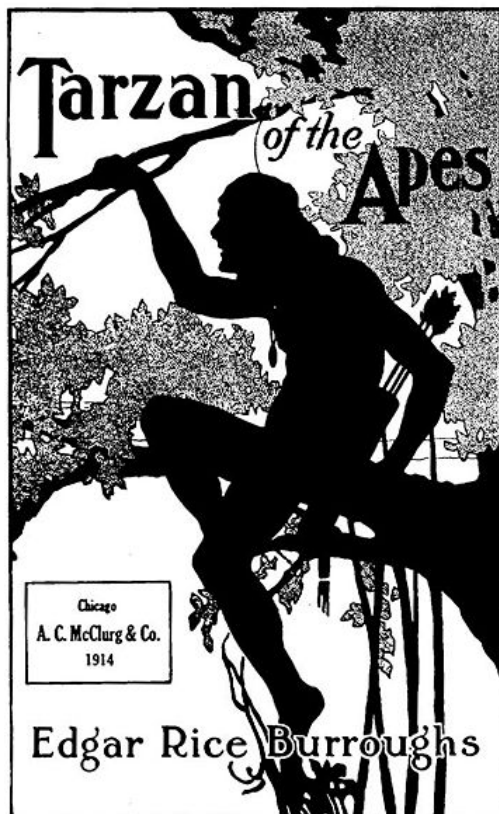
(Illustration 2.1) Edgar Rice Burroughs
Tarzan
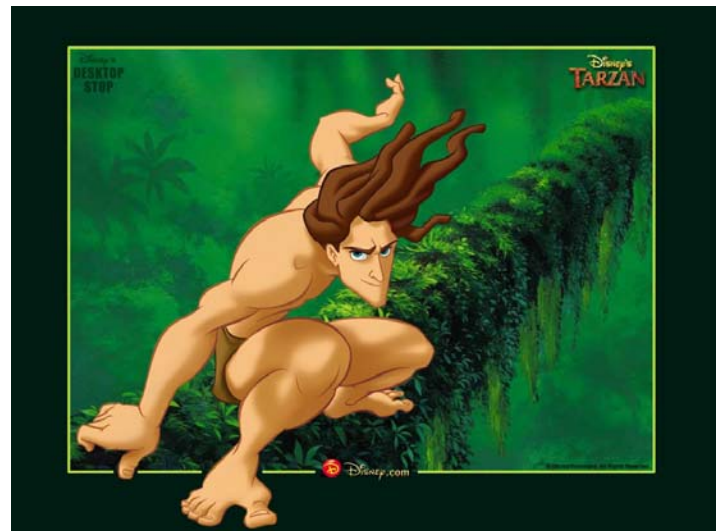
(Illustration 2.2) Animated Tarzan

hop representations of African Americans in popular media. There (re)memory of these figures and narratives are often absorbed into hip hop aesthetics as grand narratives as opposed to detailed accounts of history. Hence, European American pre-hip hop icons

such as Tarzan, Superman, Babe Ruth and John Wayne had as much impact on hip hop aesthetics—though circuitously— as did their African American counterparts.

Many emcees engage, reject and accept American popular culture icons in their work, regardless of racial, ethnic, or religious origins. Emcees reference these icons explicitly and implicitly in their work. The meaning behind the engagement, selection and rejection of certain icons within hip hop aesthetics is often shrouded in additional layers of symbolism and allegory. Hip hop narratives respond to these pre-hip hop icons on various levels. Nonetheless, when Queens, New York emcee Nas was asked in an interview whether he could remember the first time he was discriminated against because he was black, he explicitly references Superman comic book narratives as an early marker of racial discrimination: "The first time I opened up a *Superman* comic book. The first time I saw *Flashdance*, with the light-skinned, beautiful bitch who's chasing after some white cat, which…I don't have nothing against interracial relationships—love 'em, actually" (Golianopoulos). Nas links discrimination to the dissemination of lopsided representations of whiteness in popular media. Because hip hop is post modern, emcees such as Nas reflect a keen historical awareness of pre-hip hop era American popular iconography, albeit an often fragmented historical sense. Hip hop aesthetics respond to racist notions put forth in American popular culture, intermingling the past and the present into a unified and a cohesive narrative. Superman, John Wayne, and Tarzan, then, collectively inform hip hop aesthetics. Through the reappropriation of popular narratives and the selection of particular icons, hip hop aesthetics have simultaneously transcended, engaged, defended, embraced, embodied, and refuted race (through popular media) as a social construct. This is precisely why the study of pre-hip hop era hip hop iconography

is important. It is the racial-cultural tension caused by the negotiation of public space, discourse and iconography within the popular sphere that hip hop aesthetics emerge.

Super hero mythology (I discuss comic book superhero narratives at greater length in chapter 5) survived the greater part of the twentieth century and reemerged in American popular media in the 1980s. Hip hop narratives seek to debunk European American male superhero mythology. Early superhero narratives were borrowed from American folk mythology; however, Tarzan marks a new superhero mythology, which extends from American folklore yet rests on immortality:

> One strain of superhero mythology comes from the same mythic impulse that spawned Paul Bunyon and John Henry. Clearly, these figures have powers beyond those of even the most highly skilled and expertly trained athletes…One thing a superhero will usually *not* do, at least permanently, is die. John Henry proved that he could outdo the mechanical steel-driving machine, but proving so cost him his life. (Fingeroth 18)

Paul Bunyon and John Henry, two European-American archetypes, serve as an aesthetic foundation for later formulations of superhero narratives. Invincibility and heroification —which are often falsely identified as nihilism in hip hop texts—can be linked to these early formulations of American archetypes and heroic figures. Many African American heroic figures emerged in the antebellum South. African American heroic figures served as counter-narratives such as Paul Bunyan and John Henry. As Levine explains, African American folk heroes reflected socio-cultural and political change for African Americans during this period:

It is not surprising, then, that only with freedom did Negroes fashion their own equivalents of the Gargantuan figures that strode through nineteenth century American folklore. Indeed, the presence of such figure in Black folklore was, along with the decline of an all-encompassing religiosity and the rise of the blues, another major sign of cultural change among the freedmen. (Levine 401)

As superhero mythology evolved, in-line with notions of industrial and technological advancement, immortality—unlike much superhero mythology emanating from folk culture—became a central feature of super heroic narratives. White male immortality embodied in early twentieth century superhero mythology supported racist notions through a fictional character's ability to physically and mentally control his environment. Tarzan created an archetypal model for superhero narratives in American popular culture. Hip hop narratives emerge as the anti-thesis to white, male heroic narratives put forth in mass media. Twentieth century African American folk heroes were the precursor to American superman narratives:

Like the nineteenth century tall tales they closely resembled, they stressed an approach to problems which in good American fashion placed emphasis upon the growth of individual powers. Here were the elements of the extended man, the superman, who has been so central in both the rustic and the industrial folklore of modern America, from tales to comic books. But if black and white fantasies came closer together in the twentieth century, they were still separated by varying sets of priorities, needs, pressures and styles. (Levine 407)

African American and European Americans at the turn of the twentieth century developed two similar yet distinct strands of folk hero. Hip hop iconography is informed

by both strains, nonetheless, as Levine asserts, African American folk heroes were shaped by a "different set of priorities, needs, pressures, and styles." By the 1980s, super hero narratives became more sophisticated, reflecting post modern sensibilities. Hip hop's reappropriation of the badman trope links hip hop culture to previous African American folk hero narratives.

Hip hop narratives engage pre-hip heroic and comic book super hero narratives such as Tarzan, Superman, Hercules and Spiderman, but also hip hop era super hero iconography such as Rambo and Indiana Jones. The release of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in 1981 represents a continuation of earlier European American superhero narratives in popular media. The protagonist, Indiana Jones, was an amalgamation of James Bond, Tarzan, and Superman heroic narratives. The plot revolved around Jones, an anthropology professor, who travels the world "securing" rare sacred artifacts such as the Holy Grail; Indiana Jones simultaneously represented European exploitation of indigenous peoples and white male intellectual superiority. Similar to Tarzan, Indiana "Indy" Jones appeared superhuman, impervious to physical harm, dismemberment or death. Furthermore, Jones, like Tarzan, utilized violence against indigenous peoples when necessary. Jones, however, was a master thief, stealing valuable antiquities from sacred sites around the world. Although Jones did not possess superpowers per se, his only weapons a revolver and leather whip, interestingly, Jones blurred the line between good and bad, his motivations obscured in his quest for intrigue and adventure.

Super heroic narratives and figures such as those found in the Indiana Jones series are relevant to my examination of hip hop aesthetics because they serve as cultural-historical markers and because hip hop narratives are often constructed as counter-

narratives to these Eurocentric representations of masculinity and superiority. Moreover, "the superhero—more than any other fictional hero—has to represent the values of the society that produces him" (Fingeroth 17). So, hip hop's engagement and critique of American iconography is actually a critique and engagement of American ideals and values. By examining the discursive space between American popular icons and heroic narratives, a more nuanced and wholistic perspective of hip hop aesthetics, attitudes, and values can be gleaned.

Twentieth Century African-American Manhood, American, American Popular Culture, and the Formation of Pre-Hip Hop Era Aesthetics

Hip hop narratives engage American popular culture iconography through its acceptance and/or rejection of superhero mythology. Nonetheless, hip hop culture is also rooted in a uniquely American discursive, political and socio-cultural milieu, which began at the turn of twentieth-century within the popular culture sphere. The late 1800s marked not only the end of legalized slavery but also the growth of American popular culture. As America began to expand globally, American popular culture ideals began to take shape. A major part of America's rise to global power was linked to its ability to appease the American public and quall any misgivings concerning American expansion and capitalism. Entertainment gradually became the focal point of American cultural existence**.** As W.E.B. Dubois correctly forecasted, the predominant issue of the better part of the twentieth century was the color line. Race, then, undoubtedly bled into early conceptualizations of American popular media.

I begin my discussion of hip hop aesthetics with American popular culture and America's World Fairs. The America's World's Fairs between 1893-1904 left an

indelible impact on American popular culture. Early twentieth century popular culture laid the template for how African Americans would be represented, and more importantly, how they would represent themselves in American popular media. I discuss the World's Fairs in America within the realm of the emerging popular culture paradigm of the late 1800s and early 1900s. The World's Fairs in America are sites by which to examine the interface between American education, technology, entertainment, science, and racial ideals. The World's Fairs would set the tone for how African Americans would be represented within the pop culture sphere and set in motion a racial tautology within American popular media. Hip Hop emerges in this highly charged, highly visible racial-cultural milieu. The Chicago's World Colombian Exposition (the Great White City) in 1893, The Atlanta Cotton States Exposition of 1895, and the St. Louis Exposition of 1904 had a major impact on the American popular culture landscape. World's fairs in the United States served as early markers for the formation of racial/cultural dynamics and popular discursive space within American mass media.

Several historians have explored the significance of America's World Fairs as a pretext to American popular culture and entertainment. However, none have focused on their link to African American male popular discourses, in this case hip hop, and the formation of American popular culture. These mass-mediated public spaces set the tone for twentieth century African American public discourse. The Chicago World Exposition of 1893, for example, "emphasized American progress through time and space since 1492" (Rydell 46). Popular media played an important role in this and future World's Fairs. African American figures such as Ida B. Wells and Fredrick Douglass took opposing positions on several issues related to the fair. However, they were torn on one,

major point: The creation of "a special day of their own—'jubilee' or Colored People's Day" (Rydell 53). The ideological tension between Wells and Douglass over the world's fairs highlights the perceived significance of the fairs for these African American race leaders. How African Americans would be represented at the Chicago World's Fair was a major sticking point amongst African American leadership at the time. African American leadership understood that late nineteenth century popular media played a pivotal role in the racist constructions of African Americans. Popular media outlets such as America's World's Fairs supported racial stereotypes and imagery. African American icons and archetypes—even up until the hip hop era—served to counteract racist projections of African Americans in popular media. Skepticism over African American intellectual ability and their inability (or unwillingness) to assimilate into mainstream American society were cited as examples of African American inferiority. Popular media offered a platform for white ethnocentrism:

> Popular attitudes embracing the spectrum of racist notions were articulated in a series of cartoons that appeared in *Harper's Weekly,* depicting the adventures of a black family at the fair. The first series ridiculed blacks' aspirations to advance in American society as well as their intellectual ability to comprehend the lessons of the fair. (Rydell 53)

Cartoons were utilized as a means to bolster racist notions, an extension of the system that created and controlled them. In tandem, films such as *The Birth of Nation*, novels such as *Tarzan*, and cartoon/comic books such as those featured in mainstream publications such as *Harper's Weekly* had a determinant effect on African American public discourse. Popular media replicated notions of Black intellectual inferiority

embraced by whites.   The White City and the Midway, the two main attractions of the

Colombian Exposition, were precursors to the form, content and tone of twentieth century

American popular culture and media:

> The White City and the Midway were truly symbolic, not antithetical, constructs.
>
> Rather, the vision of the future and the depiction of the nonwhite as savage were
>
> two sides of the same coin—a coin minted in the tradition of American racism, in
>
> which the forbidden desires of whites were projected onto the dark-skinned
>
> peoples, who consequently had to be degraded so white purity could be
>
> maintained. (Rydell 67)

White purity and superiority was the underlying theme of the fair. Nonetheless, it was the

fairs' seamless interlocking of both entertainment, education, science and media laid the

foundation for how race would be mediated and negotiated in twentieth century

American popular culture. The White City of the World's Colombian Exposition in

Chicago was constructed as a symbol of white male superiority. It was an extension of

European American ethnocentricity and racism. The Midway served the same end but

entertainment was the foci:

> The Midway provided visitors with ethnological, scientific sanction for the
>
> American view of the nonwhite world as barbaric and childlike and gave
>
> scientific basis to the radical blueprint for building utopia….The World's Fair,
>
> generally recognized for its contributions to urban planning, beaux-arts
>
> architecture, and institutions of arts and sciences, just as importantly introduced
>
> millions of fairgoers to evolutionary ideas about race—ideas that were presented
>
> in a utopian context and conveyed by exhibits that were ostensibly amusing. On

the Midway at the World's Colombian Exposition, evolution, ethnology, and popular amusements interlocked as active agents and bulwarks of hegemonic assertion of ruling-class authority. (Rydell 40)

Though entertainment was the focal point of America's World's Fairs, racist notions permeated the fairs' exhibits. Through its utilization of popular media, American popular cultural production such as the World's Fairs of America at the turn of the twentieth century, American popular culture icons, print media and Hollywood films set the tone and parameters of African American male, public discourse. Public figures such as Fredrick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and Ota Benga—via the World's Fairs—represent a convergence of American race relations, identity politics, and nationalism, as well as a site where entertainment, scholarship and science were negotiated and renegotiated. I briefly examine Booker T. Washington and within the context of the World's Fairs in order to parse out the complexity of Black male representations in American popular culture. The former was fully accepted into mainstream American culture. The latter was exoticised and kept on the fringes of American popular culture. Because hip-hop comes out of American popular culture, the parameters and narratives that have informed American popular culture are useful in my analysis of hip-hop. I focus on Washington and the World Expositions here to highlight the convergence of African-American American public discourse and American entertainment culture; both are central to hip-hop aesthetics. Moreover, both Washington and Benga were part of the World's Expositions. Booker T. Washington highlights the complexity of constructions of Black masculinity in American popular culture. Simplistic and near-sighted

explanations are inadequate when an attempt is made to reconcile the difference between both figures.

An examination of Booker T. Washington within the context of twentieth century American expositions highlights the interface between African-American public discourse, representations of African-American manhood in popular media, and the growth of American popular culture (via American archetypes and icons). Washington was dialectically opposed to the badman figure. However, all African American leadership in the first half of the twentieth century was forced to deal with Washington's approach to public discourse. Some African American leaders embraced Washington's approach others rejected it. Subsequently, twentieth century African American leadership was gauged against a Washingtonian model. Those African American public figures that did not exemplify Washington's finesse, sophistication, and decorum risked being labeled radical and jeopardized white patronage.

Just as Americans were adjusting to twentieth century, industrial notions of labor, they were, conversely, negotiating the parameters of play and entertainment. Booker T. Washington emerged in the socio-cultural milieu of the fairs The Atlanta Cotton States Exposition represented ongoing ideological tensions within the African-American community. The Atlanta Exposition represents a struggle for public discursive space, ideology and public policy among African-American leadership. Booker T. Washington's famous speech in which he summons Southerners to "cast down their buckets" was a seminal moment within African American public discourse. Washington's Atlanta Compromise has itself become iconographic in African American discourse. Much scholarship on Booker T. Washington's famous Atlanta Exposition speech focuses on the

speech's content. Nonetheless, the context of Washington's speech is just as important as its content. The context of Washington's speech, though, is often overlooked:

> The setting of Washington's speech was just as important as its content. His address was part of an international fair concerned with finding new markets to sustain growth. Indeed, the impression of racial harmony that the directors of the Atlanta exposition and every other world's fair in the South attempted to convey was predicated upon America's industrial and agricultural productivity through the discovery of new markets and supplies of natural resources. Growth along these lines required a large industrial and agricultural labor force. This was precisely the guarantee Washington offered. He depicted blacks as best suited to industrial and agricultural labor and them to remain socially separate from whites. Washington's speech was a key element in a fair that represented an attempt to fix class relations in the South with the confines of a racial pyramid. (Rydell 74)

Washington's accomodationist approach to the fair's depiction of racial harmony stood in direct contrast to many African American's perception to the fairs. Negro departments were created by the fair organizers to properly position Black people within the socio-economic hierarchy: "Negro departments were used as "instruments of social control that would keep black s in check by defining progress as self-improvement along industrial lines and by persuading blacks that builders of the New South would take their best interests at heart" (Rydell 80). Many African Americans African American's rejected the racial and social implications of the fairs:

> Many blacks rejected the expositions out of hand, believing that the fairs delimited too severely the possibilities for social change in the South. Other

blacks, however, perceived survival as *the* issue facing them. The challenge for

blacks during sharing this viewpoint and agreeing to participate in the fairs was to

define the issues confronting them within the symbolic social constructs of the

expositions presented. At the New Orleans exposition, survival and resistance

were explicitly joined. By 1897, in contrast, black leaders who were downplaying

political resistance and elevating character building as the first step toward social

change. (Rydell 80)

A redefinition of blackness through an engagement of popular media, iconography and

symbolism is as at the heart of hip hop aesthetics. Nonetheless, this redefinition takes

place *within* the confines of European-American articulations of African American

identity within American popular media. The struggle over African American images in

popular media had its roots in America's World's Fairs. American popular culture was

utilized to support white conceptualizations of Blackness. These iterations of blackness

were all packaged and marketed as entertainment. The fairs represented a shift in

American cultural sensibilities. Entertainment was moving toward the center of American

life, and—in turn—gradually transferred American racism from the political, legal and

social spheres to the popular culture sphere. The point here is that popular culture

discourses gained much cultural capital during the early 1900s. Fair exhibits such as The

Old Plantation set the stage for revisionist historical narratives of American life grounded

in creative license, racist subjectivity and nostalgia. The Old Plantation exhibit was

revisionist, European-American nostalgia:

For those who doubted that blacks could be easily controlled, the directors of the

Atlanta and Nashville fairs added a "typical" antebellum scene to their

entertainment avenues. Called the Old Plantation, the concession was owned by whites and managed by a former minstrel showman. Once inside, fairgoers were invited to observe "[y]oung bucks and thickliped [*sic*] African maidens 'happy as a big sunflower' dance the old-time breakdowns, joined in by 'all de niggahs' with weird and gutteral sounds…'" At Atlanta, the concession received a tremendous promotional boost and implicit federal sanction when President Cleveland made it his only stop on the Midway. The Old Plantation, in short, did more than recreate the mythical past of the Old South. It created an impression that blacks would have a long road to travel before they would be considered equal [to whites]. (Rydell 87)

The Old South exhibit, as was the case with many of the exhibits at the world's fairs, offered stereotypic, symbolic and iconic imagery of Black life and presented it to the masses as authentic. The Old Plantation exhibit served as a backdrop for Washington's Atlanta Compromise speech. In many ways, Washington was the antithesis to the badman. However, Washington, as with most of the icons I examine, was a complex and towering figure. Washington's true intentions were often misinterpreted and/or misconstrued by whites and Blacks alike. Hip hop offers its own revisionist historiography, activated by the superhero trope. Iton highlights Washington's use of double-meaning in his public discourse:

[Washington's] translucence is, of course, not entirely new: consider Booker T. Washington's double performance in Atlanta in 1895. Washington's simultaneous engagement of southern black and white audiences (an to some extent, northern

whites as well) with his famous Exposition speech downplaying the importance of

civil rights whole in a lower register encouraging black economic autonomy.

(Iton 21)

 Booker T. Washington is important to my discussion of hip hop aesthetics because: 1) he

was a prominent and influential early twentieth century African American leader; 2) he

established a rhetorical and socio-political framework for twentieth century, African

American public discourse; and 3) his complexity as both an accomodationist and

capitalist effected the trajectory of all twentieth century, African American discourse

including hip hop. Rhetorically, Washington's narratives offered multiple layers of

meaning: one layer addressing whites the other Blacks. He created a new African-

American public discursive space, which served as a blueprint to garnering white

patronage and approval. Washington created an assimilationist archetypal model which

allowed him the ability to appease both Black and white audiences. Washington's focus

on institution building at the turn of the twentieth century—the Tuskegee Institute for

example--depended on Washington's ability to secure white capital: "The most important

aspect of Booker T. Washington's legacy in hip hop music culture and this generation is

the challenge of institution building…Without the institution building, [political rhetoric]

is just a whole lot of talk" (Uncle Tom or New Negro, 84). Bakari Kitwana explains:

> I think that too many hip-hop artists are less interested in achieving the more basic
>
> goals of Washington's philosophy like black self-sufficiency and more so in
>
> identifying with the idea of creating something out of nothing, the underdog who
>
> survives all odds. This is part of the American story. *(Uncle Tom or New Negro,*
>
> Kitwana 81)

The hip hop generation, based on the reappropriation and reconceptualization of historical narratives, has created a different version of the American story. The post-industrial environment provides a different context through which to activate Washington's brand of economic self-sufficiency. Hip hop aesthetics appropriate Washington's institution-building ethos, but it rejects Washingtonian approaches to assimilation and accommodation.

Hip hop's propensity to do things "on its own terms", as McWhorter explains, is precisely why Booker T. Washington has been rejected as a hip hop icon. Black manhood and how it would be represented in American popular culture under girded American popular culture discourse at the turn of the twentieth century. The ways in which Black masculinity is expressed and how it is represented in the public (or popular) sphere is at the heart of my analysis of hip-hop aesthetics. Technological advances such as the development of popular media (i.e. print, the phonograph, film and television) forced iconic figures to the forefront of the American popular culture landscape. African American public figures had an even greater impact within African American communites; Booker T. Washington's self-help rhetoric became a cornerstone of African-American public discourse and political thought. He sought to counter anti-Black sentiment by appeasing whites**.** However, his accomodationist leanings became the anti-thesis to hip hop sensibilities. Washington was by no means a race-baiting radical. As a public figure though, it is interesting how and what Washington discussed in the public sphere. Nonetheless, as McWhorter explains, hip hop culture has rejected *and* absorbed portions of Washington's legacy:

I look at people like Queen Latifah and LL Cool J, and I see people who have

basically utilized the hip hop genre as a route to self-expression, but also as a

form of influence and self-empowerment. And they've done it differently from

prior generations. There is the sense that they are doing what they are doing not

only to fulfill the American dream but also to set an example of what America is

supposed to be. In some ways, this echoes what Booker T. Washington was

saying about working with, instead of against, white people in America. The

distinction is that the hip-hop community appears to have succeeded in doing that

on its own terms. That's a little different from casting your buckets down where

they are, though of course, it is because of Washington and others like him, along

with our history as a people, that the hip-hop generation is able to do things on its

own terms (McWhorter 152)

McWhorter illustrates the many contradictions of hip hop culture. On one hand, hip hop

has sampled Washington's self-help approach to institution-building. On the other hand,

hip hop culture has rejected Washingtonian tenets of assimilation, accommodation, and

white appeasement as well as his failure to directly address African American ills through

his public narratives.

The late 1800s and early 1900s can be considered the formative years of American

popular culture development. Furthermore, public space was highly contested by African

Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. Identity, race, and gender politics were

engaged, negotiated, and contested within popular cultural spaces. In regard to gender

politics, Black manhood was under assault, particularly in the public sphere in the early

1900s. Black Codes, lynching, and Jim Crow are just three examples of many that

illustrate the ways in which white Americans attempted to control Black movement and discourse. The execution of Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, and Denmark Vesey and the interrogation and exile of Paul Robeson are all examples of the white establishment's treatment of radical African American male public figures. The censorship of *David Walker's Appeal* and the mysterious circumstances surrounding his subsequent death, as well as the imprisonment and deportation of Marcus Garvey established a precedent for the treatment of radical African American men. Walker and Garvey represent nineteenth and twentieth century ante types. The harsh treatment both men received had an adverse effect on twentieth century African American male discourse. This anti-assertive, African American male sentiment extended well into the twentieth century. Collectively, these historical moments and cultural truisms are imbedded in hip hop discourse. The form and function of Black leadership in the twentieth century as well as a perceived lack of an authentic African American voice during the 1970s and 1980s led to the creation of hip hop.

From Booker T. Washington I move to Ota Benga, a Batwan from the Belgian Congo. Benga, though all but forgotten in African American cultural analysis, represents an interesting figure within American popular culture. As an iconic figure and ante type, Ota Benga represents the intense struggle between Africans in America and so-called American progress. The question remained: How would the Africans be represented in American popular culture? Ota Benga was displayed at the 1904 St. Louis World Fair and later in 1906 at the Bronx Zoo next to an orangutan. At the behest of many African-American leaders of the time, he was "displayed" in The Monkey House Exhibit.

(Illustration 2.3) Ota Benga   **(Illustration 2. 3) Ota Benga**

An examination of Ota Benga's representation in popular media highlights the

tension between African-American male identity, the positioning and subsequent

proliferation of African images in American culture, and the growth of American popular

culture. In many ways, Ota Benga is a seminal figure, particularly when juxtaposed with

African-American icons that emerged from within the African-American community at

that time, more specifically, figures that were produced by and for African Americans. .

Benga exemplifies the tension between African masculinity in American popular culture

and American ideals. Benga is important to my discussion of African-American images

within American popular culture, because he illustrates: 1) the dependence of American

popular culture upon eroticized, savage images of African masculinity; 2) the precarious

predicament of African peoples within the American popular culture landscape; 3) the

objectification, commodification, and eventual exploitation of African-Americans; and 4)

the tenuous relationship between Africans in America and popular media/culture.

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis (1904) was a barometer of American "progress" and ethnocentricity. The expositions of the early 1900s created parameters for future formulations of race in American popular culture. They created an invisible/hyper-visible duality:

> Pitched as the largest the world had ever seen--nearly double that of Chicago…The overarching theme the fair organizers promoted was still unbridled American progress—but not for the Negro. African Americans were systematically erased from the representation of American industrial and cultural progress. Every effort to represent African American achievements at the fair were thwarted, save for one or two exhibits by Black colleges. (Baker 63)

The erasure of African Americans from the fairs more "progressive" events illuminates the tension between how African Americans would be represented at the fairs. Though Baker's approach is anthropological, his research on the intersection of race and popular culture is worth noting. American progress was inextricably linked to African repression. The significance of The Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis of 1904 is significant to my analysis of American popular culture because of its intermingling of science, "education" and entertainment. Moreover,

> The Louisiana Purchase Exposition featured the most extensive Anthropology Department of any world's fairs. The directors expressed their intent to establish 'a comprehensive anthropological exhibition, constituting a Congress of Races, and exhibiting particularly the barbarous and semi-barbarous peoples of the world, as nearly as possible in their ordinary and native environments. (Rydell 160)

Ota Benga was eventually sold to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. He eventually wound up at The Bronx Zoological Gardens. Benga highlights the influence of race on the formation of American popular culture. The connection between racial exploitation and American entertainment culture must be noted here. As Baker explains:

> In 1905 a fine line was drawn between the zoological construction of animals and the ethnological construction of other. The line was thin because of the immense popularity and entertainment value of the ethnological exhibits at consecutive World's Fairs…The administrators at the Bronx Zoo crossed the line with impunity and without reservation (Baker 72)

The entertainment value of Ota Benga overrode any moral or ethical concerns related to his display. Benga's cultural identity was sacrificed at the expense of his public persona. Hip hop aesthetics retain some of the cultural residue of this era and figures such as Benga. Because hip hop is a post-modern construct, it pulls from myriad cultural forms and eras—both positive and negative—to create its aesthetic pastiche. Animal imagery and symbolism are utilized throughout the hip hop idiom. G-Unit, or Gorilla Unit, is an example of the retention of animal characteristics. Ota Benga illustrates the racial-cultural paradox of American popular culture and media. In a sense, Benga's entertainment value rested upon his subjugation and exploitation. The construction of American popular culture within the confines and limitations of American racism set in motion a popular culture discourse that simultaneously commodified and derided Africaness. This cultural paradox shaped the context in which hip hop would emerge some 60 years later.

The Harlem Renaissance ran concurrent with American World Fairs of the early 1900s. Rarely are the effects of World's Fairs taken into account when discussing the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance provided a rhetorical response to racist trends in science, the arts and popular media. Two major African American artistic movements—the Harlem Renaissance and the 1960s Black Arts/Black Power Movements—were crucial building blocks that led to the development of hip hop aesthetics. African American discursive, conceptual and rhetorical space was created through these movements. Within both movements, there was cross-genre, multi-media discourse that existed between a wide array of public figures including artists, entrepreneurs and professional athletes. Though art was the impetus of both the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts movements, both movements utilized art as a means to address socio-political issues and transcend their American existence through their art.

Hip hop aesthetics built upon both movements and created new aesthetic models through which to mediate African American artistic production. Conversely, as the Harlem Renaissance began to take shape, alternative African-American masculinities began to emerge. Hip hop aesthetics extend both movements, while challenging and debunking previous notions of Black manhood. Several figures within the Harlem Renaissance Era are important to my discussion of hip hop icons, archetypes and aesthetics. Figures such as Paul Robeson and Jack Johnson offered new formulations of African American manhood. They offered an assertive, intelligent, hyper-masculine model that would eventually influence male identity within hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop samples from these early twentieth century icons.

Paul Robeson, perhaps more than any other early 20th century African-American male icon, challenged dominant African-American narratives. The negotiation of African American leisure and play at the turn-of-the-century played a major role in twentieth century African American life. Kelley links play to agency:

> Although the concept of play in the modern era is inextricably tied to the creation of leisure time as a form of consumption and recuperation for wage workers in capitalist political economy, play is a form of agency that is generally regarded as pleasurable activities that take place in "free time". (Kelley *Yo Mama* 75)

For African Americans, organized sport became a focal point of African American leisure and play. Within the American popular culture sphere, sports icons Jack Johnson and Jesse Owens aided in the construction of new African American identities. Jack Johnson in particular represented African American agency and self-definition. Johnson more so than any other early 20th century African American icon was a considered a "badman" or bad "nigga" by many white Americans. Jack Johnson represents a new type of African-American icon and archetype.

Jack Johnson was a complex figure. Though Johnson would qualify as a bad man— he partied, he dated white women, he was physically astounding—, he brought nuance to the bad man figure. Johnson was a self-proclaimed renaissance man. He was a musician; he was well read. He was a thespian. He was impeccably dressed. Johnson's care-free spending and in-your-face lifestyle represented a new strain of 20th century African-American masculinity. African American men had a storied tradition as pugilists both during slavery and after, making African American pugilism a permanent feature of African American culture in the twentieth century. Johnson, however, ventured into

uncharted territory in the public domain as a Black athlete. He was an enigma. Johnson's brash swagger in public space laid the foundation for future masculine identities. His defiant attitude served as a precursor for future African American public figures. Johnson's impact transcended the sport of boxing. In short, Jack Johnson was the embodiment of the bad nigga trope. Furthermore, Jack Johnson—as a pop enigma—serves as both archetype and icon within hip hop. He was a complex figure that could be approached one-dimensionally. Johnson, as hip hop archetype, was the precursor to hip hop icons within boxing—such as Muhammed Ali, Mike Tyson, Roy Jones, and Floyd Mayweather—as well as outside the sport of boxing. Like basketball, boxing is inextricably linked to hip hop culture.

American sports icons and the archetypes they spawned, served as a counterbalance to American ideals of thrift and conservatism in the early 1900s. While the African American community reified figures such as Paul Robeson, Jack Johnson and Marcus Garvey, European Americans embraced a new type of American popular culture icon. Babe Ruth and American baseball were prominent fixtures within the American popular culture landscape in the early 1900's. America's psychological and sociological anxieties played out literally, on the baseball diamond. I do not go into an in-depth socio-cultural analysis of America's pastime; however, I would like to draw attention to the emergence of a new type of American figure at the turn of the twentieth century: the sports icon. Babe Ruth represents this new type of American heroic and iconic figure. Ruth simultaneously represented the best and worst of American ideals as an American sports celebrity. He presented a new interpretation of white masculinity in popular media with an emphasis on his athletic ability, while ignoring his personal shortcomings. Of

course, I do not want to understate the significance of African Americans and baseball in the early 1900s. For African Americans' contributions to American baseball artistry and athleticism via the Negro Leagues has been well documented. I discuss Ruth merely to highlight the significance of African-American iconography and the growth of American celebrity at the turn of twentieth century. American iconography and celebrity both became foci of twentieth century American popular culture. Hip Hop aesthetics represent an aesthetic response to American iconography and historiography through hip hop narratives, attitude and posturing. As a European American sports icon, however, despite his alcoholism, womanizing, and rabblerousing, Ruth was considered a national hero:

> Ruth was the most publicized and recognized sports figure of the day, a true national hero like Charles Lindbergh and Alvin York. His rags-to-riches story, from waterfront waif to the national pastime's greatest star, coincided with America's Horatio Alger mythology while his flamboyant, garrulous, hedonistic, profane, arrested adolescent behavior fit the emerging social ethos of the Roaring Twenties. (Gerlach 43)

Babe Ruth as cultural icon emerges in dialectical opposition to African-American icons such as Robeson and Johnson. Whereas outspoken African American, male public figures were scrutinized and vilified, white male figures such as Ruth escaped such stingy criticism. More importantly, Ruth represents the emergence of a new type of American icon. The 1920s was the decade of the American hero. Ruth was a Hollywood centric capitalistic, rabble-rouser. Tangentially, Yonkers emcee Jadakiss uses "the Black Ruth" as one of his alter egos.

Heroic figure and icons such as Ruth hinged upon a uniquely American construction of male identity**.** The Wild West Mentality and The Superman Effect are fundamental components of American male identity construction. Furthermore, constructed identities are part of the American experience. Dominant American culture has, since its inception, embraced the notion of dual identities. Early American political figures like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson maintained a public persona that championed equality. However, Jefferson, for example, had intimate relations with an enslaved African, Sallie Hemmings. Racism under girded the need for dual identities among early American political figures. Within American historical narratives, dual-identity was a necessary invention that functioned as a means to reconcile the paradoxes of European-American existence and Judeo-Christian identity construction. American racism played a pivotal role in the creation of dual-identity for American political figures:

> The historical experience of racism alone belies the story of the United States as a shining city on a hill. Thomas Jefferson, the man who wrote the egalitarian phrases in the Declaration of Independence, owned slaves, and the political theorists like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton who crafted the Federalist Papers and the Constitution elevated the property rights of slave owners over the human rights of slaves. Even Abraham Lincoln, the martyred president who signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freed the slaves only as a last resort, and then only in those states in rebellion against the federal government…Racism has played a crucial role in so many of the essential decisions that have shaped and transformed American politics. (Lipsitz 122)

Dual identity is intrinsically linked to American identity. Dual identity emerged as a way to reconcile political theory and social practice. Ethical and moral inconsistencies were omitted or understated in historical accounts of these European American figures. Even though America's forefathers did not actually don a mask or disguise, they hid behind popular media and revisionist accounts of American history to cover their immoral behavior. Hip hop aesthetics borrow dual-identity for similar purposes. Emcees, B-boys and graffiti artists—for example—take on dual-identities as a means of resistance and subversion. Concealing ones identity acts as means to participate to cover-up activities that society deems illicit (i.e.. graffiti), play out voyeuristic fantasies and/or as an aesthetic device that signifies superior abilities or skills. Nonetheless, one of America's most iconic symbols, the hooded Klansman, did in fact wear a mask:

> In real life, there are many reasons people have for habitually disguising their identities and actions. The most obvious would be the criminal who wears a mask so he will not be identified for future pursuit and incarceration. The same can be said for acts of political or social courage in societies where such activities would be punished severely. Think of the masked mob informant or the hooded dissident in the Middle East. Or think of the Ku Klux Klan and its hooded cross burners. Their friends certainly know who they are, but their hoods keep them from being identified by their victims and by law-enforcement agencies (Fingeroth 48)

The propensity to embody dual identities extends even to American folk music lore. When Bob Dylan arrived in New York in January 1961, he was interviewed by Columbia Records' the head of publicity Billy James how he traveled to New York. Dylan, instead of admitting that he drove to New York City "in a four door sedan, '57 Chevy" (Dylan,

8). He created an elaborate, fictional narrative,--stating that he came in from Detroit (not Chicago)--one that was more in-line with his folk persona as a musician. Authenticity was the motivation of Dylan's use of dual identity.

The very concept of Ellis Island and the symbolism of The Statue of Liberty embody the idea of a dual or "new" identity. The American melting-pot mentality is at the core of both American symbols. New York City—the birthplace of hip hop—represents the melting pot philosophy perhaps more than any other American city. Super heroic dual identity, particularly Superman/Clark Kent originates in American immigrant identity construction, "The immigrant origin is at the heart of the Superman dual identity" (Fingeroth 53). In African-American communities, there is added significance placed upon the creation of dual identities. Within a hip hop context, the construction of dual identities is a central feature. One's alter ego in hip hop, whether a tagger, b-boy, or emcee, is created as an alternate identity. More recently, these dual identities have shifted from superhero-influenced to gangster-influenced alter egos.

Alter-ego, an extension of the dual-identity convention, is a common feature of superhero narratives. Because hip hop was heavily influenced by comic book culture (i.e. super heroic narratives), alter-ego is a major feature of hip hop aesthetics. Ironically, within hip hop aesthetics, anti hero or supervillain narratives have replaced more traditional heroic narratives. The reification of the "bad guy", anti hero and supervillain is connected to the bad man trope. Even though artists such as Lil Wayne, Dr. Dre, Eazy E, Mike Jones, Jim Jones, Keith Murray, Reggie Noble, Eric Sermon and Camron posses remnants of their actual identities, their created identities are markedly different from their true identity. Emcees often create alter egos that are dialectically opposed to their

true identity. Biggie Smalls as Frank White, Tupac as Machavelli, The Rza as Bobby Digital and TI as TIP are all examples of double, and in some cases triple, identity constructions within hip hop. These alter egos serve as sites to express one's self creatively, as well as a social and expressive construct through which the emcee performs voyeuristic narratives. These narratives serve an emancipatory and cathartic function, similar to the dozens and signifying, allowing the emcee to escape and transcend their post-industrial reality. Emcees' fictional alter-egos serve as vehicles for introspection, self-critique, voyeurism, expression and as a psycho-social mechanism to reconcile inner conflict. Texas-based emcee Devin the Dude illustrates the centrality of alter personas within hip hop aesthetics. Devin was asked to differentiate between Devin—who represents his true biography—and the Dude—his hip hop persona:

> I'm pretty much the same. You got your Devin side and then you got your Dude side. It's one in the same. I guess I'm more of a family type dude in real life. I like being with brothers and sisters…Ha-Ha! The Dude curses a lot more than Devin. He smokes and drinks and all that stuff. Devin is a momma's boy. I talk to my momma everyday. The Dude likes getting into things. Ha-Ha! (Knight)

Devin the Dude clearly delineates between his biographical narrative and his constructed alter ego. He admits that his emcee persona is a constructed identity, which is comprised of part fact, but mostly fiction.

Dual identities are a characteristic of American and African American public discourse. Both narrative traditions utilize dual identities. Whether code-switching in the African-American tradition or fragmented or Puritanical conceptualizations of white male leadership in European-American traditions, alter egos have been highly functional in the

development of American political, social and religious thought. Alter identities tend to cloak personal indiscretions, criminality, addiction and/or deviant behavior. They also allow individuals the opportunity to play out fantasies, whether psychologically or creatively. In reference to hip hop, dual identities function much the same way. At times these identities are merely creative devices, which often border on voyeurism. Other times, dual-identities are utilized to play out deviant/criminal behavior. And they are also utilized as signifiers. The adoption of alternate identities make the hip hop community that much more receptive to the influence of popular culture archetypes and icons. Quite often in hip hop, alternate identities are modeled—in both name and tone—after popular culture icons.

As will be discussed later in chapter 3, dual identities, alter egos, and codenames are characteristics of American superhero mythology. Early 20th century popular culture set the tone—aesthetically and polemically—for future racialized discourses in the popular sphere. The World's Fairs, African American male public discourses, and early twentieth century icons and archetypes impacted the form and content of hip hop aesthetics. Because hip hop is post-modern *and* African, hip hop aesthetics reflect a keen awareness of historical narratives that have been forth by popular media. Though rarely examined within the canon of hip hop scholarship, hip hop narratives respond to these pre-hip hop constructions of "whiteness" and "blackness", whether tangentially or directly. Lastly, hip hop narratives utilize or reject iconography, attitudes, and symbols from popular culture from the first half of the twentieth century. Hip hop appropriates and engages heroic and super heroic figures and narratives, which reflect the challenges and desires African American existence in a post-industrial, post-modern environment.

Post-Afrocentric Discourse in Hip-Hop

> As I have gained experience and education in both the dominant culture and that of Indians, I have found it progressively more difficult to pass from one world to the other. I had to discover a place somewhere between two worlds. It is not simply a matter of language, for, as everyone knows, it is possible to translate with fair accuracy from one language to another without losing too much of the original meaning. But there are no methods by which we can translate a mentality and its alien ideas.
> *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America*
> Jamake Highwater
> (1981)

This section examines the functionality and utilization of Afrocentric academic theory within hip hop aesthetics. The decrease in Afrocentric iconography, references, and symbolism and the subsequent increase in more mainstream, "secular" iconography within hip hop narratives and aesthetics during the 1980s and early 1990s marks a shift in the hip hop generation's attitudes and values. The shift toward gangsta aesthetics and iconography in hip hop reflect developments in American racial discourses, public policy, and popular media. Though Afrocentric iconography has been present in hip hop culture since its genesis, the Afrocentric movement in hip hop reached its zenith between 1988-1990. By 1994, hip hop culture was firmly entrenched in the post-Afrocentric era.

On the continent of Africa, prior to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, African peoples enjoyed a thriving artistic culture. In terms of African artistic production in America, early Africans in America were forced to refashion and recreate new aesthetic paradigms within a culturally oppressed environment. However, when analyzing hip hop culture, many Afrocentric scholars have been extremely critical. Some argue that African aesthetic mores were preoccupied with morality and African American popular culture represents an abruption of African cultural norms. To some extent this is true, but hip hop culture also represents a continuum of African and African American cultural norms. As I

have attempted to show in the previous section, American popular culture figures and narratives inform hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop aesthetics reconfigure American and African American narratives, however, it is the context of this reappropriation within a specific American context that makes hip hop unique. Hip hop iconography reflects the specificity of this American context. I am partially concerned here with the efficacies and implications of African cultural practices and aesthetics within an American context. For hip-hop is created within an African-American context. I also challenge certain unquestioned assumptions about African and African American cultural practices, namely: 1) the notion that traditional African art was devoid a purely aesthetic component; and 2) that hip hop is created in cultural-historical vacuum.

In Africa and throughout the Diaspora music has historically been multi-purposed and multi-dimensional. Within African and African-American culture, music is at the core of existence. In terms of aesthetics, there has been much research on the form and function of African art, most notably by scholars such as Molefi K. Asante, Mirimba Ani, Patricia Maultsby, and Maulana Karenga. However, many Afrocentric scholars have denounced hip hop culture. This denouncement has its roots cultural nationalist influences during the 1960s Black Power/Arts movement. In "Black Cultural Nationalism", for example, Karenga explains, "Black Art, like everything else in the black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution…[and] must expose the enemy, praise and support the revolution" (33). Karenga's articulation of Black Art is problematic on several fronts. More specifically, who is the enemy Karenga is referring to? How

do we define a successful "revolution? Furthermore, is "revolution", as expressed during the 1960s, a possibility?

Karenga's harsh socio-cultural critique of the blues is even more revealing. Karenga correctly identifies the blues as dysfunctional; however, he minimizes the expressive value, musical influence, and agency of the blues:

> Perhaps people will object violently to the idea that the blues are invalid historically. They will always represent a very beautiful, musical and psychological achievement of our people; but today they are not functional because they do not commit us to the struggle of today and tomorrow. (38)

When examining African-American popular culture, an Afrocentric analysis must take into account the context of African cultural production. Cultures are functional or they become anachronistic. In other words, how do we evaluate African/African American art or cultural production from an African-centered perspective in post modern, post-Civil Rights, post-Industrial environment? Even amongst African artists, since the Negritude movement, continental Africans have struggled to reconcile their Africaness with European notions of modernity. Chinua Achebe's seminal work *Things Fall Apart* (1958)*,* for example, deals with the constant struggle between Western encroachment and traditional African culture. Achebe's protagonist, Okonkwo struggled to reconcile between the two. The Roots *Things Fall Apart* sampled Achebe's work as a reference to the axiological tension within hip hop between market sensibilities and progressive art.

Within a post-industrial context, the implications of white supremacy and a global economy on African American art are far-reaching. Is it possible for one to

be fully Afrocentric in America, whether ideologically or culturally? American ideals run counter to African and Afrocentric philosophical and aesthetic principles. Therein lies the struggle for many African Americans within the hip hop generation: transcending their post-industrial, post-civil rights, post modern existence via African-centered ideology, ontology, epistemology, theory, and cultural expression.

The mid 1980s and early 1990s was a period in which the hip-hop community began to develop what Bakari Kitwana describes as a distinct hip-hop worldview. The hip-hop worldview will be discussed at greater length in chapter 4. Here I am concerned with the ways in which Afrocentric academic discourse, motifs, themes, and theory were absorbed, embraced, and rejected by the hip-hop community. My use of the term post-Afrocentric discourse is not a reference to any structured, formalized meta-theory. Afrocentric notions—because of hip hop's use of post modern pastiche—enter hip hop through less-structured channels, for example through street culture, television, print media, underground culture etc. Post-Afrocentric discourse in hip hop refers to a movement more than a formalized doctrine or dogma. Nonetheless, I utilize Afrocentric academic rhetoric and theory in order to identify and evaluate Afrocentric trends in hip-hop aesthetics. Like the blues (wo)men and the African American griot, the emcee serves multi-functional purposes within African American popular culture. They are often the chroniclers, arbiters, spokespersons, and translators of events, trends, and community sentiment.

Within hip hop studies scholarship, little attention has been paid to the link between Afrocentric academic discourse and hip-hop aesthetics. The post-Afrocentric moment, as

I describe it, is important for discussions on hip-hop aesthetics, as it provides valuable insight into shifts in the efficacy of Afrocentric praxis. The publication of Molefi Asante's *Afrocentricity* in 1980 influenced and reflected the Afrocentric movement in hip hop. The Afrocentric movement in hip hop occurs between 1973-1990 and crystallized between 1988-1990. The Post-Afrocentric movement begins in roughly 1994 with the release of The Notorious B.I.G's *Ready to Die*. The Post-Afrocentric movement in hip hop represents an acceptance—at least partially—of American ideals and practices, and, simultaneously, a gradual rejection of Afrocentric (i.e. Black Nationalist) rhetoric and discourse. I am concerned with the ways in which Afrocentric thought, practice and theory are filtered through hip hop discourse. I use the term "Post-Afrocentric' as a theoretical and rhetorical tool to draw attention to the evolution of Afrocentric thought in a American popular culture context. In the twenty-first century, American popular media is inescapable. More specifically, in this section, I examine shifts in hip hop texts—which began in the late 1980s (with hip hop artists such as Schooly D, Boogie Down Productions, and N.W.A)— that reflect an acceptance *and* rejection of Afrocentic and African-centered ideals, motifs, and theory. Surely, the proliferation of American popular culture, particularly within the hip hop community, has had an impact on Afrocentric sensibilities and vice versa.

African motifs and symbols have been utilized within hip hop culture since its inception. Afrikaa Bambaata—considered the Godfather of Hip Hop culture—and the Zulu Nation are examples of how early hip hop drew from African symbols. Afrika Bambaataa is one of the most influential hip hop pioneers, icons and archetypes. His name (Afrika) and his ideology of community peace and uplift are testaments to the

influence of the African Aesthetic on hip hop culture. These African characteristics are keystones of hip hop aesthetics. Afrika Bambaataa formed the Zulu Nation at Stevenson High in the Bronx in 1973. The Zulu Nation based "their principles on spreading love and unity in hip hop regardless of race, religion, and class" (Ratcliffe 33). The organization was vital to the sociopolitical development of late 1980's rappers such as Public Enemy and KRS-One (33).

The Zulu Nation represents hip-hop's humble beginnings (Ratcliff 33). A beginning that relied almost solely on self-definition to propel the culture. Mainstream America was not receptive to hip hop early on. The continuum of hip-hop's African lineage can be observed in more contemporary hip-hop as well. On political hip-hop group Dead Prez's first album *Let's Get Free,* they acknowledge their African ancestry on "I'm an African". Their lyrics are laden with Pan-African and Black Nationalist rhetoric. The Zulu Nation in both name and philosophy exemplifies this. Hip emerges in a Pan-African, geo-diasporic milieu These Afro-diasporic origins are linked, partially, to hip-hop's Caribbean roots.

The theoretical and philosophical shift toward post-Afrocentric discourse represents an attempt by disenfranchised, urban African-American youth to wrestle with their post-industrial, post-modern existence. The Post-Afrocentric hip hop movement represents an acceptance and absorption of 1970s and 1980s American popular culture and a shift from Black Nationalist narratives toward more materialistic and violent narratives within hip hop. The gun also moved to the fore during this time within hip hop narratives. Post-Afrocentric discourse marked the beginning of a more thorough acceptance of mainstream capitalist sensibilities while engaging, rejecting, recycling and critiquing

American capitalist culture and Black Nationalist ideology. The ideological/aesthetic struggle between African cultural norms and post-modern upward mobility is evident in post Afrocentric narratives.

The Afrocentric movement in hip-hop originated in hip hop's formative phases during the early 1970s. African referents within hip hop culture such as The Zulu Nation and Afrikaa Bambaata, as well as the incorporation of Black Nationalist and Cultural Nationalist rhetoric in hip hop texts point to the influence of African culture—at least aesthetically—on hip hop. Nonetheless, the post-Afrocentric movement in hip hop begins in the late 1980s with Schooly D, Boogie Down Productions and N.W.A., and overlaps with the post-Afrocentric movement, which ends in 1994 with the release of several albums that offer critiques of Afrocentricity and Black Nationalism. Common's *Resurrection* and the Notorious B.I.G's *Ready to Die* in 1994 solidify the end of the (Post) Afrocentric movement in hip hop.

Post-Afrocentric hip hop discourse offers a critique of Afrocentric and African-centered theory and practice. There are numerous musical and social developments that occurred within hip hop culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s that are significant to my discussion of post-Afrocentric discourse in hip hop. I identify eleven socio-cultural events and albums that demarcate the post-Afrocentric movements in hip hop. Some of these events occurred during the Afrocentric movement in hip hop and forecasted post-Afrocentric narratives in hip hop culture.

The Native Tongue Movement, which consisted of The Jungle Brothers, A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah and De La Soul), signify perhaps the most recognizable, consistent and explicit Afrocentric movement within 1980s hip hop. It is worth noting

that The Native Tongue collective has received only scant interest within the canon of hip-hop scholarship. The Native Tongue Movement, ironically, also marks the beginning of post-Afrocentricity within hip hop. Though Native Tongue artists made explicit references to Afrocentricity and African cultural norms, they also infused postmodern, multicultural references into their work.

The Afrocentric and post-Afrocentric movement within hip-hop culture represents a rejection (i.e. assimilation, aesthetics, epistemology) *and* acceptance (i.e. capitalism, patriarchy, violence) of American cultural ideals. Furthermore, "[Native Tongue] rejected what had become the authentic style of sweat suits, gold chains, and Kangol hats by presenting their bohemian style of flowered shirts, dreaded hair, and African medallions" (Baldwin,163). The post-Afrocentric movement also juxtaposes and attempts to reconcile African cultural idealism and American realism. In other words, as with much hip hop music, the Native Tongue Movement struggled to balance African cultural norms— which links them to their historical legacy and lineage—with the socioeconomic realities of being poor and Black in post-industrial urban America.

I offer a discussion of the Native Tongue Movement in order to track Afrocentric trends and sensibilities within hip hop and to segue way into my discussion of the post-Afrocentric movement in hip hop. On "Push It Along", the first track from A Tribe Called Quest's first album *People's Instinctive Travels & The Paths of Rhythm* (1990), the most acclaimed group member, Q-Tip (a.k.a the abstract poet) attempts to grapple with socioeconomic conditions in 1980s New York. It is the group's abstract, liberal approach to socioeconomic issues that made it so palpable within the hip hop. It is important to note that the political agenda within The Native Tongue movement was

subtly infused into their music. Moreover their music reflects a quasi, post-modern racial-cultural identity, more Black Nationalist humanism than hard-line cultural nationalist. In short, Afrocentric overtures within the hip-hop idiom were more of an aesthetic and psycho-social movement than mass political or ideological movement. In "Push It Along, Q-tip engages Afrocentric discourse:

> If you can't envision a brother who ain't dissin
>
> Slingin' this and that, 'cause this and that was missin
>
> Instead, it's been injected, the Tribe has been perfected
>
> Oh yes, it's been selected, the art makes it protected
>
> Afrocentric livin', Africans be givin
>
> A lot to the cause 'cause the cause has been risen

What does Q-Tip infer when he uses the term Afrocentric? Tip equates Afrocentricity with positive thinking and empowering art. He engages and critiques gangster aesthetics without being dogmatic. Q-Tip's reference to "the cause" connects him to African-American cultural and aesthetic experiences. Ideological tension within hip hop, as well as struggles between Black popular culture and mainstream American popular culture are evidenced in Q-Tip's lyrics. The group successfully delineates between emerging gangsta rap sensibilities and "conscious" hip hop. However, A Tribe Called Quest is aware of their existence within the hip hop idiom. References to Africa in Native Tongue's lyrics are not tangential nor are they merely symbolic. African references within hip-hop discourse link African-American hip-hop participants to their historical and cultural legacy. Because humankind began in Africa, references to Africa serve a similar purpose for non-African-American hip hop generationers too. So then to truly

embrace hip-hop aesthetics, one must at least recognize its African and African American roots to a much greater degree than previous genres of African-American musical production. This extends to the juxtaposition and critique of rock and roll culture within hip-hop discourse. As Native Tongue artists embrace their African cultural identity they simultaneously reject white identity and ideals (e.g. American gun culture), which is sometimes represented as rock and roll. In "Footprints", along the trajectory of Run-DMC's critique of rock music on "The King of Rock" (1985), A Tribe Called Quest demarcate the aesthetic lines between hip hop and other musical genres and between African and American ideals:

> This ain't rock 'n' roll cos the rap is in control
>
> If you're a megastar, worth will buy you a car
>
> I'd rather go barefootin, for prints I will be puttin
>
> all over the earth if we can get there first
>
> Now that we are in it, footprints are bein printed
>
> So fo you recognize em, you can try to size em
>
> A Nubian, a Nubian, a proud one at that
>
> Remember me, the brother who said "Black is black"
>
> You can come by request, I don't play, I don't dress
>
> Get emotions off your chest, we are black, we the best(blessed)
>
> Makin moves, makin motions, flowin like an ocean
>
> The walkin will continue, we know that we will bring you
>
> the times that you have waited, more anticipated
>
> Be gone but not for long because the feet will stay strong

Q-Tip's discourse is anchored within the African-American aesthetic tradition; he juxtaposes "Black" and "Nubian". In this verse, he is clearly championing Black pride ("a Nubian, a Nubia, a proud one at that"). Thematically, movement (i.e. the railroad, a journey, et al) is a central component to African-American musical aesthetics. Tip's narrative suggests a more organic, simpler way of living ("I'd rather go barefootin'")

The Jungle Brothers, another Native Tongue group—on their first album *Straight out the Jungle*—utilized the continent of Africa to signify the urban, post-industrial landscape of New York. References to Africa were more symbolic than ideological. Africa serves as a metaphor for the urban post-industrial environment. They acknowledge Africa as the origin of humanity and culture, yet they accept their existence as poor African-American men. On the first track "Straight out the Jungle", the group introduces the audience to its African cultural anchoring. Again, the Jungle Brother's African identity is created in dialectical opposition to American ideals and worldview:

> Educated man, from the motherland
>
> You see, they call me a star but that's not what I am
>
> I'm a jungle brother, a true, blue brother
>
> And I've been to many places you'll never discover

He rejects the imposed construct of artist as celebrity, preferring to connect to the historical struggle of African-Americans. Struggle is a major feature of hip-hop aesthetics. Struggles in hip-hop are connected to older African-American traditions, as well as the post-industrial environment. The Jungle Brothers at once establish themselves as Bohemian, Black cultural nationalists and urban dwellers entrenched in the emerging

New York hip hop scene. Their cultural-linguistic dexterity is also a major component of their narrative. In the second verse, they engage the post-industrial environment directly:

Struggle to live (struggle to live) struggle to survive

Struggle (struggle) just to stay alive

'Cause inside the jungle, either you do or you die

You got to be aware, you got to have the jungle eye

Take it from a brother who knows my friend

The animals, the cannibals will do you in

Cut your throat (cut your throat) stab you in the back

The untamed animal just don't know how to act

It's unbelievable (unbelievable) uncivilized (ci-civilized)

Struggle is at the forefront of the above narrative. Transcending their post-industrial, urban environment, within the context of their African heritage, is addressed directly. Again, the struggle to balance African cultural norms and postmodern, postindustrial existence is evident in the above passage**.**

The evolution of Native Tongue artist Queen Latifah is representative of the trajectory of Afrocentric discourse in hip hop. An East Orange, New Jersey-native, Queen Latina embraced Afrocentric themes and living in her early work, offering stringent critiques of patriarchy and misogyny while staying within the parameters of hip hop aesthetics. Her debut album *All Hail the Queen* (1989) was a departure from previous female narratives in hip hop. By the early-mid 1990s, Latina's popularity waned as Afrocentric themes waned within hip hop discourse. She was no longer known as Queen Latifah, but as Dana Owens. Owens was able to trade in the cultural capital she had

accrued as an Afrocentric emcee with Native Tongue for mainstream success, celebrity endorsements and stardom. This cultural exchange is an example of how upward mobility and the struggle to transcend the obstacles of post-industrial existence play into hip hop aesthetics.

Though the Native Tongue movement represents the most visible and strain of Afrocentric and post-Afrocentric thought within hip hop, groups such as X-Clan, Brand Nubian, Black Star, Little Brother, Digable Planets, the Roots, Dead Prez, and Gangstarr all utilized Afrocentric approaches and themes in their music. Post-Afrocentric discourse is evidenced further when one traces the maturation of two archetypal hip-hop acts: A Tribe Called Quest and KRS-One. Both represent mounting tensions in hip hop between Afrocentric idealism and post-industrial Black Nationalism. In 1993, A Tribe Called Quest's Q-Tip was assaulted by members of R&B group Wrecks-N-Effect's entourage. Ironically, neither group represented the gangster aesthetic. The misunderstanding was based on a veiled reference on "Jazz (We've Got)":

> I'm all into my music cuz it's how I make papes
>
> Tryin' to make hits, like Kid Capri mix tapes
>
> Me sweat another? I do my own thing
>
> Strictly hardcore tracks, not a new jack swing

The Zulu Nation, headed by hip hop icon Afrika Bambataa, intervened and eventually a peace treaty was implemented. Though Wrecks-N-Effect's performance and aesthetic was benign, their response was violent and not artistic. Their response was a foreshadowing of the blurring of the line between art and reality. It was the precursor to hip-hop's lyrical competitiveness resulting in violence. It is important to note that even

though A Tribe Called Quest's aesthetic was peaceful, they could not transcend their post-industrial reality. Moreover, between the release of their first album *Peoples Instinctive Travels (1990)* and *Low End Theory* (1991), it is possible to observe the evolution of Afrocentricity in hip hop, via Post-Afrocentric movement, in the group's attempt to reconcile the above mentioned tension. In these albums, the group engaged American popular culture both explicitly and implicitly. However, *Low End Theory* represents a departure from Afrocentric motifs toward more secular themes. On *Low End Theory,* A Tribe Called Quest shifted their focus toward commercial sensibilities through numerous pop culture references in their work. "Skypager" highlights their newfound market sensibilities. Though not always an overt critique, their work does address transcending the post-industrial environment. On "Jazz", for example, Q-Tip established the underlying theme of the album when he proclaims, "the aim is to succeed and achieve at 21." In the next verse, Phife, illustrates the group's desire for upward mobility, "I'm all into my music, cause its time to make papes/Try to make hits, like Kid Capri makes tapes." Phife explains that he is interested in the group's market value in his articulation of his desire to "make papes [and] hits".

BDP DJ Scott La Rock was murdered on August 27, 1987. La Rock would represent the first of a number of casualties of well-known hip hop figures. LaRock's murder was a tragic portent that signaled a major shift toward realism, and by virtue post-Afrocentric discourse, within hip hop. On BDP's first album, *Criminal Minded* (1987) KRS-One embodied gangster aesthetics, yet he was firmly entrenched in the emerging

(Illustration 2.5) X-Clan
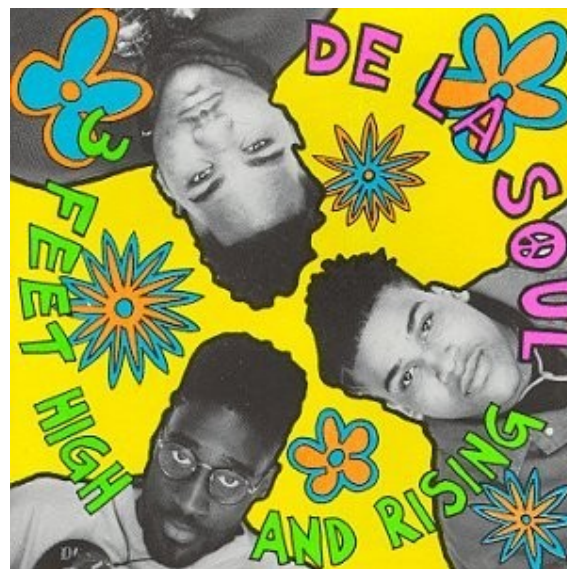
(Illustration 2.6) De La Soul

(Illustration 2.7) Brand Nubian *One for All*

(Illustration 2.8) "Going Way Back" video

hip hop aesthetic. In fact, KRS-One—who would be considered a "conscious" emcee—is partially responsible for gangster motifs and themes within hip hop. However, after Scott La Rock's murder, KRS-One reinvented himself as a Black Nationalist. Whereas Q-Tip became more mainstream and less Afrocentric, KRS-One became more nationalist in his narratives. Q-Tip represents a convergence of a cultural nationalist engagement of post-industrial and pop culture discourse. KRS-One represents a blending of gangster and Black Nationalist rhetoric. The convergence of both icons represents a new brand of Afrocentric discourse within hip hop. Both A Tribe Called Quest and KRS-ONE illustrate the complexity of hip hop aesthetics.

Hip hop group Leaders of the New School, which featured Dinko D, Charlie Brown, and Busta Rhymes, marked the end of Afrocentric discourse in hip hoop narratives. As their name infers, Leaders of the New School ushered in a new aesthetic, which—at the time—was an amalgamation of post-soul, Afrocentric, and commercial aesthetics. Their album *A Future with a Past (1991)* was their first release, but it was the group's collaboration with A Tribe Called Quest on "Scenarios" that solidified the group— particularly Busta Rhymes—as up and coming emcees. The group was introduced to a national audience with their appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992 when they performed "Scenarios" with A Tribe Called Quest. Even though Leaders of the New School did not utilize gangsta aesthetics in their performance, they did mark a shift

Much scholarship constructs gangsta hip hop in opposition to more politically-influenced hip hop. Dichotomizing hip hop in this manner—gangsta and conscious/political— obscures overarching shifts in hip hop discourse as a whole. Examining shifts *within* so-called conscious hip hop (i.e. the Native Tongue Movement)

highlight the ways in which hip hop aesthetics reflect socioeconomic reality, "the political language nation-conscious rap, in its most general sense, was traded in for the grammar of the hood and the particular day-to-day struggles of black people" (Baldwin 166).

N.W.A and Dr. Dre's use of West coast gangsta aesthetics and iconography is often cited as a major factor in the gradual phasing-out of the overtly political strain of hip hop. Nonetheless, KRS-One's *Criminal Minded* and *Any Means Necessary*; A Tribe Called Quest's *Low End Theory;* Leaders of the New School *A Future with a Past* (1991); and Onyx's *Throw ya Gunz* EP (1992) and *Baccdafucup* LP (1993) all signal aesthetic shifts within hip hop. By 1994, collectively, these events forecasted the end of post Afrocentric discourse in hip hop, many of which challenge and engage Afrocentricity and Black Nationalism directly: 1) the sonic and thematic shifts between A Tribe Called Quest's debut album *Peoples Instinctive Travel* (1990) and *Low End Theory* (1991); 2) the shift, proliferation and solidification of gangsta iconography and iconology within hip hop, which is represented in the emergence of more gangsta-inspired narratives; 3) the creation of Death Row, Cash Money, and Bad Boy Records in the early 1990s; 4) the death of Scott La Rock and subsequent release of *Criminal Minded*; 5)the 1992 LA. Rebellion; 6) Common's *Resurrection* (1994)*,* particularly "I Used to Love H.E.R"*; 7)* the Notorious B.I.G's *Ready to Die* (1994)*;* 8) Onyx's *Baccdafuccup;* 9) Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* (1992)*;* 10) Wu-Tang Clan's *Enter the Wu-Tang* (1993)*,* particularly "C.R.E.A.M (Cash Rules Everything Around Me)"; 11) Mobb Deep's *Juvenile Hell* (1993); 12) The Roots' *Do You Want More?* (1993*)*; 13) Nas' *Illmatic* (1994); *and* 14) Naughty by Nature's "O.P.P" (1991).

The post-Afrocentric hip hop discourse is represented in a general decline in the embrace of Afrocentric iconography and practice, but also in the direct engagement and signification of Afrocentricity. Wu-Tang Clan's "C.R.E.A.M (Cash Rules Everything Around Me), which appeared on *Enter the Wu-Tang,* signaled hip hop culture's acceptance and absorption of capitalist sensibilities. Inspectah Deck's verse encapsulates the impetus of "C.R.E.A.M", "It's been 22 long, hard years and still strugglin'/Survival got me buggin, but I'm alive on arrival." Deck links his narrative to struggle and the prison industrial complex:

> Bassin/Goin up state's my destination/ Handcuffed, in back of the bus, forty of us/
>
> Life as a shorty shouldn't be so rough/But as the world turn, I learn life is
>
> hell/livin in a world no different from a cell.
>
> Neglected for now, but, YO, it's got to be expected (That What?)/Life is hectic.

Nas' *Illmatic* and the Notorious B.I.G.'s *Ready to Die* solidified the end of the post Afrocentric movement in hip hop. Both albums permanently shifted the focus of hip hop aesthetics to survival in the post industrial, inner-city. Furthermore, *Ready to Die* solidified ostentation—via tragic realism— as a central component of hip hop aesthetics. However, One of the most overt markers of post-Afrocentric discourse in hip hop appears in Common's seminal, hip hop classic "I Used to Love Her". "I Used to Love Her" chronicles and critiques the evolution of hip hop culture and aesthetics as it passed through its various stages from folk music to popular music. Common utilizes personification, metaphorically referring to hip hop as a woman:

> She didn't have a body but she started gettin thick quick
>
> Did a couple of videos and became Afrocentric

>Out goes the weave, in goes the braids beads medallions
>
>She was on that tip about, stoppin the violence
>
>About my people she was teachin me
>
>By not preachin to me but speakin to me

Common points out that the Afrocentric movement was not dogmatic or judgmental. He also links the Afrocentric movement in hip hop to Afrocentric iconography and aesthetics. Though hip hop served as an educational and historical tool according to Common, it was not "preachy". He goes on to describe hip hop's musical expansion and hip hop's transition the post-Afrocentric moment.

>She said that the pro-black, was goin out of style
>
>She said, Afrocentricity, was of the past
>
>So she got into R&B hip-house bass and jazz
>
>Now black music is black music and its all good
>
>I wasn't salty, she was with the boys in the hood
>
>Cause that was good for her, she was becomin well rounded
>
>I thought it was dope how she was on that freestyle shit
>
>Just havin fun, not worried about anyone

Common's "I Used to Love H.E.R." is a primary musical marker, which signaled the end of post-Afrocentric discourse in hip hop. Common clearly identifies the end of Afrocentric narratives, symbolized in the post-Afrocentric movement in hip hop ("Afrocentricity, was a thing of the past").

The release of *The Chronic* album by Dr. Dre was signaled a significant shift in hip hop aesthetics. Although Black Nationalists themes were still present in this work,

gangsta themes and iconography predominated. The album served as a musical backdrop to the L.A. Rebellion of 1992. As the passage below indicates, Dr. Dre made a deliberate attempt to link *The Chronic* to collective African American struggle, despite the album's debauchery and its misogyny, violent imagery. "Nigga wit a Gun" which featured RBX, and Snoop, opens with a sample from news footage from the 1992 L.A. Rebellion newscast:

> I'ma say this and I'ma end mine
>
> If you ain't down, for the Africans here
>
> in the United States, period point blank..
>
> If you ain't down for the ones that suffered in South Africa
>
> from apartheid and shit
>
> Devil you need to step your punk ass to the side
>
> and let us brothers, and us Africans, step in
>
> and start puttin some FOOT, in that ass!!

Though west coast gangster aesthetics under gird *The Chronic,* the narrative is linked to collective struggle. Daz, chronicles the urban angst of Los Angeles' inner-city and links it to the Rodney King beating:

> Dem wonder why me violent and no really understand
>
> For de reason why me take me law, in me own, hand
>
> Me not out for peace and me not Rodney King
>
> De gun goes - click, me gun goes - bang
>
> Dem riot in Compton and dem riot in Long Beach
>
> Dem riot in L.A. cause dem no really wanna see

Niggaz start to loot and police start to shoot

Lock us down at seven o'clock, barricades us like Beirut

Me don't show no love cause it's us against dem

During the late 1990s, the hip hop generation reassessed and revisits the efficacy of Afrocentric discourse. There are several cultural markers that signal notable shifts toward post-Afrocentric thought within hip hop discourse. These post-Afrocentric moments are present in both hip hop sensibilities and within hip hop lyrics. Hip hop's aesthetic, artistic, epistemological, cultural, and philosophical foundation is grounded in African and African American cultural norms, yet hip hop is *constructed* as post modern cultural and artistic production. Stated differently, it is the way in which hip hop reconfigures and reappropriates popular media that its African sensibilities emerge. Hip hop aesthetics come out of an intrinsic understanding and recognition of Africa's contribution to world civilizations. Yet hip hop aesthetics encompass a wide range of perspectives and perceptions of African culture. Some artists outwardly embrace African culture; others are subtler in their treatment of Africa. Nas, for example, frequently explores African themes and motifs in his work. He intersperses African references in his work filtered through a post-industrial gangsta aesthetic. On "Nas is Like", he subtly refers to European's appropriation of African knowledge, "like Greeks in Egypt, learnin' somethin' deep from they teachers". As will be explained in chapter 4, hip hop's epistemological approach is post modern, yet hip hop narratives often cite historical wrongs that have been perpetrated against African peoples on the continent and throughout the Diaspora. Africa operates as an aesthetic and cultural marker linking hip hop narratives to 1960s Black Nationalist symbolism. The proliferation of Africa medallions, like the one donned

by emcee Just-Ice "Going Way Back" (1987) video, serve as cultural markers for Afrocentric discourse. As Baldwin asserts, "The icons of Afrocentricity and Africa itself served as bridges between upward mobility and historical black experiences". (162)

Jeru the Damaja's "Come Clean" which appeared on *The Sun Rises in the East* (1994) marks the end of post-Afrocentric discourse in hip hop. Jeru the Damaja, a dreadlocked emcee from Brooklyn, used esoteric symbolism and imagery as a means to counter and engage gangsta narratives in hip hop. Nonetheless, Jeru the Damaja engages gangsterism in hip hop by reappropriating gangsta imagery, utilizing it as a trope in his critique. "Come Clean" illustrates the struggle within hip hop over gangsta imagery and more esoteric themes and approaches:

> I snatch fake gangsta MC's and make em faggot flambe
>
> Your nine spray, my mind spray
>
> Malignant mist steadily pumps the funk
>
> The results you're a gang stuffed in a car trunk
>
> You couldn't come to the jungles of the East poppin that game
>
> You won't survive get live catchin wreck is our thing
>
> I don't gang bang or shoot out bang bang
>
> The relentless lyrics the only dope I slang

Jeru's declaration that he does not "gang bang or shoot out bang bang" was a direct response to west coast g-funk. Yet, Jeru the Damaja's acceptance of violence as a means to resolve conflict builds upon earlier hip hop narratives by emcees such as Just-Ice and KRS-ONE, who used gangsta posturing and attitude in their performance:

> My attack is purely mental and its nature's not hate

It's meant to wake ya up out of ya brainwashed state

Stagnate nonsense but if you persist

You'll get ya snotbox bust you press up on this…

Unplug it on chumps with the gangsta babble

Leave your nines at home and bring your skills to the battle

"Come Clean" marked the end of overt ideological critiques within hip hop culture. This marked the end the post-Afrocentric movement within hip hop. By the twenty-first century, the Afrocentric references and symbolism became scant. Artists as diverse as Styles P, Ice Cube, Mos Def, and Nas, Talib Kweli, who could definitely be deemed a "conscious" artist, illustrates this departure from Afrocentric motifs and imagery. The term "conscious" within hip hop discourse is often synonymous with Afrocentric living and/or Black Nationalist tendencies. However, upon further examination, there appears to be little difference between "gangsta" and conscious" hip hop aesthetics. Gangsta themes, symbols and aesthetics appear in so-called conscious hip hop narratives and, likewise, "conscious" themes, symbols and aesthetics appear within the so-called subgenre 'gangsta hip hop". There are striking similarities in theme, form, content, tone, iconography, and attitude. On "Gun Music", he discusses the complexity of urban violence and African cultural norms:

Silencers bring the heat without bringing the noise

Bringing the funk of dead bodies, go ahead bring in your boys

You'll see the soul of black folk like W.E.B DuBois

Israelis got tanks and Palestinians got rocks

Inmates got shanks and dirty cops they got glocks

> We got tribes in Africa that listen to Pac
>
> fighting with brothers who pump Biggie like they live on the block

Here the distinction between conscious and gangsta is barely noticeable. Kweli invokes W.E.B Du Bois and juxtaposes the intellectual giant with urban gun violence. By 2000, post-Afrocentric discourse was firmly established within hip hop narratives. Kweli's reference to tribes in Africa listening to Pac exemplifies the quagmire of many of hip hop's more progressive emcees. Kweli essentially acknowledges the inescapability of urban violence. Here, Kweli also links hip hop's post-industrial struggle to that of continental Africans in post-colonial Africa. Many artists challenged and rejected Afrocentric notions altogether. African American emcees particularly struggled to balance the demands of post-modern, post-industrial life with Afrocentric living. Transcendence of this environment provides a subtext within hip hop narratives. It is a focal point for many hip hop artists. More recently, Chicago emcee Common inserts a critique of Afrocentricity on "The 6TH Sense". He attempts to reconcile Afrocentric dogma and postmodern reality:

> I'd be lyin if I said I ain't want millions
>
> More than money saved
>
> I wanna save children
>
> Dealing with alcoholism and Afrocentricity
>
> A complex man drawin off simplicity
>
> Reality is frisking me
>
> This industry will make you lose intensity
>
> The Common Sense in me remembers the basement

I'm Morpheus in this hip-hop Matrix, exposing fake shit

Common juxtaposes Afrocentricity and alcoholism, inferring that balancing Afrocentric living and his existence as an African American male in a post-industrial environment can be challenging. On "Country Cousins" Talib Kweli further dissolves the line between gangsta and conscious aesthetics. "Country Cousins" is a collaboration with UGK, a southern hip hop group. Not only are Talib Kweli and UGK different in their geographic origin, UGK could easily be categorized as gangsta emcees but many standards. "Country Cousins" is an example of how hip hop defies and rejects external categorization. Post-Afrocentric discourse is an example of hip hop's post-structuralist emphasis. Hip hop continually defines and transcends structuralist representations of its existence.

(Illustration 2.9) Queen Latifah

(Illustration 2.10) Dana Owens

The Afrocentric movement has had a profou discourse and aesthetics. The Afrocentric and Post-Afrocentric movements in hip hop culture track Afrocentric trends, sensibilities and attitudes in hip hop culture. By 1994,

the release of albums such as Black Moon's Enta da Stage, Wu-Tang's *Enter the Wu-Tang*, The Souls of Mischief's *93' til Infinity*, Nas's *Illmatic,* and B.I.G's *Ready to Die* marked the end of the post-Afrocentric moment in hip hop. The Post-Afrocentric movement in hip hop is important because: 1) it highlights the continuity and discontinuity of African culture and Afrocentric thought in hip hop; 2) it engages Afrocentric practices in the context of a post-modern, post-industrial phenomenon (i.e. hip hop); and 3) it assesses the functionality of Afrocentric theory among contemporary, African American youth. Though Afrocentric criticism is valuable to hip hop analysis, it is crucial that Afrocentric scholars track Afrocentric shifts and trends within hip hop in order to gain a more informed perspective of the hip hop generation. Post-Afrocentric discourse is not a neatly-packaged theoretical construct with clearly defined boundaries nor was Afrocentric theory absorbed into hip hop aesthetics uncritically as an organized theoretical discourse. Post-Afrocentric discourse in hip hop is merely a theoretical proposition which highlights, tracks, and assesses the efficacy of Afrocentric theory and praxis within hip hop.

<div align="center">*******</div>

Hip Hop's aesthetic influences from the early part of the twentieth century are often understated in hip hop scholarship. Hip hop aesthetics represent an uncanny awareness of historical narratives in popular media. Hip hop emerges along the continuum of African American cultural traditions, yet some of hip hop's foundational elements hearken back to early twentieth century American public discourse and popular culture. African American public figures (for example Booker T. Washington, Jack and Paul Robeson), the American World's Fairs in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and white icons such as Babe Ruth, Buffalo Bill and Tarzan shaped (and informed) hip hop aesthetics. Early

twentieth century movements and figures laid the template for aesthetics, discursively,

ideologically, and attitudinally. Hip hop is both post-modern *and* African in its

construction; hip hop lulls from all available media and texts. Hence, pre-hip hop

narratives and icons are crucial to understanding the full scope and implications of hip

hop aesthetics.

CHAPTER 3
YO' BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF HIP-
HOP AS POST-MODERN, URBAN BLUES

In the previous chapter, I identify notable developments in pre-hip hop, American popular culture as a precursor to hip hop. This chapter offers a comparative analysis of blues and hip hop aesthetics. I examine hip-hop aesthetics and their relation to blues aesthetics. Mississippi hip-hop artist David Banner has referred to hip-hop as urban blues. I build upon Banner's assertion, illustrating how hip-hop has selected and absorbed the most radical and functional features of African (American) thought and practice, in this case blues sensibilities. By doing so, I show that hip-hop is part of a cultural continuum and, conversely, explore the causes and ways in which hip-hop aesthetics, and by virtue Black Aesthetics, have shifted—thematically, sonically, creatively, and philosophically—from its musical forbearers. I illustrate how, because of the emcee's covert social-aesthetic critique of American society, she is positioned within the realm of African-American cultural and intellectual traditions. I posit that emcees can be viewed as modern-day blues figures. The emcee links blues motifs, experience and themes with contemporary ones. This chapter seeks to explore three methodological questions concerning African Americans and the blues: 1) Have African Americans transcended "the blues"? Stated differently, has the post-industrial, post-Civil Rights environment rendered blues sensibilities and motifs obsolete for the hip hop generation? If the blues as-such are still present in hip hop aesthetics, how are they represented in hip hop culture and discourse?

The blues was birthed in the pressurized, angst-filled, despair-laden landscape of America. It is unique to the American experience. Even within European-American, culture there is blues. Though the blues originated within African-American culture, there is white blues music (see folk, bluegrass, country, western, grunge alternative, etc). I

view hip-hop culture as a contemporary manifestation of post-modern, urban blues and offer comparative analysis of the convergence of the two idioms. Collective and individual struggle are major themes within both idioms.

The blues paradigm is a fundamental component of hip-hop aesthetics. For it is the unique and often maligned existence of African-Americans that has spawned blues culture in America. Conversely, hip hop reflects both the successes and failures of the blues era. I approach blues from a socio-musical perspective. I am concerned with the blues-as such, as well as the ways in which blues themes have changed**.** Stated differently, how can we account for the cultural, thematic, and sonic change in African-American music since the creation of the blues? Are the blues still a part of the African-American experience? Are the blues present in hip hop? I examine "the blues" as not so much a genre but as an African-American trope, an attitude, and an aesthetic quality.

Several hip hop scholars have referenced blues as an aesthetic foundation for hip hop, most notably Jelani Cobb. In *To the Break of Dawn,* Cobb (2007) includes a brief discussion of the trickster blues (20). He asserts that "hip hop is blues filtered through a century of experience and a thousand miles of asphalt" (26). However, Cobb's analysis of blues in hip hop does not offer enough nuance or detail to the discussion of blues as an aesthetic contributor of hip hop. Cobb over generalizes and creates a false blues/hip hop dialectic. Though many scholars, such as Cobb, cite blues as an aesthetic foundation of hip hop, blues' influence is often understated. Furthermore, much scholarship has failed to construct a detailed topography, which identifies blues characteristics in hip hop aesthetics. Cobb's comparative analysis is topical. He does not factor in the complexity of hip hop's post-modern, mass-mediation. Cobb makes several delineations between hip

hop aesthetics and blues aesthetics. Cobb asserts that hip hop discourse: a) lacks irony; b) lacks "standard" songs; c) is not collectively-authored; and d) denies pain. Unfortunately, as I illustrate in this chapter, Cobb does not sufficiently utilize actual hip hop narratives to support these claims. Cobb correctly identifies the use of alter-ego or dual identity in hip hop and links it to its blues origins. As discussed, the use of alter-ego in hip hop can be credited to blues aesthetics as well as superhero comic narratives:

> In both hip hop and blues we encounter the vocalist as the alter ego of the artists complete with the adoption of a *nom de mic*—the kind of artistic pseudonym that has its roots in the blues tradition. Nobody's mama named their boy Redman, Jay-Z, or Biggie, but neither did anyone come into this world with a tag like Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, or Leadbelly. (29)

But there is a distinction that must be made within Cobb's comparative analysis of alter-ego, "The two musics have different relationships to the characters they create; the blues musician can sing about evil, but is not necessarily expected to live that way"(29). Cobb's analysis is at times anachronistic. He fails to recognize the centrality of authenticity within African American musical production since the creation of work songs and spirituals. He also understates the similarities between hip op and blues narratives. Hip hop is post-modern in it construction, therefore the addition of alter-ego borrowed from 1950, 60s, and 70s superhero comic narratives adds an additional dimension to the blues alter ego persona Cobb describes

African-American shared experience is a fundamental component to understanding African-American cultural production. Attitude (and as a result authenticity) within blues and hip-hop culture, perhaps more so than any other American musical genres, is a

central component to its production. Noted music ethnomusicologist and poet Amiri

Baraka discusses the link between African-American musical production and experience.

Baraka explains:

> Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes,
>
> about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made.
>
> The blues and jazz aesthetic, to be fully understood, must be seen in as nearly its
>
> complete human context as possible. People made bebop. The question the critic
>
> must ask is: why? (183)

Baraka correctly links blues and jazz analysis to the peoples that created them. This

"human context", as Baraka explains, is central to any examination of African-American

musical aesthetics. I utilize Baraka's focus on African American attitudes as a rubric to

analyze hip hop aesthetics.

It has been inferred that African-American music has been anchored in political and

social commentary on the American experience. However, overt political themes were

not a major component of early African-American musical forms. As with hip-hop music,

aesthetic, tangential pleasure and appreciation are also closely linked to African-

American musical production and consumption. Albert Murray takes up the issue of

politics within blues music and supports Baraka's analysis in regard to African-American

music's grounding in the attitudes of African-Americans' attitudes:

> Not that blues music is without fundamental as well as immediate political
>
> significance and applicability. But the nature of its political dimension is not
>
> always as obvious as some promoters of folk-music-as-social commentary seem to
>
> believe. The political implication is inherent in the attitude toward experience that

generates the blues-music counterstatement in the first place."(68)

As both Murray and Baraka explain, in order to understand African-American music, one must understand the attitudes of African-Americans. So, the primary question for scholars examining African-American music is an existential one: what are the attitudes that created hip-hop music? Furthermore, have the blues as an expressive modality disappeared from African American musical aesthetics?

The blues man/woman was much more than a musician. Within the context of hip-hop music and culture, the emcee emerges as a similar entity in both form and function. One's ability to listen to, enjoy, as well as understand a particular music is based on experience. Amiri Baraka, in his seminal text *Blues People*, discusses the cultural link between music and lived experience. Baraka places Blues in the context of social phenomenon. I assert that hip-hop is contemporary urban Blues or postindustrial Blues. Hip-hop, like blues, provides social commentary across myriad themes. These themes are derived directly from African-American socio-cultural experiences. Baraka declares:

> Blues as verse form has as much social reference as any poetry,
>
> except for the strict lyric, and that also is found in blues. Love,
>
> sex, tragedy in interpersonal relationships, death, travel,
>
> loneliness, etc., are all social phenomena. And perhaps these are
>
> the things which actually create a poetry, as things, or ideas: there
>
> can be no such thing as poetry (or blues) exclusive of the matter
>
> it proposes to be about. (50)

Blues "matter" was derived from African American experiences in the rural south and northern migration. Hip hop also follows in the Blues tradition within a post-modern,

post-industrial context. Baker asserts, "It is rap and its creators, distributors, and individual geniuses who have continued the voluble beat of the inner-city blues from the 1960s" (103). Urban blues, 1960s rhythm and blues and soul segue wayed into hip hop. From this perspective, it is more plausible to see hip-hop culture along a continuum and not an abruption of the Black Aesthetic (i.e. African aesthetic).

The emcee within hip-hop culture has taken on mythological proportions, particularly when one considers the folkloric impact of emcees such as Tupac and Biggie Smalls. The role of the emcee is closely linked to prominent archetypes and iconography, one African in origin the other African-American. Both the African griot and the American bluesman/woman are archetypes that have been cited as influences on hip-hop culture. The former has been widely recognized as a forbearer to the hip-hop emcee. The latter has not been as widely recognized for its influence on hip-hop culture. Moreover, the centrality and importance of the emcee within hip-hop culture cannot be fully understood from a musicological perspective. Zora Neale Hurston's "culture hero" category from her work "Characteristics of Negro Expression" points to the significance of heroic public figures within African American culture. The emcee is an extension of the bluesman, a socio-cultural, heroic figure in African American culture.

The blues musician was an arbiter of African-American socio-cultural ideals. As cultural figures, bluesmen and women followed "existing conventions sometimes 'by extending that which they like or accept, and sometimes by counterstating what it rejects'"(Murray 126). The emcee serves a similar role in contemporary hip hop, rejecting and/or accepting prevailing African American myths, stereotypes, narratives and traditions. One could not merely play the blues; the blues man/woman had to embody

or live the blues. Again, the focus and appeal of the blues man/woman was not limited to technical musicianship. Similarly, the emcee does not merely rap. Rapping existed in the pre-hip hop era. The blues man/woman served myriad purposes within the African-American community, elevating the blues man/women to iconic status:

> A "technical" definition of the blues does not take into account the role of the bluesman in the lives of blacks living in segregated America. The black community asked the bluesman to compose, to improvise, to be a poet, to be a collector, to arrange traditional themes, to be a singer, to be an instrumental virtuoso, to entertain, to be a sociologist. Furthermore, the bluesman also had a therapeutic role for himself and his audience, for whom this music had a cathartic effect. (Herzhaft)

From this vantage point, it becomes more clear the importance of the bluesman/woman within the African-American community. The implications for such an analysis when examining the emcee within hip-hop culture are far-reaching. It is within the framework of blues culture that the template for the emcee was laid. Though the connections are not always exact, by examining the bluesman/woman, scholars are better able to understand the significance of the emcee, which has become the focal point of hip-hop culture. Furthermore, by examining the blues paradigm, one can observe how important archetypes and icons have been present in the development of not only African-American music culture, but also hip-hop and African-American culture at-large.

The Urban North

Hip hop emerged in the South Bronx, and then moved southward and westward. Blues originated in the rural south and moved north. African American migratory trends

have had a pronounced impact on African American musical aesthetics. Urbanization has altered African musical aesthetics throughout the diaspora as well on the continent of Africa. Whether Lagos, Paris, or the South Bronx, African peoples have faced myriad challenges in urban centers. This has undoubtedly affected African American musical aesthetics and creative content. Urban migration has left an indelible imprint on African American musical aesthetics. Northern metropolitan areas became meccas for Black cultural trends. Large African-American populations in New York, DC, Philadelphia, and Chicago helped to stimulate and maintain African American artistry at the turn of the twentieth century. These epicenters are representative of the impact of urbanity and modernity on the African-American psyche. The urban landscape transformed, or at the very least altered, not only the lifestyle of Africans in America, but also their aesthetic sensibilities (i.e. music, culture, etc.). Maultsby describes the effect the urban environment had on African American music:

> The segregated environment, the faster pace, the factory sounds, the street
>
> noises, and the technology of the metropolis gave a different type of luster,
>
> cadence, and sophistication to existing black musical forms. In response to new
>
> surroundings, the familiar sounds of the past soon were transformed into an
>
> urban black music tradition. (203)

Maultsby attributes the shift toward an urban black music aesthetic to the frenetic pace and technology of the metropolis**.** It is important to note the trajectory of blues from the South to the urban North. The form, style, and manner of production and consumption were altered in this process. Griffin discusses the transition of blues narratives and links them to African American northward migration. She explains, "the blues narrative

becomes less fragmented, more condensed and consumable…In a social situation that is itself fragmented, the blues begins to provide some narrative coherence and order (54).

The fragmentation Griffin chronicles is important to my analysis of hip hop aesthetics. Post-modern fragmentation is a feature of hip-hop aesthetics. I argue that hip hop, particularly by the mid-1980s, provided cohesion and community for working-class African Americans and Latinos in a post-industrial economy. Many sociopolitical factors were responsible for the fragmenting of African-American and Latino communities during the 1980s, some of which I discuss later in this dissertation. Blues, like hip hop, provided a semi-safe space within these communities:

> In the South, where a sense of community exists, the bluesman can serve as the wandering stranger, but in the North, where the context is itself is the "stranger," the bluesman convenes the community and sets the atmosphere to invoke tradition…[the blues performance] acted as a means of convening community, of invoking common experiences and values. Though not necessarily a resistant space, it was a space where migrants would let their hair down, be themselves and have a good time. As such, it was a healing space. (Griffin 55)

The blueswoman, like the emcee, was a carrier of tradition. In some cases, particularly during its folk phase, hip hop provided a safe space for its urban denizens. It is interesting to note the shifts within hip hop aesthetics as hip hop migrated to the south, Midwest, and West Coast. (See crunk, snap, etc.). Blues music, and later jazz, provided a musical backdrop that accompanied periods of African-American migration. In many cases, this migration coincided with African-Americans' struggle to obtain upward mobility. William Barlow explains, "many rural blues artists were in the forefront of the exodus

[north]; they were the oracles of their generation, contrasting the promise of freedom with the reality of their harsh living conditions" (117). Early hip hop discourse chronicled the effects of Black and White flight in a similar way.

Struggle is a predominant theme within hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop, like blues, reflects the inherent struggles of African American existence. Even artists that are labeled party emcees/rappers contain elements of individual and/or collective struggle. Struggle is in fact central to hip hop narratives. It is utilized as an aesthetic principle that links emcees to African American historical struggle. Murray contextualizes sadness as a prominent blues motif and it to African American struggle:

> A number of blues lyrics express an urgent and unmistakable concern with defeat, disappointment, betrayal, misfortune, not excluding death; but even the most exuberant stomp rendition is likely to contain some trace of sadness as a sobering reminder that life is at bottom, for all the very best of good times, a never-ending struggle. (17)

Murray highlights the centrality of struggle within blues narratives. Hip hop embraces African American struggle, yet hip hop attempts to transform struggle into valuable social and economic capital. Struggle is one of the most pervasive and consistent themes within hip hop discourse. Philadelphia emcee Beanie Sigel illustrates the importance of struggle within hip hop narratives. Often, struggle is a means of linking individuals to their community (i.e. one's hood). When asked how he keeps himself grounded in the music industry, Sigel alludes to collective struggle as a vital component to his moral grounding and creative approach, "I keep myself grounded and I stay connected to the streets. I'm connected to what's going on, the struggles and all that, I'm there. I let them

see me. I try not to above everyone else. That keeps me grounded" (Markman 67).
Struggle links hip hop to its blues roots. Struggle is also linked to the myriad ways in
which the hip hop performs and embraces authenticity.

Another characteristic of the blues tradition that is similar to hip hop is its non-
judgmental nature. Non-judgment in hip hop is accentuated by and coincides with an
increase in explicit content within American popular media. Much scholarship on hip hop
does not take hip hop's blues origin into account when critiquing profane content in hip
hop culture. Non-judgment is a primary characteristic of secular African American
music:

> The openness of the blues realm—its repudiation of taboos of all sorts—is rendered
> possible by virtue of the fact that blues always decline to pass judgment. Their non-
> judgmental character permits ideas that would be rejected by the larger society to
> enter into blues discourse. (Davis 135)

Non-judgment is an aesthetic carryover from blues to hip hop. Non-judgment does not
excuse homophobic, patriarchal narratives within hip-hop, but it does point to a certain
discursive freedom within hip-hop discourse. In many analyses of hip hop aesthetics,
non-judgment is seen as a post-modern characteristic. By linking non-judgment to blues
aesthetics, non-judgment can be viewed as a continuum of African American musical
aesthetics and not an abruption. Hip hop embraces and explores themes that are
considered taboo in popular African American discourse. Thematically, hip hop draws
from several blues tropes and motifs. For my purposes, I lump blues themes in hip hop
into four overarching categories: 1) pain; 2) joy; 3) loss; and 4) otherworldly (i.e.
extrasensory). It is the treatment of the aforementioned themes within a particular cultural

and historical setting that make blues unique. Socio-cultural context is inextricably linked to artistic production. It is the interpretation and negotiation of blues themes by the blues artist that makes blues themes unique. Hence, as with hip hop, blues themes are filtered through the blues artist's aesthetic-approach to his or her subject matter, as well as his or her experiences.

Realism is another similarity between the hip- hop and blues idioms. In blues lyrics, realism is often represented in sexual relationships. Davis states: "Fearless, unadorned realism is a distinctive feature of the blues. Their representations of sexual relationships are not constructed in accordance with the sentimentality of the American popular song tradition. Romantic love is seldom romanticized in the blues" (Davis 23). Many critics point to more recent influences as contributors to the gritty realism of hip hop aesthetics. An examination of the blues tradition connects realism in hip-hop to older African American narratives—in this case blues narratives. Though often embellished, the blueswoman drew from the realities of African American life (e.g. love, loss, poverty). Authenticity, therefore, was vital to the blues performance. It was imperative the audience identified with the blues performer. The cultural familiarity that existed between blues performer and audience linked performance to aesthetic experience. Stated differently, African-American experience (i.e. attitudes, habits, etc) was central to the blues experience. This is not to say that there were not universal themes within blues that transcended race, as is the case with great art in any genre. However, it does point to the fact that blues aesthetics and African American experience were intrinsically linked. The bluesman was always *performing* his blues. Tragic realism is also prominent within hip hop aesthetics

Pain and (perceived) hardship, like tragic realism, are predominant themes in blues that are also present in hip hop. Yet the blues simultaneously transcends and transforms pain. To the casual observer, the redemptive, cathartic qualities of the blues are not always perceptible. Cobb incorrectly explains "if the blues exist for the express purpose of alchemizing beauty from pain, hip hop is more often about swaggering in the face of it" (Cobb, 23) Pain is a prominent theme in hip hop discourse. However, the way it is articulated in hip hop—though still palpable—differs from blues. Whether expressed explicitly or subtlety, the emcee seeks to document, articulate, and transform pain for his/her audience. When examining pain as a trope in hip hop, one must take into account the changes is popular culture since the blues. Post-Industrial survival is the impetus for much of the pain that is articulated in contemporary hip hop narratives. Beanie Sigel and Styles P explore pain in their collaboration "All I Know is Pain" (2007):

> All I know is pain, all I seen is death
>
> Couple homies and brother gone, when I'm gon' step
>
> I ain't suicidal, damn my brain need rest
>
> Think about my childhood, pain in my chest
>
> Past is the past, future ain't great
>
> All right in the hood when any day could be my last

Pain is the focal point to the above narrative. Styles P and Beanie Sigel are firmly rooted in gangsta aesthetics, yet "All I Know is Pain" illustrates: 1) the prominence and recognition of pain—past and present—as a viable theme in hip hop aesthetics; 2)the redemptive qualities of hip hop narratives ("All right in the hood"); and 3) the bleak outlook of hip hop generationers. Pain is a trope that appears in many hip hop narratives.

Mos Def's ode to his mother, "Umi Says", is grounded within the blues aesthetic. It is an example of the redemptive qualities, which originates with the blues and spirituals. "Umi Says", though sad in tone, approaches sorrow with optimism, aligning pain with earlier blues narrative. Mos resolves the axiological tension between pain and sorrow, leaving his audience hopeful:

Sometimes I feel like crying

Sometimes my heart gets heavy

Sometimes I just want to leave and fly away [fly fly fly, like a dove]

Sometimes I don't know what to do with myself [ow!]

Passion takes over me

Mos's sorrow is not a permanent state. He resolves his sorrow with love and passion. Mos Def utilizes blues sensibilities within a hip hop context to express his pain. Mos Def and Beanie Sigel are two examples of how pain is indeed articulated in hip hop narratives.

Southern hip hop narratives are often more closely linked to blues narratives. African American spirituals inform hip hop aesthetics, particularly southern hip hop narratives. This is due to the strong influence of Christianity on southern culture in general. Goodie Mob and the Dungeon Family represent the converging of southern blues, spirituals, and hip hop aesthetics. Nonetheless, the Dungeon Family, which includes Grammy-Award winning hip hop group Outkast, is firmly entrenched in hip hop aesthetics. On their debut album, *Soul Food,* Goodie Mob situates their narrative within the spiritual/blues tradition. The first track on the album, "Free", which is a spiritual-inspired ode by group member Cee-Lo Green, sets the blues-tone of the album. An extension of Donnie Hathaway's

"Someday We'll All Be Free" (1978), Goodie Mob's "Free" links the group's narrative to the African American sermonic tradition:

> Lord it's so hard, living this life
>
> A constant struggle each and every day
>
> Some wonder why I'd rather die
>
> Than to continue living this way
>
> Many are blind and cannot find
>
> The truth cause no one seems to really know
>
> But I won't accept that this is how it's gon' be
>
> Devil you gotta let me and my people go

Cee-Lo taps into traditional African American religious discourse, calling on the Lord for assistance. He names the Devil explicitly. These tropes link Goodie Mob, aesthetically, to (overcoming) struggle, which is a recurring theme throughout the album. However, Goodie Mob's narratives fall just short of being fatalistic. Their narratives reflect a transcendent optimism. All these aspects link Goodie Mob to blues traditions and narratives.

Hip hop aesthetics draw heavily from blues aesthetics. Based on comparative analysis, which focuses on blues themes and hip hop narratives, many parallels can be made between the two. Although the aesthetic connections are not always exact, much is revealed about the origin, trajectory, and rationale of hip hop when it is linked to blues. Hip hop documents African American life in a post-industrial, post-modern, post-civil Rights environment. Hip hop's reconfiguration of blues sensibilities—via the emcee as contemporary bluesman, for example—is mass-mediated. Mass mediation of blues tropes

within hip hop aesthetics alters the discursive, racial, and gender dynamics of hip hop as urban blues. Hip hop aesthetics revise blues tropes and situate them with in contemporary context. Blues themes such as pain, loss, and love, are prominent and pervasive tropes within hip hop discourses. These blues themes are even more prominent within call-and-response modalities between men's hip hop music texts that are mediated by women, neo-soul artists. Post-modern, mass-media has altered the scope, context and rationale of blues themes within hip hop. Nonetheless, hip hop's reappropriation of blues tropes provides a linkage between hip hop aesthetics and African American aesthetics and cultural practices. Even twenty-first century hip hop narratives illustrate the functionality and saliency of the blues within African American culture.

Table 3.1 Blues/Hip Hop Comparative Rubric

Blues	**Hip-Hop**
Emerges in the late 1800s	Emerges in 1970s
(1912) "Memphis Blues" W.C. Handy "blues could no longer be restricted to the category of folk expression"	1979) "Rapper's Delight "Sugar Hill Gang

Rural origins	South Bronx
The Black Church	Rastafarianism, The five Percent Nation, Judeo-Christian ideology
Disseminated by railroad, by foot, live performance, phonograph	Disseminated through radio, cassette tapes, record, live "performance"
Features a "break" between each vocal line	Based on "break" beat
Natural disaster and love loss	Good times; directly drawn from one's environment and/or experiences
Initially considered low culture	Initially considered low culture
Early blueswomen known	Early rappers known
Cathartic	Cathartic
Often reflects the personal response of its inventor to a specific occurrence or situation	Often reflects the personal response of its inventor to a specific occurrence or situation
Guitar-accompaniment	DJ accompaniment
Pre-industrial; Industrial	Post-industrial
Ironic-humorous	Ironic-humorous, hyperbolic
Spawned partially by state-sanctioned violence/Control of public space Focus on expression and technical skill	Spawned partially by state-sanctioned violence/Control of public space Focus on expression and technical skill
Attraction to the blues is based on Sound not word	Attraction to hip-hop is based on both sound and the word
Survival mode; implicit upward mobility	Explicit upward mobility
Attitude and style essential to the bluesman	Attitude and style essential to the emcee
Makes listener feel good	Evokes myriad emotions, including happiness
Blues as sport	Emceeing as sport
Call-and-response	Call-and-response

Highly-competitive	Highly-competitive

Let's Talk About Sex: an Analysis of Gendered Discourse in Hip-Hop and Neo-Soul Call and Response

It has been purported that because hip hop is male-dominated, women's voices have been muffled and/or muted. Misogyny and the objectification of women are often the foci of much of the research investigating gender dynamics in hip hop. Such interpretations miss out on the invaluable cross-genre discursive space between female neo-soul and R&B artists and male emcees. Such narrow analyses do not take into account the full scope of gender dynamics in hip hop, and they often understate and/or overlook the *positive* interactions between men and women in hip hop narratives. In other words, a more inclusive rubric must be utilized to gain a nuanced interpretation of gender dynamics in hip hop. To gain an accurate perspective of gender dynamics, I pay close attention to cross-genre discourse in my analysis of gender within hip-hop. I argue that there is an inter-gender discourse embedded within the hip-hop idiom. Hip hop music becomes the discursive space within which call-and-response modalities are performed. This call and response often occurs across and outside musical genres, eras, individual songs, artists, etc. When examining gendered discourse within hip-hop music, I extend my analysis to contemporary rhythm and blues and neo-soul. Both provide conceptual space within which sex and sexuality are negotiated and renegotiated.

Within the discursive space between hip-hop and neo-soul, African-American female neo-soul artists engage black male misogyny, patriarchal notions, and sexual politics. This discursive space illuminates African-American female agency and call-and-response. Hip hop culture is not binary in nature, nor is it culturally or orally restrictive. It defies and transcends structuralist boundaries. Hip hop is post-structuralist in nature. I

create a wholistic framework to examine gender dynamics within hip hop, which will allow for more nuanced and informed analyses of hip hop aesthetics.

Gendered call-and-response is a major feature of hip-hop aesthetics I extend my discussion of hip hop aesthetics to include neo-soul, post soul, and soul movements. Invaluable critiques of Black male patriarchy, violence, and misogyny are present within these music discourses. This is not to suggest that we should ignore available female narratives constructed by female emcees. I am suggesting that in order to gain a more thorough understanding of gendered discourse within hip-hop culture, I extend my investigation to include female narratives within the neo-soul and R&B movements.

Some hip hop scholars have interpreted hip hop with a broad brush, highlighting hip hop's misogynistic and patriarchal tendencies. Not that these critiques of misogyny are overstated, but their methodological and theoretical frameworks, often grounded in Eurocentric approaches to African American phenomena, can be problematic. Bakari Kitwana's *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and Crisis in African America Culture* illuminates this point. In chapter 4 "Where Did Our Love Go? The New War of the Sexes," Kitwana's use of a Eurocentric framework and nomenclature, in this case, his use of the term "war" to describe gender dynamics is problematic. Moreover, Kitwana begins chapter 4 with a quote from Jay-Z' s hit single "Big Pimpin". Not only are Jay-Z's lyrics taken out of context, Kitwana does not sufficiently utilize actual hip hop discourse (i.e. lyrics) to support his claims. Such oversight often leads to faulty analysis when examining hip hop aesthetics. Stated differently, Kitwana's analysis of gender dynamics projects public sentiment and opinion onto hip hop narratives as opposed to utilizing actual hip hop narratives to support his claims. In regard to gendered discourse

in hip hop, Kitwana's limited use of hip hop lyrics, for example, does not take into account Jay-Z's maturation as an artist, the impact of market demands on Jay-Z's narratives, nor does it include inter-genre and inter-gender discourse between Jay-Z and Beyonce, which is more prominent in his later work.

My intention here is to avoid a drawn out debate on the categorization of western music production (i.e. genre). I utilize the term "neo-soul" simply to demarcate a post soul aesthetic circa 1995-present. Though Neo soul began to take shape in 1988 with the release of Tony! Toni! Tone's *Who?* and the subsequent release of Mint Condition's *Meant to be Mint* in 1991, D'Angelo's *Brown Sugar* (1995) marks the emergence of a clearly defined, new soul aesthetic. I utilize Mark Anthony Neal's construct of post soul and expand upon it. I am not inferring that Neo soul and R&B are identical to hip hop in form or content. However, I am proposing that neo soul and contemporary R&B are firmly rooted in hip hop aesthetics. Neo-soul and hip hop both draw from blues aesthetics. For neo soul and contemporary R&B artists, hip hop aesthetics inform their creative process, both rhetorically and thematically. As an aesthetic foundation, hip hop serves as a socio-cultural bridge linking African American male and female narratives. Call-and-response, which plays out on a number of levels, is the primary mode utilized to facilitate the interaction between female neo-soul and male hip hop artists. Though this is not necessarily a feminist critique of gendered discourse in hip hop, I attempt to debunk the myth that women's voices are absent—though often male-mediated—from hip hop discourse.

I articulate neo soul as a movement as opposed to a distinct music genre. There is much pressure within western scholarship on music to categorize music into genres.

Categorizing African American music obscures its essence and presents a methodological quandary. Hip Hop band The Roots sheds light on the concept of approaching neo soul as a movement instead of an organized, coherent genre. The Roots represent the aesthetic interface between hip hop and neo soul. The group has collaborated with neo soul artists such as Erykah Badu and Jill Scott and has benefited from a symbiotic creative relationship with neo soul artists. When asked about his experience releasing their classic *Illadelph Halflife,* the band's lead emcee Black Thought speaks to the notion of approaching neo soul as an aesthetic movement, though he falls just short of naming neo soul explicitly:

> I felt like there was a movement of something, with Common and Black Star and Erykah Badu. Something in its formative stages that became the new standard, part of some movement that was going to come and change the game…What the Roots and Common and Black Star sort of perpetuated has given way to Talib Kweli and Lupe Fiasco and J-Electronica…We wanted to rep three generations of conscious, avant-garde hip hop, for lack of a better word. (Tayib13)

The neo soul movement created a new creative and thematic standard in African American music. The neo soul movement represented the zenith of gendered call-and-response in hip hop aesthetics. The neo soul movement was firmly *rooted* in hip hop aesthetics. The neo soul movement was instrumental in altering the sound of hip hop music.

3.1 Neo Soul Movement

Gendered call-and-response in hip hop begins with the emergence of The Real Roxanne in 1985 with the release of UTFO's "The Real Roxanne". The Real Roxanne is significant to my investigation into gendered discourse for several reasons. A textual analysis of the Real Roxanne's style and lyrics highlight the constraints and parameters of female discourse in hip hop. The fact that she was introduced to the hip hop audience through an established male hip hop group, UTFO, is noteworthy. UTFO's "introduction" of the Real Roxanne laid a template for future female emcees. The vast majority of female emcees have been introduced to their audience by male-centric crews. Hence, a pattern emerged in which African-American women's voices were mediated by African American men in hip hop. This undoubtedly had an impact on the theme, scope, and content of African American women's discourse in hip hop. The Real Roxanne was clearly objictified in her role in UTFO. An average emcee at best, she towed the line between skilled artist and sex symbol. The Real Roxanne paved the way for sexually-charged female emcees such as Foxy Brown and Lil Kim.

(Illustration 3.2) The Real Roxanne

I mention The Real Roxanne to demarcate gendered discourse in hip hop, but also to make a larger point about the male-mediation of female voices in hip hop discourse. What are the aesthetic implications of African American and Latina women creating art in hip hop's malecentric discursive space? What modes, genres, and approaches do African American and Latina women employ—musically—to engage male hip hop narratives? Misogyny and sexism are rampant in hip hop discourse, but do these "gendered cues" mean what scholars say they mean? In other words, critiques of misogyny, sexism, and exploitation rarely go beyond identifying these surface attributes of male-dominated hip hop spaces. Such critiques miss out on the opportunity to examine African American female discursive space that does exist within hip hop narratives, as well the source of misogynistic sentiment in hip hop discourse:

> Rap music and Hip-Hop culture can be used as a springboard for various kinds of conversations and actions. Feminism needs to change its focus in order to take full

advantage of the possibilities in rap music. Instead of admonishing rappers, it is

time to do something that will evoke change. I probe the public dialogue about

love in raps songs; furthermore, I challenge Black feminism to interrogate rap as a

site for political change. (Pough 24)

Contemporary female neo-soul and rhythm and blues artists engage male hip-hop artists

and their sensibilities directly and indirectly in their music. Because of hip-hop's male-

dominated nature, neo-soul in particular has offered a safe space for African-American

women to engage hip-hop artists. Aesthetically, neo-soul is greatly influenced by hip-hop

aesthetics. Artists such as Mary J. Blige, Meshell Ndegeochello, Jil-Scott, Erykah Badu,

and Lauryn Hill, who each unabashedly declare their appreciation of hip-hop music,

engage hip-hop directly and indirectly through both their lyrics and their creative

collaborations with hip-hop artists. This is not to negate the presence or impact of female

emcees, but since 1997—with the release of Erykah Badu's *Baduizm*—neo-soul and R&B

have been far better indicators of hip-hop's feminine sensibilities. As with the blues

idiom, gendered discourse, though it did not shield African-American women from

racism, sexism, and classism, offers a similar discursive space between female neo-soul

artists and male hip-hop artists.

Inter-gender and inter-genre discourse between male hip-hop artists and female neo-

soul and R&B artists can be traced to a similar legacy within blues. Angela Davis

describes this blues phenomenon as "signifying blues" (22). Davis links the signifying

blues to the call-and-response tradition:

In the call-and-response tradition, many of [the blueswoman's] love-and-sex-

oriented songs mirror or furnish responses to songs associated with the male

country blues tradition. Male blues deal with a wider range of experiences, many

accumulated on the job or on the road. But those that revolve around sexuality or

include observations on love are not radically different from their female

counterparts in their behavior they describe and the images they evoke. (20)

This is not say that the male and female narratives were identical. The idea of two similar

but distinct gender-based perspectives is not new to African American artistic production.

These distinct perspectives were parsed out within the parameters of blues aesthetics.

Griffin takes up this point in her discussion of Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real

Cool":

For the most part, female protagonists attempt to create 'home" in hope of

providing a space where dreams are possible. It seems that male protagonists give

up any hope of dreaming and seek instead to carve out some degree of manhood in

a male-oriented street culture and its accompanying spaces. Men and women

respond to each other's spaces in opposing ways: Male threatening. (110)

The urban, street spaces Griffin mentions and the ways in which male and female

characters responded to them is a central component of hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop has

provided a safe space for African-American and Latino men to play out their voyeuristic

fantasies in a male-dominated capitalistic society. As with blues, this discursive space is

resistant to traditional familial norms. Conversely, neo-soul and R&B offer African

characters find a domestic space stifling; female characters find street space American

women a means to engage male hip hop artists and in turn create their own vision of

family life and home.

It is important to note that the majority of neo soul and R&B artists' work is semi-autobiographical. Neo soul has been more attractive to African American women artists because its: 1) experimental, open-minded, eclectic structure; 2) inferred awareness of social consciousness/issues; 3) grounding in African American musical traditions (i.e. blues, soul, jazz, R&B and hip ho) and 4) receptiveness to African American women's narratives.

Soul artists built upon blues aesthetics, yet an additional political emphasis was placed upon the soul artist. Because of 1960s Black Power rhetoric, the soul artists of the late 1960s and 1970s—as with blues artists before them—reclaimed their position as cultural leaders and political arbiters, "Soul musicians came to be seen not merely as entertainers but as essential contributors to—and articulators of—African American life and experience, and this was the view not only of the black community but also of the national political leadership" (Starr 272). The elevation of the soul musician to a position of "national political leadership" within the African American community during the 1960s and 1970s laid the framework for neo-soul artists and emcees. Similar to soul musicians, neo-soul artists and emcees serve as "articulators of African American life" in post-industrial, post modern America.

Sista Souljah, activist, emcee, and author, is a hip hop icon and archetype. The publication of *No Disrespect* in 1995 marked a shift in women's narratives in hip hop discourse. Hip hop's everywoman, Sistah Souljah was firmly rooted in hip hop and African American aesthetics. Black Nationalist rhetoric undoubtedly influenced Souljah's discourse. Souljah's grounding in hip hop aesthetics, however, offered a fresh, slightly feminist perspective on hip hop aesthetics. She built upon a foundation laid by early

women hip hop artists such as Roxanne Shante, Queen Latifah, and Monie Love. *The Coldest Winter Ever,* as a post-modern, feminist hip-hop text, is also an important cultural marker in terms of African-American women's engagement of hip-hop culture. Her realist portrayal of Winter— written in the Wrightian, realist tradition— provided a female voice within 1990s male-dominated hip-hop discourse. Souljah utilizes call-and-response modalities to engage African American men. Her protagonist, Winter, struggles to navigate through the post modern, post industrial urban landscape. Souljah addresses African American relationships and sexuality, as well as misogyny in hip hop culture and the postindustrial crack economy.

There are many examples of the blues tradition of call-and-response, across genders (and genres), within the hip-hop idiom. The female emcee and neo-soul artist function as contemporary blues women. Though James Brown is often cited as an early influence on hip-hop aesthetic, female rhythm and blues and soul artists of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s such as Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, and Patti Labelle are foundational and iconic within hip-hop culture. Their influence is musical, but also overtly political and aesthetic. These female artists provided a progressive, empowered voice for African-American women, as well as creative space for future African-American female artists. Aretha Franklin is a pre-hip hop icon and neo-soul archetype. Franklin's work was revisionist:

> What is important about Aretha Franklin is the overwhelming power and intensity of her vocal delivery. Into a pop culture that had almost totally identified female singers with gentility, docility, and sentimentality, her voice blew huge gusts of revisionist fresh air…the strength of her interpretations arguably moved her songs beyond the traditional realm of personal intimate relationships and into the larger

political and social spheres. Especially in the context of the late 1960s, with the civil rights and black power movements at their heights, and the movement for women's empowerment undergoing its initial stirrings, it was difficult *not* to hear large-scale ramifications in the records of this extraordinary African American woman. Although Aretha Franklin did not become an overtly political figure in the way that James Brown did, it may be claimed that she nevertheless mad strong political statements just through the very character of her performances.

(Starr 274)

Zora Neale Hurston's "Absence of Privacy" category sheds additional light on cross gender call-and-response in hip hop narratives. Public discourse is a fundamental component of hip hop aesthetics. Within the hip hop aesthetics, grievances are aired publicly, often in song. Hip hop discourse is semi-autobiographical, which is partially linked to its preoccupation with authenticity. Private squabbles are sometimes resolved in the public sphere. According to Hurston, the lack of privacy Black culture goes back to Africa. Communality is part of the oral tradition. In hip-hop culture, the battle over public space coupled with exclusion within the mainstream has made communal aspects more pronounced. Hurston rightfully makes the connection between the Black aesthetic and its African roots. African- Americans keep:

> nothing secret, that they have no reserve. This ought not to seem
>
> strange when one considers that we are an outdoor people
>
> accustomed to communal …There is no privacy in the African
>
> village…An audience is a necessary part of any drama. We
>
> merely go with nature rather than against it. (39)

Hurston extends this "public" quality to every aspect of the "Negroes'" existence. Although it is reductionist, it does explain the lack of shame concerning public displays of disapproval in the African-American community:

> Hence the holding of all quarrels and fights in the open. One relieves one's pent-up anger and at the same time earns laurels in intimidation. Besides, one does the community a service. There is nothing so exhilarating as watching well-matched opponents go into action. The entire world likes action, for that matter. Hence prizefighters become millionaires…Lovemaking and fighting in all their branches are high arts. Other things are arts among other groups where they brag about their proficiency just as brazenly as we do about these things that others consider matters of conversation behind closed doors. (39)

The irony of Hurston's cynical description deserves further mention, particularly, in post-industrial America. Hurston's absence of privacy is linked to blues aesthetics. Non-judgment is a major feature of the blues aesthetic. In America's urban areas, violence is often seen as the only viable option to resolve disputes. According to Hurston, intimidation and public quarreling are integral parts of the "Negro" aesthetic. From this perspective, in light of the combative origins of hip-hop culture, a broader, more complex question emerges: What are the implications of such activities in a media-driven, gun-toting society?

I view the interaction between male hip-hop artists and female neo-soul and R&B artists as a social and aesthetic exchange, a symbiotic relationship that is transmitted musically, offsetting the predatory tone of hip hop discourse. Many of these female artists are grounded in the blues, rhythm and blues, and soul traditions. I focus on six female

neo soul artists and examine their engagement, collaboration and critique of male hip hop artists. Mary J. Blige, perhaps more than any other female artist I explore, engages male hip hop artists in her work. Considered the Queen of Hip Hop Soul, Blige has a storied history of collaborating with male hip hop artists:

> The Hip-Hop soul diva is helping rap evolve to yet another level of crossover appeal…Hip hop soul has opened the largely masculine discursive space of Hip Hop culture to include more women. In fact, there are now more re recorded hip Hop soul artists that there are recorded woman rap artists. It has always been a struggle for women to disrupt the masculine space of Hip-Hop, but the success of Hip-Hop soul offers more possibilities for women's voices and issues to be heard. (Pough 30)

Blige began her professional singing career in 1990 with an appearance on "I'll Do 4 U" with emcee Father MC. Blige's collaboration with Father MC marked the beginning of a

(Illustration 3.3) Mary J. Blige

longstanding creative relationship with male emcees. On her debut album *What's the 411* (1992), hip hop artists Busta Rhymes and Grand Puba appear. The title, presented as a rhetorical question, taps into the African American call-and-response tradition. More importantly, the call-and-response on *What's the 411?* often occurs across gender and genre boundaries. The title track "What's the 411?" features Grand Puba, who is a member of 5% hip hop group Brand Nubian. Blige's work is important to my discussion of gendered hip hop discourse, because it served as a prototype for future collaborations with hip hop artists. *What's the 411?* also set the tone (and foundation), musically and thematically, for the neo-soul movement.

> You try to play like Mr. All-of-that
>
> But now you wanna come to me with some chit-chat
>
> I don't have no time for no wham-bam thank you, ma'am
>
> Gas me up, get me drunk and hit the skinz and scram
>
> The same ol' shit you pulled last week on Pam
>
> I'm not havin that, No I'm not havin that
>
> You gotta do alot more and that's just how it be
>
> I'm Mary Blige and you just aint runnin up in me
>
> I need a man who's lookin out with some security
>
> So come correct with some respect and then we will see

Blige articulates her vigilance and strength in regards to intimacy and relationships.

On *Share My World* (1997), Blige continued to collaborate with male emcees. She worked with Nas on "Love is All We Need". On *Mary* (1999), she collaborated with DMX on "Sincerity" and Funkmaste Flex and Big Kap on "Confrontation". On *No More Drama* (2001), Blige did not include as many collaborations with hip hop artists as she had on previous projects. Nonetheless, she maintains aesthetic continuity within hip hop with the release of her first single "Family Affair", which was produced by legendary West coast producer Dr. Dre. She also worked with Ja Rule on "Rainy Dayz". In 2008, Mary J. Blige kicked off "The Heart of the City" Tour with rap icon Jay-Z. Though market forces may be partially responsible for Blige's frequent collaboration with male emcees, the frequency of such collaborations speaks to a deeper, artistic link to hip hop aesthetics. In short, Blige set the tone for collaborations between hip hop artists and R&B artists. She also influenced neo soul musical aesthetics and parameters. Mary J. Blige's music narratives are firmly rooted in soul and blues aesthetics, yet it is Blige's more contemporary, hip hop influence that makes her blues unique:

> Blige offers a different kind of blues that caters to a Hip-Hop generation devastated by crack, AIDS, and Black-on-Black violence. Her voice offers the reality of a ghetto that is simultaneously beautiful and ugly…Mary J. Blige's music becomes an outlet of expression for many of the wants and needs of young Black women. (Pough 32)

Mary J. Blige not only forged new discursive space within hip hop narratives, she also created a discursive and aesthetic precedent within R &B. Her influence served as precursor to the neo-soul movement.

Erykah Badu, a neo-soul icon and originator, is an example of this type of interaction. Badu utilizes many genres in her music including rock and soul, but most noticeably jazz, blues, and hip-hop. Her 1997 release *Baduizm* embodied characteristics of post-Afrocentric discourse. Though she wore Afrocentric garb and her name, Badu, is a reference to West African culture, she dealt with myriad themes such as love loss, spirituality, womanhood, 5%ideology, and relationships. On one interlude, she performs a blues-tinged, satirical ode to an unnamed love interest. She croons, "You said you was goin to take me to see Wu-Tang baby/so I braided my hair". She explicitly name drops Wu-Tang—a crossover underground group firmly established within hip-hop aesthetics—and expresses her disappointment that she is being stood up and will miss the concert. Badu's interlude links her to hip-hop aesthetics. This type of signification—an ode to an unnamed lover—was common in many blues forms. "What Ya Gonna Do" captures the precarious economic situation many African American men find themselves enmeshed in a post-industrial economy. The song chronicles her romantic relationship with a drug dealer, and more importantly, her understanding of his "trade": "What ya gonna do when they come for you/work ain't honest but it pays the bills: "What ya Gonna Do" is a rhetorical question directed at African American male hustlers. The track activates call-and-response modalities and creates a discourse with and critique of African American men.

Badu's creative process on her most recent album *New Amerykah,* more than previous albums, reflects Badu's grounding in hip hop aesthetics. Not only does Badu work with hip hop mixer/producer Mike "Chav" Chavarria, she also maximizes hip hop's aesthetic approach to post-modern, sonic pastiche. She explains her use of pastiche within

the context of sampling: "I work in layer. The first layer is the track. The second layer is the songs. The third would be the musicians who add a certain nuance. And when they play, they play like they are a sample. Or we take a piece of what played, and we sample and loop it" (Micallef 34).

Jill Scott, another Neo-Soul artist, engages hip-hop on various levels. Not only does she collaborate with male hip hop artists such as Fredro Starr, Common, and the Roots, she names hip hop explicitly as an influence. On "Jilltro", the interlude that introduces Jil-Scott as Neo-Soul artist, she reveals over a sampled sound bed:

Basically, what I live for is um…?

Love, love…Inspiration…Comes from…listening to hip-hop

Inspiration comes from R &B…

Inspiration listening to Jazz…

On the Roots (Interlude), which is also from the *Who is Jill Scott?* album, Scott executes a masterful call-and-response improvisation with Roots emcee Black Thought. He essentially introduces or invites Jil-Scott to respond in musical form. Thought asks, "What's your name?" Scott responds with an alphabetical spelling her name, Jil-Scott, in a melodic, operatic tone, accenting various letters as she sings. Faith Evans is another example of how contemporary neo-soul female artists utilize call and response modalities in their discourse. Besides her collaborations with hip hop artists such as Jay-Z, Missy Elliot, DMX, Tupac, and Nas, Evans is significant to my discussion of hip hop aesthetics because of her relationship with hip hop icon and culture hero The Notorious B.I.G. An analysis of B.I.G's work is incomplete without taking into account his collaboration with African American neo soul and R&B female artists such as Evans. Her 1994 hit, "One

More Chance" with Notorious B.I.G is significant to gendered hip hop discourse for several reasons. One, it illustrates the intimate link between male hip hop artists and female R&B artists. Two, "One More Chance" was instrumental in ushering hip hop music into the mainstream, opting for a less-aggressive, more melodic (i.e. R&B) approach. And three, it illustrates call and response within hip hop discourse across gender and genre boundaries.

Foreign Exchange's release of *Connected* in 2004 marks a solidification of cross-genre, inter-genre call-and-response within hip hop discourse. "Sincere" which features North Carolina neo-soul artist, Yahzarah, embodies the synergy created by this cultural milieu. On the hook, Yahzarah illustrates this unique bond, which is often overlooked within hip hop studies, "I would never ever hurt you/ Can't you see my love is sincere/I just want to be the one you call/when you need someone near/In a hurrrrry." Erykah Badu's *New Amerykah* (2008) reveals the intimate and symbiotic relationship between neo-soul and hip hop aesthetics. Badu illustrates the centrality of hip hop aesthetics within neo-soul music on "The Healer/Hip Hop" and "Bigger than Religion," which reify hip hop iconography (e.g. J.Dilla), epistemology and culture.

Hip Hop Soul, neo-soul and R&B have provided alternative spaces for African American women within hip hop music narratives. African American women neo soul and R&B artists engage, critique, and discard male-centric hip hop narratives through their work. Although this does not negate misogyny, sexism, homophobia and patriarchy in hip hop music narratives, inter-genre gendered discourse does provide a more wholistic and accurate perspective of gender dynamics in hip hop.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The blues has informed hip hop aesthetics. As a foundation to hip hop aesthetics, blues themes, attitudes, and modalities have been absorbed into hip hop aesthetics. This is not to suggest that blues aesthetics are identical to hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop as embraced the most radical and non-traditional components of blues aesthetics such as non-judgment, inter-gender call-and-response, and the use of tragic realism. Hip hop has also extended many blues themes including pain, loss, love, and struggle. As post-modern, urban blues, hip hop filters blues themes through a post industrial, post-Civil Rights, and technologically-advanced aesthetic lense. Hip hop aesthetics have embraced the most philosophically radical, culturally-functional and aesthetically-pleasing components of the blues tradition. These blues components served as the aesthetic foundation for hip hop culture.

(Illustration 3.5) Jill Scott

(Illustration 3.4) Erykah Badu
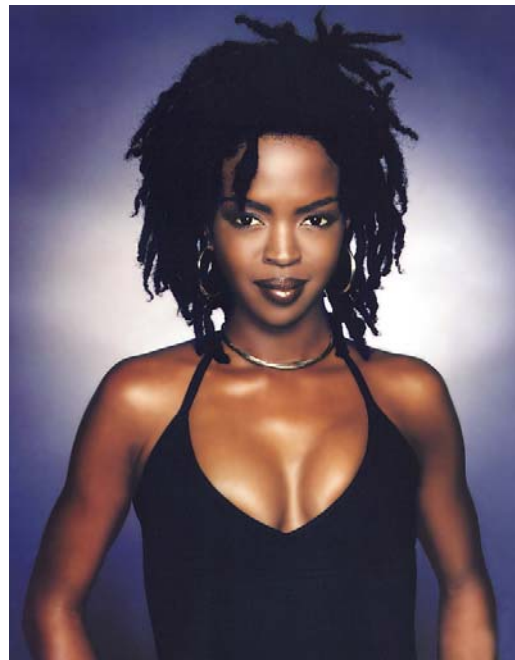
(Illustration 3.6) Laurvn Hill

(Illustration 3.7) Meshell Ngeochello

(Illustration 3.8) Erykah Badu and Q-Tip

CHAPTER 4
HIP-HOP AESTHETICS

Livin' life without fear
Puttin' 5 karats in my baby girl's ears
Lunches, brunches, interviews by the pool
Considered a fool 'cause I dropped out of high school
Stereotypes of a black male misunderstood
And it's still all good
The Notorious B.I.G, "Juicy", *Ready to Die*

This chapter traces the development of hip-hop aesthetics, drawing on American and African-American cultural practices and aesthetics to analyze the development and trajectory of hip hop aesthetics. I am concerned with early characteristics of hip-hop cultural expression, which were derived partially from African-American aesthetics (e.g. blues and jazz aesthetics) and are fundamental (or foundational) in regard to hip-hop aesthetics, and its development within the context of American popular media. Hip-hop aesthetics are an amalgamation of post modern, post-industrial, urban sensibilities filtered through African and African-American musical traditions. Just as there is such a thing as "real jazz", there is some credence to the notion of "real hip-hop," or hip-hop that builds upon or is linked to hip-hop's aesthetic foundation. I identify hip hop's foundational "characteristics" and flesh out the essential elements of hip-hop aesthetics. Though I approach hip hop from a cultural-linguistic and textual perspective, hip hop's outgrowth emerges within a specific socio-historical milieu.

A society's aesthetic is defined by and inextricably linked to that society's dominant culture. This is true whether that culture is an organic extension of shared human progress and cultural exchange or the result of racist hegemonic ethnocentricity and economic monopolies, as was the case with all African American music production. In the case of American aesthetics, American art—particularly music— has been greatly influenced by African culture. I refer to this phenomenon as the Africanization of American art. This is not to imply that the cultural cross-pollination of America's aesthetic was/is a one-way street. All cultures, to some extent, borrow. As discussed in chapter three, blues sensibilities and approaches to music production, along with hip hop's engagement and appropriation of icons and aesthetics, are instrumental in hip hop's

post-modern pastiche. Just as the blues chronicled northern migration and the challenges of the urban north, hip hop aesthetics have expressed the fears, desires, phobias and expectations of working-class, African-American in the post-Civil Rights, post Industrial era.

Alaine Locke deemed African American music "the most basic American prototype" (1). African American music is essential to African American identity and culture. Music has also reflected African American values and attitudes. Hip hop emerged along the trajectory of African-American music traditions such as blues, jazz, soul and funk. Call-and-response is a crucial component to African and African-American artistic production. Within the realm of African-American oral culture, for example jazz, sermonic and comedic performance, an audience's response is vital. African aesthetics provide a cultural context for hip-hop as an African-American cultural practice. Because hip hop is a post modern phenomenon, hip hop relies heavily on recycling and revisiting the past, which links hip hop to African and African American artistic traditions. Hip hop aesthetics also reconfigure and transcend chronological, technological and spatial limitations. Time, within a hip-hop framework, similar to African approaches to time and space, is to be utilized and semi-controlled not vice versa. Sampling is an example of hip hop's reconfiguration of historical genealogy. Within a post-modern context, chronology is not linear:

> The present does not follow the past; rather, everything is one flat simultaneous plane, and past, present, and future all appear in the present as a collection of images. There is no sense of history as that which came before; instead, history is treated as a set of images, a collection of representations without context…The

postmodern dismantles the notion of a real behind the copy; it is the copy, or what is called the simulacrum, a copy that has nor real as its referent, no real as that from which it originated. (Freccero 100)

Imitation, or copying, is a cornerstone of African-American cultural production. Within a Eurocentric, capitalist context, imitation is often misunderstood. This is precisely why utilizing the pop aesthetic to understand the meaning of African American popular culture production, even within a pop cultural context, may not be wholly sufficient. Imitation within the African aesthetic functions as a pedagogical tool. As in jazz, the basic format is mastered, usually through imitation and then individual style can be attained. In jazz, imitation is used more as a mentoring process and/or a sign of respect and admiration. This musical-cultural epistemology has been absorbed into hip-hop aesthetics. The Notorious B.I.G elucidates this point on "The What" from his classic album, *Ready to Die*:

Welcome to my center

Honies feel it deep in they placenta

Cold as the pole in the winter

Far from the inventor, but I got this rap shit sewed

And when my Mac unloads

I'm guaranteed another video

Ready to die, why I act that way?

Here, B.I.G states that he has not invented hip-hop music, but he has mastered the form. As one of hip-hop's foremost lyricists, the above verse is an example of the duality of hip-hop aesthetics. Although artists claim to have mastered the form, they are fully

aware of their predecessors. Hurston grounds her assessment of imitation in a cultural

context, debunking notions of simplicity:

> The Negro, the world over, is a famous mimic. But this in no way damages his
>
> standing as an original. Mimicry is an art itself. If it is not, then all art must fall by
>
> the same blow that strikes it down. When sculpture, painting, acting, dancing
>
> literature neither reflect nor suggest anything in nature or human experience we
>
> turn away with a dull wonder in our hearts at why the thing was done. Moreover,
>
> the contention that Negro imitates from a feeling of inferiority is incorrect. He
>
> mimics for the love of it. (38)

Hurston elevates African American expressive mimicry to artistry. Hip hop lyricism

falls within this Hurstonian conceptual framework. Hip hop studies scholarship must

utilize new paradigms and theoretical models, which build upon works such as

Hurston's, in order to accurately assess it. This is especially true when examining

African-Americans within a popular cultural context. Hip hop has been built upon pop

aesthetics. To what extent do pop aesthetics alter historical, religious, expressive, and

cultural meaning in hip hop aesthetics? In what manner are African American attitudes,

themes, etc. as it is filtered through hip hop aesthetics?

> Elements of popular culture represent specific responses to times and places. The
>
> problem with the usage of pop as an aesthetic basis is the degree to which meaning
>
> is present in pop. More specifically, how much meaning accrues to recycled pop
>
> elements? (Chin 15)

In other words, how do the "specific responses to times and places"--as Chin describes

them—lose or gain meaning as they are filtered through hip-hop culture at a given time?

In a post modern, globalized world, popular culture is commodified and disseminated through various media. What are the implications for African-American culture as it is filtered through global, pop media? As an African-American popular cultural production, what degree of historical and rhetorical meaning is retained in hip-hop culture? The meaning of hip-hop's cultural icons, attitudes and practices, because they are based on recycled imagery and artifacts, is undoubtedly altered. I deal with the transition from hip hop folk culture to popular culture by examining African-Americans and their relationship to an emerging American popular culture, including the ways in which this culture impacts the hip-hop idiom:

> Without a concept of, or even an interest in, aesthetics, style, and visceral pleasures of cultural forms, it should not be surprising that most social scientists explained black urban culture—particularly hip hop—in terms of coping mechanisms, rituals, or oppositional responses to racism. Like its progenitor, the dozens, soul, and swing jazz, hip hop has been subject to incredible misconception and over interpretation. (Kelley, *Yo Mama* 34)

I attempt to reconcile this misinterpretation by linking hip hop aesthetics to American popular icons, narratives, etc. In this chapter, I discuss the origins and influences of hip hop aesthetics with a focus on specific American popular culture and African American folk attitudes.

African Aesthetics and Hip Hop Aesthetics

> Every culture has its distinct style or elements, rituals or ritual objects, that define for its members what is most important in life. The Dogon of West Africa define their existence through art; the Balinese of Indonesia, through drama and music…For the indigenous peoples of the American Plains, the key element of cultural life was the buffalo. For members of the culture of capitalism the key element is money. (6)

Richard Robbins, *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*

Much research on African culture highlights the functionality of African aesthetics. Indeed, functionality is an important aspect of African aesthetics. Within an American context, the *function* of a given African cultural artifact or notion is not always easily translated. The syncretic nature of American culture hinges upon a reappropriation, recycling, and repositioning of cultural capital. Hip hop is no different in this regard. So the questions beckon: What is the function of African cultural and artistic production in America? To what extent does hip hop reflect African worldview and aesthetics? Gyeke supports the thesis that African aesthetics are functional, yet he also identifies a "purely aesthetic dimension" of African artistic production. For Gyeke aesthetic pleasure is itself a function of African art. He posits a three-tiered framework for African aesthetics that include functionality, symbolic significance and the purely aesthetic, debunking the African art-as-mere-function thesis. Gyeke explains:

> To say…that African is symbolic and functional is surely not to deny that there is a purely aesthetic dimension of it, that a work of art, such as a form of music or dance, is enjoyed for its own sake in the traditional culture. For there are objects that have no functional use, but that, nevertheless are enjoyed because of their purely aesthetic qualities. (126)

Functionality is also an important aspect of African Aesthetics, particularly music. In a contemporary, post-modern context, the *function* of hip hop may not always be clear. As discussed in chapter 3, the emcee—like the blueswoman— is a multi-dimensional figure in the African-American community, serving many functions simultaneously. In twentieth mass mediated consumer culture, aesthetic pleasure and instant gratification are

much sought after commodities. Furthermore, upward mobility, or at least the dream of it, is also an important factor in understanding the function of hip hop. In African culture, songs "generally reflected personal or community concerns. The texts might speak of everyday affairs or of historical events; texts might inform listeners of current happenings or praise or ridicule persons, even including those listening to the song" (18). When songs become dysfunctional, they were discarded.

African culture embodies several components of artistic expression, each component hinging on the concept of the collective (i.e. community). Through communal production and participation, creative balance and harmony is achieved. Aesthetically, these components create a complementary dynamic. African culture—even within an American cultural context—avoids dichotomous thought processes. It embraces both the sacred and the secular. Hip hop aesthetics hinge upon a similar and/both paradigm. In African cultures, when artists performed:

> Speech and music frequently were integrated, with varying degrees of gradation among the four kinds of expression—speech, recitative, chant, and song…A song might move into speech and back to singing during its performance; a story might employ songs during the course of the narrative. Call-and response structure made ample allowance for the interjection of speech into song; for example, the group might sing or chant refrains instead of singing them.
> (Southern 19-20)

The emcee emerges in this cultural milieu. Not only were the lines between speech and song blurred in African cultures, but the boundaries between audience and performer were erased as well. Spectators participated by "joining in the song refrains, clapping

hands, tapping feet, or even entering the dance ring on occasion" (20). Call and response between spectator and performer encourages creative interpretation and improvisation. Poetic language (i.e. poetic license) is a natural progression within the African Aesthetic, which enhances the entire aesthetic (18).

The proliferation of the hip hop mixtape, which is a popular medium and aesthetic outlet within hip-hop music culture, is another example of call-and-response. The rise of the mixtape represents a technocratic breakthrough that empowers both the audience and the artist. Listeners can become hip hop artists by creating a mixtape. Mixtapes and "dubbed" tapes are cornerstones of hip hop culture. These usurpations of technology allow for a circumvention of traditional musical avenues. Mixtape culture thrives primarily in an underground economy. This process allows artists to communicate directly to their audience and links artists directly to their communities, while bypassing white-mediated spaces. Hip hop artists utilize the mixtape as a promotional and marketing tool, but also as a means to literally "respond", lyrically, to an opposing emceed challenge or disrespect. Mixtapes (and CDs) are generally distributed on the street level and through neighborhood establishments and social institutions (i.e. barbershops, bodegas, and record shops). Dubbed audio tapes and mix tapes have permanently altered the record industry. The mixtape also illustrates hip hop culture's post modern approach to music production, promotions and cooperative economics, while building on African communal approaches to art. Hip hop aesthetics have retained the African and African American tradition of communal creativity.

The Oral Tradition

In hip hop culture's contemporary form, the emcee is the focal point. From one perspective, the prominence of the emcee can be linked to the emcees marketability. Market forces have undoubtedly encouraged the elevation of the emcee in hip hop culture. Music is much easier to commodify and mass-produce than, say, B-boying or DJing. From another perspective, the prominence of the emcee can be linked directly to the African and African American oral tradition. In its early stages, apprenticeship was the only path to inclusion and acceptance for deejays, graffiti artists, b-boys and emcees. Apprenticeship is more in-line with African and American cultural practices. Within the West African tradition, orators, or griots—with their stylistic blend of fact and fiction---were held in high esteem. (Hine 20). The African American oral tradition has been well-documented. I situate the emceeing within the context of the African and African American oral tradition. The African griot emerges as a focal point of African culture, linking artist with "the folk". Darlene Hines states:

> West African literature was part of an oral tradition that passed
>
> from generation to generation. At its most formal this literature
>
> developed by specially trained poets and musicians [griots]…But
>
> West African literature was also folk art that expressed the views
>
> of common people."(20)

The griot was an important member in African societies. The griot conveyed community values, ideas, and desires. Like the bluesman, the griot was much more than a mere artist. The griot was a purveyor of cultural values, a therapist and, of course, an artist. Thematically, African music traditions dealt with myriad topics. Though the griot often performed with music, music was

secondary to the griot's performance. In hip hop music, the beat is as important as the poetry. Hip hop's reconfiguration of sound, from an aesthetic perspective, can be viewed as poetic. Surely, Public Enemy's The Bomb Squad's post modern arrangement of sound can be considered poetic.

The content of African music is as diverse and intricate as are individual personalities and experiences. One-dimensionality and homogeneity has never been an aspect of African art. Traditionally, African art expressed a wide range of topics, themes, and functions. Despite what some cultural idealists purport, African peoples have always participated in war. In fact, music and dance were integral parts of the various rituals of war (20). War songs serve a function in African society. Like hip hop music, African music accompanied many rituals and activities in African culture. As will be discussed in chapter 5, the very notion of community has been reconfigured and reconceptualized in a post-industrial, mass market culture. Hence, hip hop's content, to retain its functionality, is informed by its context. As Southern notes, music-accompaniment was not reserved for celebration:

> For almost every activity in the life of the individual or the community there was as an appropriate music; it was an integral part of life from the hour of birth to beyond the grave . . .There was ceremonial music for the festivals commemorating agricultural rites, celebrating the installation of kings or bringing together important chiefs of the nation, and reenacting historical events of significance. (7)

Hip hop also reenacts and documents significant social, cultural, and historical events. Hip hop's reification of certain icons, for example, highlights its commemoration of important moments in the popular culture landscape. Many African Americans within the hip hop generation feel as though their post-industrial existence is a constant battle. The 1980s war on drugs is just one of many microwars that have caused collateral damage in the African American community. Some argue that African-American men are at war with the American sociopolitical system. Urban communities have experienced violence in myriad ways and numerous levels. Historically, African-Americans have experienced a disproportionate amount of state-sanctioned American terrorism. This dissertation does not include a hermeneutic on the socioeconomic conditions that spawned hip hop culture. This dissertation explores the aesthetic implications of hip hop aesthetics. In short, what is the proper musical response to the post-industrial, post-modern condition? Amidst the decadence, violence, and chaos of the inner city at the turn of the twentieth century, music—particularly by the 1960s-became the medium through which Black America chose to express their spiritual unrest. Ultimately, socio-economic conditions would combine to create a hybrid of African culture. Evidence of the technological and economic impact of American society on African art can be seen when comparing the African American aesthetic and other diasporic aesthetics throughout the Americas and the Caribbean. Swindell posits:

> When one listens to African American music in Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, or Columbia it bears a striking similarity to the music of Africa. African American music in the United States, however, is dissimilar to that of Africa. Black music

in the United States is unique because it is the product of what Oliver Cox calls acculturation under intense pressure. (188)

The development of African American cultural production in New York City is an example of "acculturation under intense pressure." New York in the 1970s, and the South Bronx in particular, was representative of the effects of Civil Rights politics and post-industrial economics on African American and Latino communities. There is a consensus among hip hop scholars that socioeconomic factors had a profound impact on hip hop's emergence in the Bronx, as well as its development since its birth in the South Bronx in 1973. African aesthetics and worldview has influenced hip hop aesthetics. The emcee is indebted to the legacy of the griot and the African oral tradition. Nonetheless, it the intense pressure of American political, social, and cultural existence, within a post modern, post-industrial context, that offers a new and distinct strain of the African oral tradition. In the realm of comic book super hero mythology, because hip hop originated in New York City and New York is the fictional setting (e.g. Gotham, Metropolis) of many comic book narratives. These fictional accounts of New York City aided in hip hop culture's aesthetic development.

African American Musical Aesthetics

African American musical aesthetics are an extension of African musical aesthetics. Yet, the issue of African aesthetics and its relation to African American musical output has been debated since the 1800's. This section examines African American musical aesthetics and their influence on hip hop aesthetics. It also critically examines the

influence of African American musical aesthetics and fleshes out the more pervasive themes in his piece and tie them to the formation of hip-hop aesthetics. In Warren Swindell's article "Aesthetics and African American Musical Expression", he attempts to formulate a model that challenges the inaccuracies of America's musical canon, while simultaneously striving to create an African American aesthetic base from which to operate. In doing so, Swindell iterates the intimacy between art and experience. Swindell reinforces Alaine Locke's premise, which is that black music by the 1900's had become "the most basic American prototype" (175). Inherent in Locke's notion is the recognition that African American music in the United States is, at the very least, an amalgamation of both American and African culture. It is my position that African American music is much more. It is an Africanized response to an American reality and phenomena. It is post-modern pastiche configured within the framework of African aesthetics.

Swindell states that between the 1870's and 1930's "black people were molded into a definite nationality"(179). He goes further by proclaiming, "if art reflects experience, and experiences are different, aesthetic principles too would have to be different". Aesthetic principles. Swindell correctly links aesthetics to experience. In describing the formation of Post World War II Urban, Black music, Portia Maultsby writes that:

> The segregated environment, the faster pace, the factory sounds,
>
> The street noises, and the technology of the metropolis gave a
>
> different type of luster, cadence, and sophistication to existing black
>
> musical forms. In response to new surroundings, the familiar sounds of
>
> the past soon were transformed into an urban black music
>
> tradition. (203)

The crowded, chaotic pace of the urban north influenced African American musical production. The African American urban experience is not totally responsible for the African American musical aesthetic, but it is notable nonetheless. It would be hard to imagine African American music in the United States without recognizing its technological component. The African American musical aesthetic was shaped and molded by the characteristics of the African Oral Tradition. Music was often the only cultural accoutrement that could be passed down one generation to the next. In relation to these retentions, Southern explains:

> But though they could bring no material objects with them, they retained memories of the rich cultural traditions they had left behind in the motherland and passed these traditions down to their children. The importance given to music and dance in Africa was reflected among black men in the colonies, as will be seen---in the songs they sang, in their dancing and folk festivals. In addition, there were specific customs that persisted throughout the black man's long years of acculturation into the lifestyle of the dominant society in the United States. The function of music as a communal activity, for example, led to the development of slave-song repertories that provided some measure of release from the physical and spiritual brutality of slavery. (23)

The spiritual release that music provided African Americans is central to my investigation of hip hop aesthetics. The spiritual component of hip hop aesthetics is often overlooked. It would be safe to say that African-American musical production has always functioned, to some extent, as a release. Orlando Patterson discusses social death for Africans Americans in *Slavery and Social Death*. He alludes to slave

culture as an early contributor to social death. It can be argued that African-American and Latino men experienced a social (and cultural) death of sorts during the 1980s. Nihilism amongst hip hop generationers can be linked to the lingering effects of Pattersonian notions of social death. Stated differently, how can one kill an individual that already considers him/herself socially and politically dead? Though African American male popular icons flourished during the 1980s, ordinary, working- and lower class African American men were reduced to invisibility.

Maultsby takes this analysis a step further when looking at the African American musical aesthetic. She proposes that the "fundamental concept that governs music performance in African and African-derived cultures is that music-making is a participatory group activity that serves to unite black people into a cohesive group for a common purpose" (187). She goes on to say that many artists ad-libbed or "rapped" at the beginning of songs when they performed (188). This was done to establish "a rapport with the audience" (188). Hence, presentation or "visual experience" became an important part of African American musical aesthetics. Both were precepts of hip-hop aesthetics**.**

Individual style is a primary characteristic of hip hop aesthetics. Fashion is also an important element of African American Aesthetics. Portia Maultsby categorizes fashion and speech under the heading "style of delivery" (189). Moreover, style is inextricably linked to 20th century African-American musical production. This includes body movement, facial gestures, and improvisation. In African-American culture, "the element of dress in musical performance is as important as the musical sound itself…Performers establish an image, communicate a philosophy, and create an atmosphere of "aliveness

through the colorful and flamboyant costumes they wear'" (189). Today, fashion within

hip-hop aesthetics is itself a performance, an integral component of one's identity.

Conceptually, these elements are combined to create African American Aesthetics:

> Music-making throughout the African Diaspora is an expression of life where
> verbal and physical expression is intrinsic to the process. This conceptual
> framework links all black music traditions together in the African Diaspora
> while distinguishing these traditions from those of Western and Western-derived
> culture. (195)

Physical and verbal expression coexists within Maultsby's construct. The importance

placed upon physical expression—for example, the B-boy stance— within hip-hop

culture is an extension of African-American conceptual approaches to artistic production.

When African American artists perform "within the aesthetic boundaries framed by black

people, audiences respond immediately. Their verbal comments and physical gestures

express approval of both song being performed and the way it is being performed" (194).

Hip-hop's aesthetic boundaries, though influenced by American popular and folk

culture, were "framed by black people." For African Americans, since slavery, there has

always been a need for two, distinct discourses. Hip hop's underground/mainstream

dialectic speaks to this need. Hip-hop music/hip hop culture can be classified into two

major categories: mainstream/popular culture and underground authentic culture. The

former is directly effected and controlled by corporate interests and is two or three times

removed from the streets. The latter is dominated by hip-hop "purists" and tends to be

more experimental and eclectic in approach. Both classifications can be applied

latitudinally, that is they can be found within the numerous sub-categories and genres of

hip hop i.e. hardcore, gangsta rap, alternative rap, Southern rap, Christian rap, "backpacker" rap, and conscious hip-hop. This is not to say that these categories are inert. Neither is exclusive in their construction and presentation. At times, the two are indiscernible. For example, so-called underground acts (e.g. The Roots, Mos Def, and DMX) often morph into mainstream personas, garnishing the adornments of financial success.

James Peterson discusses the underground tradition within African American cultural production and its link to hip hop culture. The phenomenon of the underground has always informed, guided and conceptualized African American creative output. In the African American community, by the time mainstream white America discovers a given art form, it is *passé.* In Will Ashon's article "Whose Underground Is It Anyway?" he expounds on the tradition of the underground:

> Hip hop shares a trait with other popular musics stemming from the African
> American slave Diaspora—like jazz and the blues before it—in that we want it
> to be "authentic."… It can be located in our obsession with realness—the idea
> that our storytellers should report only on that which has directly happened to
> them. Or you can find it in our notion of being true to the culture. More
> radically, you can find it in the idea that to be true to hip-hop is to be true to
> yourself rather than any particular way of rhyming or making music. All of these
> ideas and notions, often meaning different things to different people, are caught
> up in what we as hip-hop fanatics value about those artists we describe as
> "underground". (84)

Ashon links underground hip hop to authenticity. The tension between underground

hip hop aesthetics and mainstream aesthetics speaks to an internal struggle that

plays out along social and aesthetic lines within hip hop culture. Rapper Black

Thought from Philadelphia hip hop group The Roots explains the notion of the

underground. He views the underground label avant-garde artists often receive as

stigmatizing:

> I wanna say record sales, but I don't even know that it's necessarily that. But if I
>
> say record sales, it would be related to what it is they're saying. If you with the
>
> formulaic approach to recording your shit then you just trying to do the same joint
>
> that you did last time or the same joint that the next nigga did that all the bitches
>
> like, then you fucking around to be mainstream. I feel like anybody that's coming
>
> with something fresh, new different, original in this business is frowned upon. And
>
> that's when you get stuck in the underground. (Ex 174)

Thought believes that mainstream success in hip hop is the byproduct of unoriginal and

formulaic approaches to music production. Hip-hop's underground represents the essence

of hip hop culture in its purest form. Hip-hop existed (and thrived) long before

mainstream/popular culture caught on. Although underground hip hop ethos have become

somewhat convoluted the rise of hip hop subgenres such nerd rap and hipster rap, hip

hop's folk origins are represented in the independence, resiliency and continuity of hip

hop's self-help ethos, which is present in mainstream hip hop as well.

Examining hip-hop's underground aesthetic is crucial to gaining a multidimensional

understanding of the essence of hip hop aesthetics. Underground hip hop music

dissemination is more autonomous than mainstream hip hop, and in turn less effected by

popular culture whims. Def Jam, Death Row, Bad Boy, Rap-A-Lot, Cash Money, No Limit and G-Unit Records flourished because of their self-help approach to the music and their connection to the underground (i.e.. the streets, the underground market economy). Aesthetically, these labels—though aware of mass market and popular media demands--, with the exception of perhaps Bad Boy and G-Unit, did not cater to mainstream sensibilities. The underground economy through dubbed audiotapes, mixtapes, and bootleg DVDs offers continuity and balance within hip hop aesthetics. This is a more African-centered approach to hip hop criticism and scholarship. Hip-hop existed (and thrived) long before mainstream/popular culture caught on. The autonomy and innovation of the underground encourages the participants of hip-hop culture to be viewed as subjects/human beings, creators and conduits of culture, rather than objects or commodities. Hip hop's underground aesthetic represents hip hop's deep structure and mainstream aesthetics represent its surface structure. Much scholarship on hip hop fails to make this distinction. In turn, some scholars erroneously cite mainstream hip hop texts as indicators of deeper attitudes, sensibilities, and trends. Though mainstream hip hop aesthetics may represent hip hop's essentialist qualities, this is not necessarily the case.

Since their arrival in America as enslaved Africans, Africans in America have utilized phenomenon the concept of the undergrounds and has shaped African American creative output. In the African American community, by the time mainstream white America discovers a given art form, it is *passé*. In Will Ashon's article "Whose Underground Is It Anyway?" he expounds on the tradition of the underground:

Hip hop shares a trait with other popular musics stemming from the African American slave Diaspora—like jazz and the blues before it—in that we want it

to be "authentic."… It can be located in our obsession with realness—the idea

that our storytellers should report only on that which has directly happened to

them. Or you can find it in our notion of being true to the culture. More

radically, you can find it in the idea that to be true to hip-hop is to be true to

yourself rather than any particular way of rhyming or making music. All of these

ideas and notions, often meaning different things to different people, are caught

up in what we as hip-hop fanatics value about those artists we describe as

"underground". (84)

The concept of the underground often serves as an African American trope. Hip hop

aesthetics builds upon and reaffirms its underground status. The underground within

hip hop aesthetics represents the hip hop generation's acceptance of their second-

class status in America. The concept of the underground is also linked to hip hop's

grassroots, folkloric origins. The Dungeon Family, Outkasts, Group Home, and the

Lords of the Underground all personify the concept of the underground within hip

hop aesthetics. Whereas earlier African American artists such as Ralph Ellison,

Richard Wright, and Thelonious Monk approached the underground as an imposed

state brought on by a racists society, hip hop embraces and revels in their

underground status. Even in the midst of hip hop's mainstreaming, hip hop narratives

are most often linked to common struggle and folk origins. Struggle, whether

articulated in the mainstream or through the underground economy, links hip hop

narratives to its cultural essence. In short, the concept of the underground is

transmitted through hip hop culture as an aesthetic, axiological, and epistemological

approach.

Authenticity is a major feature of African American music production and consumption. Hip hop aesthetics, even within the mainstream, are driven by "authentic" representations of one's life. These narratives tend to be semi-autobiographical. Hardcore Queens-bridge group Mobb Deep are representative of the importance placed upon authenticity or "realness" on their platinum album *Murda Muzik* (1999). Interestingly, even though Mobb Deep dealt with graphic subject-matter, as evidenced in the album's title, Mobb Deep was firmly rooted in hip hop aesthetics, blending vivid wordplay, and stark imagery with tragic realism. Authenticity is central to Mobb's aesthetic approach to their music. On "Allustrious", which was sampled by "conscious" emcee Mos Def, Prodigy illustrates Mobb Deep's unique strand of realism. In one verse, Prodigy reinforces his authenticity by rebuking R &B aesthetics, "Take a walk jerk/This ain't Levert, Sweat or Johnny Gill/This rap for real, some thin you feel." Prodigy clearly delineates between R&B and hip hop aesthetics. Tragic realism is at the forefront of this delineation. Though Mobb Deep's authenticity has been questioned in more recent years, they are committed to their gangsta aesthetic.

On "The Realist", which features hip hop legend Kool G. Rap, Kool G provides a warning to individuals that are not authentic, "lack the real, "Yo, when the gat's revealed/your cap gets peeled/ and that's the deal/Fuck a bitch ass/that switch fast, niggas that lack the real/When the slugs burst/ G Rap be aimin at ya mug first." As evidenced, authenticity takes on an added dimension within hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop takes authenticity to a new level in its appropriation and engagement of popular media. Trends such as the growth of reality television, the growth of the Hollywood horror genre,

globalization, shifts in racial discourses, and the proliferation of gangster themes in film accentuated authenticity in hip hop.

Hip-Hop Epistemology

Knowledge is the fifth, and most overlooked element, of hip hop culture. It can be argued that without a knowledge "component", a particular text cannot be considered a hip hop text. Hip hop's political dimension lies in its critique of American popular culture and American institutions (i.e. education, law enforcement, government).   Historically, American institutions, whether educational, religious, or social, have not been receptive to or tolerant of African-Americans. Since Africans were brought to America, they were forced to create new paradigms for acquiring knowledge. More importantly, the African worldview—and by virtue African aesthetics—are often dialectally opposed to the European worldview. Even within the context of twenty-first century hip hop, a critique of European (American) epistemologies and worldview is present. In fact, hip hop artists raise questions similar to those raised by early African American Studies proponents: a relevant education. As discussed in chapter 2, Afrocentric theory has influenced the trajectory of hip hop discourse and aesthetics. Hip hop's critique of Eurocentric education is informed by hip hop's propensity toward self-determination. Self –determination is a prominent characteristic of hip hop expression. Likewise, within the hip hop community, there has been a stoic skepticism of American education and democracy. Hip hop discourse offers a stringent and consistent critique of both. These critiques appear explicitly in hip hop narratives, but also in the selection, rejection and critique of American iconography. Relevant and practical education, whether formal or informal, is a cornerstone of hip hop aesthetics.

American education has failed the majority of African Americans, particularly African American men, both statistically and historically. This is not to suggest that there have not been exceptions, however, America has been resistant to educating African Americans at best and have out right forbidden it, through violent means, at worst. By the 1980s, skepticism of American education during the Reagan years was widespread in working-class, African American and Latino communities. Within hip hop discourse, explicit critiques of American education—which could correctly be labeled as Afrocentric critiques—were pervasive. The emergence of Afrocentric scholarship in the academy in 1980 with the publication of Molefi K. Asante's *Afrocentricity* aided in hip hop's acerbic critique of America's subjective (i.e. Eurocentric) pedagogy. In line with the Black Studies, Black Power, The Free Speech and Black Arts Movements, hip hop sought to circumvent mainstream, Eurocentric education by implementing Afrocentric praxis and aesthetics. This was done ad hoc and outside the confines of institutionalized American education. Hip hop's critique of American education and its preference for first-hand, self-knowledge actually offers a critique of American historiography, emanating from anachronistic pedagogy and detached historical analysis:

> [History] textbooks almost never use the present to illuminate the past…The present is not a source of information for writers of history textbooks…Conversely, textbooks seldom use the past to illuminate the present…They portray the past as a simple-minded morality play, "Be a good citizen" is the message that textbooks extract from the past. "You have a heritage. Be all that you can be all that you can be. After all, look at what the United States has accomplished." While there is nothing wrong with optimism, it can be

something of a burden for students of color, children of working-class parents, girls who notice the dearth of female historical figures, or members of any group that has not achieved socioeconomic success. The optimistic approach prevents any understanding of failure other than blaming the victim. No wonder children of color are alienated. (Loewen 13)

Loewen highlights the subjectivity of American history textbooks. Hip hop aesthetics recreate, revise, and re-imagine American history through oppositional posturing, the reclamation of public space and the reappropriation of popular culture iconography. Ironically, American historiography and biographical narratives transmitted through the American educational system have actually contributed to the reification of American popular iconography within hip hop. Hip hop culture has also challenged the "African American firsts" approach to African American historiography. This top-down approach to history fails to link African American history to grass-roots, African American thrusts in the unfolding of African American history. Heroification is a common feature of American history textbooks. The heroification of historical figures, though, is even more problematic for African American students:

Our post-Watergate students view all such establishment" heroes cynically…Some students say they have no heroes in American history. Other students display the characteristically American sympathy of the underdog by choosing African Americans: Martin Luther King, Jr, Malcolm X, perhaps Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, or Fredrick Douglass…In one sense this is a healthy development. Surely we want students to be skeptical…but replying 'none" is too glib, too nihilistic…It is however, an understandable response to heroification.

> For when textbook authors leave out the warts, the problems, the unfortunate character traits, and the mistaken ideas, they reduce heroes from dramatic men and women to melodramatic stick figures. (Loewen 36)

Loewen's deconstruction of American history textbooks and pedagogy reveals how American education has contributed to a general malaise among hip hop generationers concerning education. The heroification of European American historical figures in particular and American historical figures in general has contributed to the centrality of iconography in hip hop. In other words, the omission and/or sanitizing of African American historical figures in American public school history textbooks has created a void in functional and viable role models for the hip hop generation.

> For like other peoples around the world, we Americans need heroes…Most of us tend to think well of ourselves when we have acted as we imagine our heroes might have done. Who our heroes are and whether they are presented in a way that makes them lifelike, hence usable role models, could have a significant bearing on our conduct in the world. (Loewen 36)

Hip hop's critique of American education lies in its rejection of textbook representations of working-class, African American historical figures. Hip hop iconography reflects a reclamation and recreation of "usable" role models. Traditional representations of American historical figures—transmitted through popular culture and American institution, in this case American educations—are not functional within a hip hop framework (i.e. the post-Civil Rights, post-industrial environment). Because struggle serves as a consistent trope within hip hop aesthetics, American textbook accounts that avoid the internal and external struggles of the historical figures they cover have fueled

hip hop's revision of American iconography and historical narratives. Hip hop's As with hip hop's engagement of popular culture icons, hip hop' It is hip hop's reappropriation of American iconography—highlighting certain portions of icons' narratives while overlooking others—that make hip hop aesthetics unique. In hip hop culture, popular culture figures have replaced "establishment heroes" as iconic figures. Nonetheless, hip hop aesthetics also engage and critique historical figures that are discarded and rejected. In other words, analyses that include icons that have been omitted from hip hop iconography are just as telling as hip hop's embrace of other icons. Hip hop's critique of American iconography is, nonetheless, informed by the "heroifcation" of American figures via American institutionalized education.

The hip hop generations' skepticism of the American educational apparatus has led to the elevation of street knowledge as a highly valued feature of hip hop culture and aesthetics. In "Making the Strong Survive: the Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap", Earnest Allen Jr. discusses, what he describes as, the "three spheres of knowledge" in the world of message rap (180). Allen's framework can be extended to include gangsta hip hop as well. Knowledge of self and street knowledge are fundamental components of hip hop aesthetics. Allen identifies formal, street, and scientific knowledge, the latter being the highest level of wisdom and understanding (Allen 181). Hip Hop epistemology rests on the understanding that knowledge and understanding cannot be obtained merely by acquiring formal (or book) knowledge. At best, one can only gain a partial understanding of a given topic through printed texts.

Street knowledge, or knowledge gained from first or second-hand experience, is often valued more than formal knowledge and institutional education in the hip hop

community. Taken a step further, the hip hop community has been critical of American education. On Nas' *Hip Hop is Dead*, Nas offers a scathing criticism of the current state of hip hop. He predicts hip-hop's allegorical and polemical death. He covers a plethora of themes on this album. On the album's title track "Hip Hop is Dead" he takes a subtle jab at academicians: "Criticize that/why's that?/Cause Nas rap/Compared to legitimized crap…Cause we love to talk on nasty chickens/Most intellectuals will only half listen". In this verse Nas infers that the metaphoric death of hip hop can be partially blamed on a lack of serious consideration and engagement of hip hop by academicians. Moreover, he suggests that in this "half listening" scholars rarely receive a complete or wholistic understanding of hip hop.

LOX member Styles P critiques the intellectual community on "Green Piece of Paper". The song explores the absurdity and necessity of American capital(ism). In his commentary, he reveals his skepticism of academia and academicians:

Never bite the hand that feeds you

But the rules is different

When the hand ain't got food in it

Room full of scholars

Bet you it's a fool in it (Yea…)

I learned my wisdom from the wise

And then I learned livin from the live…

Styles P expresses his condemnation of scholars; he also implies that he acquired his wisdom through first-hand experience, observation and/or in person, face-to-face.

In hip hop culture, a performer's credibility is correlated by fans not only with musical and verbal skill but also with the degree to which the artist is question possesses "street knowledge," that is, firsthand experience of the urban culture that spawned rap music (Starr, 420).

Revolutionary hip hop group Dead Prez provides one of the most focused critiques of American education institutions. On "They Schools", Dead Prez deconstructs American education. They conclude that American education is irrelevant and dysfunctional for African Americans:

Students fight the teachers and get took away in handcuffs

And if that wasn't enough, then they expel y'all

Your peoples understand it but to them, you a failure

Observation and participation, my favorite teachers

When they beat us in the head with them books, it don't reach us

Whether you breakdance or rock suede Adidas

Or be in the bathroom with your clique, smokin reefer

Then you know they math class aint important 'less you addin up cash

In multiples, unemployment ain't rewardin

They may as well teach us extortion

Critiques of American education and historiography are not unique to "conscious" emcees. Such critiques exist within all subgenres of hip hop, which is precisely why criticism of dominant culture (i.e. status quo) is an intrinsic characteristic of hip hop expression. Jay-Z, Ice Cube, the Lox, Mobb Deep, Dead Prez, Nas and 50 cent are just a few examples of emcees that offer critiques of American education explicitly. Some

critiques are explicit while others may be implicit. On Nas' most recent album, which was initially titled *Nigger* 2008, he mentions Eurocentric education explicitly on "N.I.G.G.E.R (the Slave and the Master)":

> They say we N-I-double –E-R, we are, much more
>
> But still we choose to ignore, the obvious
>
> Man, this history don't acknowledge us,
>
> We was scholars long before colleges

5% ideology has had a major influence on hip hop aesthetics. The influence of the 5% Nation is evident in the centrality of self-knowledge within hip hop aesthetics. Self-knowledge in 5% doctrine is linked to earlier African American narratives such Marcus Garvey, Noble Drew Ali, and Elijah Mohammed. 5% ideology is most prominent in hip hop discourse between 1989 (Paid In Full) and 1995 (Wu-Tang Clan). 5% ideology rests on the notions of self-knowledge or knowledge of one's self. 5% ideology also places a high value on mathematics (or quantification) as opposed to emotionalism, mysticism, and blind faith. 5% ideology has undoubtedly shaped hip hop aesthetics and discourse. These views had been espoused in previous African American movements, such as the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple, yet I am concerned with the ways in which self-determination, and self-knowledge are filtered through hip hop aesthetics.

Hip-hop treads on unexplored technological terrain. Since its inception, hip-hop has transcended—utilizing technological innovations—socio-economic limitations. Hip hop's reappropriation of technology—for example, the phonograph (i.e. the scratch) — served as a stylistic *and* technical extension of hip hop aesthetics. The "pass along rate", for example,--"the rate at which one

product is shared by many consumers"—is evidence of hip-hop's technological

reappropriation (8). From this perspective, technology is utilized in a communal,

revolutionary manner. Hip-hop, at its core, is about the reappropriation of

certain artifacts and modes of production. In a global society, this process

creates an increasingly complex matrix. Rose declares:

> Rap music blurs the distinction between literate and oral modes
>
> of communication by altering and yet sustaining important
>
> aspects of African-American folk orality while embedding oral
>
> practices in the technology. Rap's orality is altered and highly
>
> informed by the technology that produces it; and in rap, oral logic
>
> informs its technological practice. (Rose 85)

Rose's emphasizes hip hop's reconfiguration of "oral logic" through technology. When

extending this theory to other genres of African-American music (e.g. Blues, jazz,

spirituals, etc.), the influence of technology is deemphasized. Hip hop's approach to

musical production has affected technology as much as technology has informed African

American culture. Scratching, sampling, mix CDs, sneaker marketing, and graffiti all

represent hip hop's manipulation of technology.

Notions of one's "hood" or neighborhood in hip-hop aesthetics is filtered through a

1980s, Crack Era nostalgia. The "hood" as post-modern historical rememory is an

extremely important facet of hip-hop aesthetic. References to "the hood" in hip-hop

usually conjure images of low-income housing, poverty, and urban blight. However,

though hip-hop emerges in low-income, inner-city communities (i.e. New York), hip-hop

also emerges within lower middle-class and middle-class urban communities. In fact, the

middle-class was a crucial demographic to the development of hip-hop aesthetics. The ghetto was a prominent fixture in funk and soul music of the 1960s and 70s. The hood, short for neighborhood, replaced the ghetto. What are the sociolinguistic implications of this shortened version of neighborhood?

It is also important to note that "The ghetto" was a prominent theme in funk and soul music of the 1960s and 70s. Ghetto aesthetics in hip hop pull from 1960s and 1970s Black culture iconography. Many R&B and Soul artists of this era experimented with "the ghetto" as a thematic focal point. The presence of the ghetto aesthetic during the 1960s reflected radical critiques of racism and hegemony, which were taking place in the African-American at-large. Ghetto aesthetics also marked a resurgence of tragic realism within African-American musical production. Artists utilized the ghetto to signify African American oppression and struggle. Thematically, "the hood" replaced the ghetto as a cultural-linguistic focal point within hip-hop aesthetics. It is redefinition and reconceptualization of the ghetto.

The overall sense of community within hip-hop culture is another aspect that connects hip hop to African Aesthetics. At times, the strong sense of community (i.e. one's crew, team or "hood") in hip hop borders on xenophobic, homoeroticism. From an African perspective, art and community are one. Hip-hop artists do not create in isolation. Their inspiration, motivation, and content are derived directly from the streets (i.e. their communities). Within this creative process, the "hood" takes on almost mythological proportions. Even when detached physically, the emcee artist thrives to connect with his/her community. Mos Def describes his creative process in this manner: "We don't come into the studios by ourselves. We come into the labs with, like our mans from the

ave., you know, deceased. Our moms, our block. We come with a lot of ghosts, and you hear it in people's rhymes" (Williams 210). Mos Def's artistic process includes not only his immediate friends, family, and neighbors, but also the ancestors and loved ones that have passed away. Mos Def's commentary illustrates the intrinsic link between artist and community within hip hop (via African aesthetics).

The rememory of hip-hop artists neighborhoods, which is a characteristic of hip hop expression, can easily be passed off as post-industrial, post-crack era nostalgia. Earlier, I linked notions of community in hip-hop to African cultural aesthetics. Additionally, the post-industrial, inner-city neighborhood took on added significance within Black and brown communities. During the 1980s, the decline of the nuclear family, African American suburban flight, and the rise of latch key kids all were major contributors to the reconceptualization of (neighbor)hood within hip hop aesthetics. From a sociological perspective, Tricia Rose notes that hip hop artists are the mouthpieces of their respective communities. She writes:

> Rapper's emphasis on posses and neighborhoods has brought the ghetto back
> into the public consciousness. It satisfies poor young black people's profound
> need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized and celebrated…few
> local people are given an opportunity to speak, and their points of view are
> always contained by expert testimony. (8)

Again, this process signifies an intense and intimate relationship between emcee and his or their community. Chicago hip-hop artist Common iterates the liberating qualities of hip hop culture on the "The 6th Sense" from *Like Water For Chocolate:*

I start thinking, how many souls hip-hop has affected

How many dead folks this art resurrected

How many nations this culture connected

Who am I to judge one's perspective?

Though some of that shit y'all pop true it, I ain't relating

If I don't like it, I don't like it, that don't mean that I'm hating

I just want to innovate and stimulate minds

Travel the world and penetrate the times

Escape through rhythms in search of peace and wisdom

Raps are smoke signals letting the streets know I'm with 'em

For now I appreciate this moment in time

Ball players and actors be knowing my rhymes, it's like

On Styles P's "Where I'm From," Styles collaborates with southern neo-soul artist Anthony Hamilton. The two artists offer a male-centric, cross-genre interpretation of their existence as African American men in America. Such a collaboration infers that although both men were reared in different locales—Anthony Hamilton in rural North Carolina and Styles P in Yonkers, New York—there are commonalities in their respective experiences. Originally, hip hop culture sought to redefine the creative boundaries of the "hood". This process entailed a recycling of ideas. Hip-hop's reclamation of African American culture and theme is an implicit attempt at trying to supplant and invent culture where needed. This process, according to Kariamu Welsh-Asante, is called reconceptualiztion:

> Reconceptualiztion acknowledges change and influence but insists on regarding the African centered perspective as the only one which would be totally

harmonious and ontological. Change and influence then from whatever direction

must be reconceptualized as well. The "shape of content" is not the same as the

"shape of context." (18)

How can we gauge the extent to which African American art adheres to an African-

centered perspective? Furthermore, how do we reconcile both the change of both form

and content of African American culture (i.e. hip hop) in reference to the African

worldview? Reconceptualization is often times the only cultural option for oppressed

peoples. African Americans found themselves constantly fighting for creative space. A

race of oppressed people that cannot adapt, reconceptualize, and refashion its culture in

the wake of assimilation and racism will surely be faced with the threat of cultural

extinction. What is the proper cultural/aesthetic response to imperialistic, materialistic,

technologically hostile, racist environment (i .e. America)?

Community is a central theme within hip-hop aesthetics. Technology and mass-

mediation in contemporary American popular culture have informed hip hop aesthetics

since its genesis. How has technology impacted notions of community within hip-hop?

Greg Dimitriadis, in Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text,

Pedagogy, and Lived Practice, explores the relationship between technology and nation-

building as they relate to hip-hop. He focuses on Public Enemy in his discussion of the

potential of hip-hop's nation-building potential:

> Community performance and entertainment on a decentralized scale gave way to
>
> worldwide mediation by and through more centralized recording media. Rap
>
> became, in short, an idiom that could create solidarities beyond the boundaries of
>
> face-to-face communication…Similarly, recorded technology allowed artists such

as Public Enemy to envision their audience as a wide and encompassing nation

within a nation, one that transcended any and all local contexts of production. (27)

When critically examining a given aesthetic or culture, it is pertinent that critics/scholars

look back to the origins of that aesthetic. This is particularly true in a capitalistic society

such as America, where everything revolves around capital. Without this type of in-

depth, nuanced analysis, cultures may come off as shallow and opaque. When looking at

hip-hop culture, one must refer to pre-mainstream hip hop culture to locate a proper

aesthetic foundation. Quite often, the commercialism and commodification of African-

American musical forms dilutes their true intent and essence. The Zulu Nation and

Afrikaa Bambaata are important to any investigation of hip-hop aesthetics. Unfortunately,

the Zulu Nation does not often receive the critical scholarly attention it deserves.

Sampling

Sampling is another example of the communal-shared spirit of hip-hop, as well as an

example of hip-hop's post-modern roots. Sampling is also a primary example of hip hop

culture's use of pastiche. In the tradition of African culture, individualism (i.e. sole

ownership or authorship of a creative product) is a foreign idea. According to Kariamu

Welsh-Asante, artistic documentation, authorship and preservation was not a concern for

African artists (5). Some African American artists were not in agreement with the

unauthorized use of their work, but they were not as adamant as white interests were

(George 95). The libertarian approach to ownership of artistic production in hip hop is

linked to its African and African American lineage. More specifically, sampling--though

clearly a post-modern process—is a carryover (i.e. non-judgment) from blues aesthetics.

Sampling—in some form—has existed for millennia, for there are no new notes in the

pentatonic, major, and minor scales. All artists borrow or "sample" from their predecessors. Yet, the blatancy of sampling within hip hop music coupled, the hip hop generation's ability to create an entirely new composition from a small piece of music through its utilization of technology, and the monetary value of late twentieth century copyrights are all factors that led to hip-hop's maligned history with the music industry and general public concerning sampling (substantial similarity).

Donald Byrd has appeared on numerous hip hop compilations such as Guru's *Jazzamatazz* and has been sampled regularly (e.g. Black Moon, Gang Star, etc). He is not offended by the idea of sampling. He sees sampling as a way to give jazz artists an extended life and an opportunity to reach a broader audience. Donald Bryd's perspective on sampling, though not unanimous among music artists of his era, represents a continuum of African American approaches to art. He represents an aesthetic link between the soul and hip hop generations:

Sampling is just taking something from somebody else's record. In most cases, it is old jazz stuff. And see that it is what has helped jazz tremendously: the royalties these musicians are getting. If it hadn't been for sampling, all them old kats would have been dead now. They would have starved to death. It has revived the music. It has recreated an interest. I see kids come up to me all the time… they thought I just started doing stuff with the Black Byrds in the 70's. They don't realize I had been recording 25 years before I had the Black Byrds. I have been in it 45 years. Now they say, "I hear your stuff on Guru's album and all your stuff from the 50's. That is the hip part about rap, because it is introducing them to something that they had never heard before. Now with the

Jazzmatazz thing, with the older people who have never listened to rap, they come in because they hear some jazz. They bring their kids, and now I am getting both crowds. You got young girls freaking out. They see me on the videos and stuff, BET jazz, "Loungin'" and all the stuff I did with Guru. You see how that brings in audiences, people of all ages. But that's what it's about.

(Byrd)

Byrd illuminates how sampling links the hip hop generation to the Black Power, Civil Rights and Baby Boomer generations. It has served as a vital link connecting contemporary African American narratives and aesthetics with older African American cultural traditions, tropes, icons and practices. The musical and technical aspect of sampling has been well-documented, however, much scholarship has focused on the post-modern origins and construction of sampling in hip hop. Originality and sampling are fundamental components of hip hop aesthetics. Biting (or copying) is taboo in hip hop. How, then, is biting and sampling differentiated within hip hop aesthetics? It is the cultural-aesthetic approach to reconfiguring past texts, the embrace of communal access to these texts as well as the methods that are utilized embrace when borrowing cultural matter—which come out of an African aesthetic context—that makes sampling in hip hop unique.

How can originality and imitation co-exist? Originality and imitation appear, on the surface, to be in direct opposition to one another. In hip hop's formative years, sampling was viewed as unoriginal and non-music because of its lack of live instrumentation. Nonetheless, sampling is an aesthetic carryover from African aesthetics and is also closely linked to African American approaches to imitation. Bartlett asserts "African

American musical aesthetics are historically little concerned with the exactitude of *imitation"* (650). In hip-hop culture, originality and imitation are not constructed as dialectically-opposed to each other. Bartlett goes on to state:

> Traces of the "original" are lost in translation, whether digitally sampled or instrumentally improvised. Technology serves and has served well the dissemination of certain aesthetic elements. With digital sampling, expropriated material is (often minutely and momentarily) recognizable, yet placed so that it often sounds radically anomalous, especially when the sampled material is overlapped or layered. (649)

Sampling is an integral part of the integration of technology within the hip-hop aesthetic (Bartlett 650). Here, Hurston again places emphasis on historical contextualization in reference to Black art, which by its very nature reinterprets white motifs (37):

> Everyone is familiar with the Negro's modification of the white's musical instruments, so that his interpretation has been adopted by the white man himself and then reinterpreted…Thus has arisen a new art in the civilized world and thus has our so-called civilization come. The exchange and re-exchange of ideas between groups. (38)

The "re-exchange" that Zora Neale Hurston refers to is precisely the element upon which hip-hop was created. Syncretism has become part of the African experience in America. As post-modern pastiche, hip hop utilizes all available media. However, it is hip hop's reappropriation of popular media and discourses that make it unique.

Imitation within the African aesthetic functions as a learning tool. As in jazz, the basic format is mastered, usually through imitation and then individual style can be attained. In jazz, imitation is used more as a mentoring process and/or a sign of respect and admiration. This paradigm is evident the hip-hop aesthetic. Biggie Smalls raps in "The What" from his classic album, *Ready to Die*:

> Welcome to my center
>
> Honies feel it deep in they placenta
>
> Cold as the pole in the winter
>
> Far from the inventor, but I got this rap shit sewed
>
> And when my Mac unloads
>
> I'm guaranteed another video
>
> Ready to die, why I act that way?

B.I.G clearly states that he has not invented hip-hop music, but he has mastered the form. As one of hip-hop's foremost lyricists, the above verse is an example of the duality of the hip-hop aesthetic. Although artists claim to have mastered the form, they are fully aware of their predecessors. This is reminiscent of the seeming paradox between originality and imitation in Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression". Hurston grounds her assessment of imitation in a cultural context, debunking notions of simplicity:

> The Negro, the world over, is a famous mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art itself. If it is not, then all art must fall by the same blow that strikes it down. When sculpture, painting, acting, dancing

> literature neither reflect nor suggest anything in nature or human experience we
>
> turn away with a dull wonder in our hearts at why the thing was done. Moreover,
>
> the contention that Negro imitates from a feeling of inferiority is incorrect. He
>
> mimics for the love of it. (38)

Hurston elevates African American expressive mimicry to artistry. Hip hop lyricism falls within this Hurstonian conceptual framework. Early, regional hip hop aesthetics, as they migrated from the South Bronx to the South, the Midwest, and the West, tended to mimic New York hip hop. Nonetheless, as hip hop aesthetics developed in these areas, they incorporated their own regional aesthetics into their discourses.

Besides Sampling, the "pass-along rate" of hip-hop albums and hip-hop magazines is an example of the communal ideology in hip-hop. African-American consumers "may have a higher 'pass-along rate,' that is, the rate at which one purchased product is shared among consumers" (Rose 8). The African American pass-along rate is roughly one item (e.g. music CDs or magazines) per 11-15 persons (8). The pass-along rate may account for the perceived co-optation of hip-hop culture. Granted, European Americans may purchase more hip hop music than African American through merchandising outlets that can track their purchases; yet, this does not necessarily mean that hip hop is *consumed* more by European Americans than African Americans. Some may argue that this is due to poverty, but from an African-centered perspective sharing is an intrinsic tendency. Such an analysis refutes the myth that white's *listen* to more hip-hop than African-Americans.

Because whites purchase more hip-hop cultural production does not infer that they necessarily consume more hip-hop than African-Americans. Moreover, it does not deal with the centrality of hip hop culture, aesthetics and worldview with the African American community. Hip hop occupies a much larger portion of African Americans cultural existence than it does within European American culture. Technocratic advances such as mix CDs, CD burning, music downloads, the bootleg market, and the advent of the mix DVD have all aided in the rise of the pass-along-rate. Moreover, hustling is a characteristic of hip-hop expression. In other words, it is doubtful that hip-hop is as predominate force within white American communities than it is in African-American-American communities.

The scratch is an example of hip hop aesthetics reliance upon reappropriation. Scratching is perhaps one of the most post-modern *and* African representations of hip hop aesthetics. Scratching is a revolutionary approach to music production and mediation. A postmodern expression, scratching is a manipulation of sound and time; it reconceptualizes the function and intent of the phonograph. Prior to hip hop's appropriation of the phonograph, scratching a vinyl album was considered a major *faux pas.* The scratch represents a major detour in American aesthetic approaches to music production and consumption. This reconceptualization extends from the curvilinear nature of African aesthetics and worldview.

Hip-hop culture thrives on innovation. Innovation is a fundamental characteristic of hip hop expression. This is especially true with hip hop vernacular or slang. Stylistic innovation is apparent not only in hip hop lyrics and language, but also in hip hop fashion and business frameworks. As stated earlier, this falls well within the parameters of the

African Oral Tradition. Language is an essential component of any culture. It takes on added significance in African communities on the continent of Africa and throughout the Diaspora. Even though hip hop slang varies from region to region, innovative and witty wordplay is common throughout hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop reinvents and reconceptualizes the English language, which can be viewed as countercultural resistance. Dillard cites "Fancy Talk" as a component of so-called Black English. He lists two basic characteristics of Fancy Talk, "1) flashy vocabulary, often beyond appropriateness to the subject under discussion from the point of view of the speaker of Standard English; [and] 2) 'poetic' diction, or "highly seasoned' talk"(249). Flashy vocabulary and poetic diction is the creative vehicle upon which hip hop expression is activated.

Hip-hop slang/language and fashion are two areas in which originality is emphasized. Both elements permeate the music. E-40, in an article written by Anthony Mandler entitled "King of Slanguage," illustrates the importance placed on an avant-garde approach to the creative process:

The style I speak, I try to throw a curve ball at em' every once in a while. You'll never know how I come. One minute I rap slow, one minute I'll put the Woody Woodpecker, star-stop-and-go scoop type delivery on you…I don't try to follow what everybody else is doing. I just do what I do. (150)

Hip-hop vernacular transcends conventional time and space. Hip-hop lyricism makes words fit, through inflection, cadence, style, delivery, and cultural references, where they would not otherwise fit grammatically. Hip-hop defies traditional laws and boundaries concerning Standard English. Hip hop is poetry in its highest form. Music, through

rhythm, is the added dimension. As an artistic medium, hip-hop is socially-captivating and culturally-revolutionary. Listeners must conform to the music, not vice versa. Certain assumptions and hidden meanings must be grasped in order for one to properly understand most aspects of hip-hop music and culture. One must be able to code–switch in order to fully understand hidden meanings, tropes, and metaphors.

The importance placed upon language and competition in hip hop culture can be linked to the African Oral Tradition. Jimmy Stewart describes a contest between two Swahili poets called "kufumbana". He explains, "two poets [try] to outwit each other by composing two lines of verse which the other must complete by two lines in the same meter and rhyme. This was a feat requiring exacting skill. For in addition to improvising… each line had to have sixteen syllable…" (Stewart 188). My focus here is not the content of African poems but the context. Competition can also be observed in b-boying. As with many African (American) art forms, the general public misconstrues first, then places negative connotations upon the aesthetic. Both represent a general misunderstanding of African Aesthetics. In reference to dance, Hurston observes:

> Negro dancing is dynamic suggestion. No matter how violent it
>
> may appear to the beholder, every posture gives the impression
>
> that the dancer will do much more…the spectator himself adds
>
> the picture of ferocious assault, hears the drums and finds himself
>
> keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the
>
> struggle. (35)

In the seminal movie *Beat Street,* Lee (a main character and b-boy dancer) gets into a (b-boy) "battle" with a rival crew in a New York City subway station. As the battle ensues, a transit police officer stumbles upon the two crews engaged in battle. The police officer mistakenly identifies this dance ritual for a gang fight and chases the two groups of young Latino and African American males away. In African culture, music and dance are inseparable. Historically, though, African (American) dance has been misunderstood and vilified. Though hip-hop dance was not a prominent feature of hip-hop aesthetics through the later portion of the 1990s, a new generation of hip-hop dance has emerged in the late 1990s. Urban dances such as the Superman, Wu-Tang, and Chicken Noodle Soup, are all examples of dance as a creative expression within hip-hop.

African culture does not distinguish between song and dance as such. In hip-hop culture, the merging of song and dance can be observed in breaking or b-boying. The first "breakers" were "street gang members who danced upright, had names names like El Dorado, Sasa, Mr. Rock, and Nigger Twins, and were overwhelmingly African-American" (George 15). Kariamu Welsh-Asante describes how the Wolof and Karanga peoples of Senegal and Zimbabwe respectively utilize "the break". She writes, "both use the "break" (a movement and rhythmic response initiated and manipulated by the drummer) even though they represent specific cultural aesthetics. The use of the musical "break" in African dance is similar to the art of B-boying. The style was created based on the "break points in DJ's performance.

Hip-Hop Worldview and Hip Hop Aesthetics

The hip hop generation's interaction with American popular culture, American nationalist narratives, and American public policy has been instrumental in the development of hip hop aesthetics. The hip hop worldview consists of an amalgamation of traditional African and African American sensibilities filtered through an American cultural-political lense. Swindell explains, "If art reflects experience, and experiences are different, aesthetic principles too would have to be different" (179). In the case of hip hop aesthetics, as Kitwana correctly posits, the hip hop generation's unique view of the world has been the impetus of hip hop culture's sensibilities and aesthetics. Kitwana creates a theoretical and socio-cultural framework that demarcates the ideological distinctions of the hip hop worldview and the worldview of Baby Boomers.

Kitwana posits what he describes as the hip-hop worldview to identify this generation's perspective. How does Kitwana's construction differ from, say, the African/African-American worldview? Why? The hip hop worldview is decidedly different than traditional African-American sensibilities. The hip-hop worldview reflects the positive and negative aspects of American, African, and African American culture. The hip-hop worldview is similar to traditional African American worldviews because it borrows so heavily from African-American culture. It is different because it reconceptualizes, critiques, and at times, rejects African-American and American icons, themes, narratives and motifs

In *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Black and the Crisis in American Culture,* Bakari Kitwana wrestles with the idea of a hip-hop worldview. Kitwana, as the title implies, views the state of young, African-Americans as one of crisis. He states that sociopolitical forces shaped the hip hop generation's group identity (9). He goes on to

describe "six major phenomena that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s" that played a major

role in fashioning the hip hop worldview (9): 1) popular culture and the visibility of

Black youth within it (9); 2) globalization; 3) "persisting segregation in an America that

preaches democracy and inclusion (13); 4)"public policy regarding criminal justice,

particularly policy that has clear racial implications" (14); 5) Limited, one-sided

representations of African American youth through "televised images" (18); and 6) "the

overall shift in the quality of life for young Blacks during the 1980s and 1990s"(20).

Collectively, Kitwana's sociopolitical matrix highlights the hip hop generations'

precarious relationship to popular media. On the surface, Kitwana's solutions to these

crises are somewhat simple, "understand the generation most heavily besieged by them"

(xxi). He goes further by inferring that "Those genuinely concerned about these crises

must begin to carefully examine the major social and political forces shaping young

Black Americans at the dawn of the twenty-first century" (xxi). This dissertation is

constructed within the context of understanding the impetus of hip hop aesthetics and

sensibilities

Similar to the emergence of the Black Studies Movement, the hip hop movement

emerged within the context of collective struggle**.** Lucious Outlaw asserts in reference to

the creation of Black Studies, "The rules of our discourse have thus been formed in the

crucible of struggle: contemporary Black Studies emerged from the context of Civil

Rights and Black Power movements. The connection between historicity and dimensions

of those struggles and our African "origins" is anything but simple continuity" (452). As

noted, struggle is one of the most salient tropes within hip hop aesthetics. Until the late

1980s and early 1990s, African-Americans—particularly the middle-class, of which

academics are a part—had middle-class aspirations. Black flight to the suburbs in the 1980s, which was precipitated by crack cocaine, inner-city violence, and Reganomics, had a detrimental effect on inner-city African-Americans. African-American men, in particular, were viewed as a collectively criminalized in American society. From this vantage point, it becomes clear that socioeconomic conditions, coupled with the African (American) Oral tradition, spawned hip-hop and not vice versa.

Unfortunately, there exists a widening gap between baby boomers and the hip-hop generation. The pitfalls of postindustrial America have done much to accelerate this generational shift. Joblessness, fratricide, and the War on Drugs, for example, have all led to the breakdown in communication between generations. Today's African-American youth, bombarded with consumer products and sexual innuendos, have veered away from their parents' social mores. Social mobility has become a central tenant of American existence; the hip hop generation has absorbed and accentuated American individualist ethics. Conversely, race (i.e. Black Nationalism) has been deemphasized. Hedonism and hopelessness work in tandem. Kitwana explores the deracialization of the hip hop generation:

> For our parents' generation, the political ideals of civil rights and Black power
> are central to their worldview. Our parent's generation placed family,
> spirituality, social responsibility, and Black pride at the center of their identity as
> Black Americans. They, like their parents before them, looked to their elders for
> values and identity. The core set of values shard by a large segment of the hip-
> hop generation—Black America's generation X—stands in contrast to our
> parents' worldview. For the most part, we have turned to ourselves, our peers,

global images and products, and the new realities we face for guidance. In the

process, the values and attitudes described above anchor our worldview (7).

Kitwana over generalizes African-American's affinity for Black Power politics. In some

cases, this was merely symbolic. The selection of certain popular culture icons within hip

hop--via "global images and products"—played a pivotal role in the shaping of the hip

hop worldview. By the mid 1970's, America was suffering from an economic downturn.

African Americans by and large were experiencing an economic depression (Hines 554).

Heightened expectations fueled by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements coupled

with the socioeconomic realities of post-industrial America were evident in hip hop

aesthetics. Despite these trends, the Black middle-class grew (554). Unfortunately,

conditions for the black working class did not improve. These disparate experiences led

to disparate views within the African American community. On one hand, there were

those who had successfully assimilated into American culture through education, petty

tokenism, etc.; on the other hand, there were those individuals who felt ensnared in the

hypocrisy and exploitation of American capitalism. Maultsby states:

> Blacks responded to the realities of the 1970s and 1980s in diverse ways and
>
> with mixed feelings. Many assessed progress toward social, economic, and
>
> political equality as illusory at best. Some felt conditions had worsened, though
>
> a few privileged blacks believed the situation had improved. (204)

How can we account for the different responses *within* the African American

community? Are these responses grouped along certain socioeconomic, gender, and

class lines? What are the implications of the diverse responses to the realities of the

1970s and 1980s within popular culture discourses and texts?

The 1970s and 1980s South Bronx was far from a cultural wasteland. White *and* Black Flight reduced many American cities to virtual ghost towns. The individuals that were left to inhabit these forgotten communities became virtually voiceless, at times even faceless. Nelson George writes in *Hip Hop America*, "The suburban revolution…along with prejudice against blacks and Hispanics, left large chunks of our big cities economic dead zones that mocked the bicentennial's celebration of America as the promised land" (10). Even though the citizens of the Bronx, like many of America's urban areas of the 1970s, became pawns within the cultural-political chess match that came to be known as Reaganomics, there was still evidence of a burgeoning culture. In 1976:

> [The Bronx] was a cauldron of vibrant, unnoticed, and quite visionary creativity born of its racial mix and its relative isolation. It is within its boundaries that the expressions we associate with hip hop—graffiti art, break dancing, emceeing, and mixing—all have roots. (George 10)

Hip hop's birth in the Bronx represents the ultimate paradox of ghetto existence. Poor people with little or no resources are not supposed to create a commercially-viable and socially-fulfilling art, far less master it. The birth of hip-hop culture in the Bronx symbolizes the highest stages of cultural alchemy, which is a prominent characteristic of hip hop expression. Art in "the hood" is the antithesis of economic discrimination and social alienation in America's impoverished African American communities. Hip-hop culture illuminates African American's collective will to create culturally and aesthetically appealing art. From an Afrocentric perspective, this can be described as a consciousness of victory and African American agency.

Hip-hop aesthetics, particularly by the mid-1980s—similar to its musical predecessors blues and bebop jazz—emerged as a discursive space which challenged and refined prevailing myths, images, etc. concerning African-American existence in popular media. During the 1980s, images of African-American working Black men, when they were portrayed in popular culture media at all, were often portrayed as non-threatening at best, or they lacked depth and nuance at worst. Michael Jackson, Prince, Bill Cosby, and Michael Jordan represent this strain of African American icons. In 1981, Frankie Smith's "Double Dutch Bus" helped to further solidify hip hop aesthetics within the mainstream. Rarely mentioned within hip hop scholarship, Smith's "Double Dutch Bus" ushered in a new era of hip hop aesthetics. By 1988, the hip hop idiom was again at a crucial juncture in its development. Rob Base "It Takes Two" (1988), which sampled James Brown's "Think (About It)" though it was a crossover hit, still adhered to hip hop's foundational elements. For example, Rob Base was the focal point of this hip hop act, yet, the "group"—Rob Base and E-Z Rock--still drew from the DJ/Emcee framework of early hip-hop aesthetics. The DJ was an integral part of Rob Base and DJ Easy Rock. In "It Takes Two" Base still reflects the folk roots of hip hop aesthetics. Base famously raps, "I'm not a sucker so I don't need a bodyguard." It also recycles Brown's call-and-response with Lyn Collins. It marks a notable shift within the hip-hop idiom from urban realism to party anthems.

Much of the scholarship on the formation of hip-hop culture alludes to the influence of American cinema on hip-hop. American movies during the late 1970s and early 1980s left an indelible imprint on hip-hop aesthetics. Many themes, motifs, attitudes and imagery within hip-hop culture were gleaned from American television and movies.

Horror films have even spawned a distinct subgenre within hip hop. Horror-core rap artists such as Gravediggers, Flatliners, Kool Keith, and Necro have digested much horror imagery.

Cinema enhanced and encouraged realism in hip-hop. The rise of American celebrity via 1980s pop music and the creation of the cinematic blockbuster in the mid-1970s— which I discuss at greater length in chapter 6— aided in the solidification of tragic realism within hip hop aesthetics. The presence of tragic realism within hip-hop sought to circumvent the cultural/gender ambiguity of post-modern representation of African American masculinity. As I discuss at greater length in chapter 6, by the mid-1980s, Black masculinity was highly contested within American popular culture. Many images of black men were sanitized. Within the realm of popular music, pop artists such as Michael Jackson and Prince were post-modern constructions that offered androgynous, a-cultural representations of black men. These figures were non-threatening. Even their falsetto voices represented an emasculated version of black manhood. Hip-hop, and the emcee specifically, in the early 1980s functioned as a response to these images. Michael Jackson and Prince were part of larger socioeconomic matrix that signaled market shifts in the music industry:

> The pattern of relying on a small number of multi-platinum artists to create profits became more pronounced in the 1980s. By the mid-1980s, when the industry began to climb out of its hole, it was clear that the recovery was due more to the megasuccess of a few recordings by superstar musicians—Michael Jackson, Madonna, Prince, Bruce Springsteen, Whitney Houston, Phil Collins, Janet

Jackson, and others—than to any across-the –board improvement in record sales.

(Starr 369)

Hip-hop was birthed in the 1970s South Bronx. Since its inception, American popular culture has had a far-reaching impact on hip-hop aesthetics. During the 1970s, film—as an artistic medium—explored new conceptual terrain articulating race, ethnicity, gender, and class in new ways. Popular culture, particularly film, offered new frameworks to engage sociopolitical phenomena. Tragic Realism is inextricably linked to cinematic production and consumption. Television and film, in its highest form, offer the ultimate in tangential escapism. Film and television are intended literarily to draw the viewer in, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality.

American gangster icons have also influenced hip-hop aesthetics. Authenticity is central to the conceptualization of the gangster in American cinema; however, this brand of tragic realism presents serious issues for the transference of thematic and cultural meaning within hip-hop aesthetics. In 1971, *The Godfather* series made its way to film. Mafia imagery is prominent in contemporary hip hop lyrics and iconography. Italian mafiosoes are especially enticing to the hip hop community. Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* series serves as an archetypal foundation for future representations of gangsters in American popular culture. Chin discusses the limitations of popular film's ability to portray reality within the context of gangsta motifs:

> Was *The Godfather* an example of new tragic realism in terms of American genre
> filmmaking, or was it just a portentous, overblown, arty version of a family-
> gangster movie? One of the questions implicit in the work was whether or not a
> movie in which structural development and ideological conception were based on

old movies could be an adequate representation of reality. The example of

Coppola's later *Apocalypse Now* (1980) indicated that the aestheticizing approach

might have limitations in providing a framework for a work dealing with

contemporary socio-political issues. Although pop must be acknowledged as part

of the contemporary landscape, it is questionable whether pop is an adequate

framework to deal with reality. (Chin 14)

Hip Hop attempted to resolve many of the pop aesthetic issues within American film

concerning realism. Hip hop aesthetics, though, seeks to redefine older themes and

motifs, giving additional layers of meaning to its aesthetic selections. However, the

transference of popular gangster film icons and motifs in hip hop aesthetics is

problematic. As Chin asserts, the pop framework presents serious issues in its

representations of reality.

The penultimate form of realism in artistic production is the reality television genre.

In its current incarnation, reality television has enhanced realist narratives in hip hop. Hip

hop, on a pop psycho-sociological level reflects overarching trends in society concerning

realism, or reality, as an aesthetic. The O.J. Simpson saga and the Rodney King beating

and rebellion pushed the envelope in this area. Hip hop aesthetics reflect this trend. This

is not to understate the impact of these two events on American popular culture in

general; however, my focus is the rise of realist narratives within hip-hop. Reality

television further blurred the lines between reality and reality-influenced, fictional

narratives in popular media.

The reality show *Cops*, which debuted in 1989, is an example of the criminalization

of African American men in popular media. It was a breakthrough in American

television, catapulting the reality show onto the American consciousness. The show follows police officers on the beat in various cities. It chronicles their encounters, arrests, traffic stops, and police chases. The themes song "Bad Boy" by reggae group Inner Circle sets the thematic tone for the show. Many critics have accused the show of perpetuating stereotypes. It can also be argued that the show further vilifies African American men. This is not to suggest that hip hop responded to *Cops* directly, yet it did provide a visual, rhetorical and ideological backdrop for hip-hop artists.

1991was a watershed moment for hip hop aesthetics. Gangsta motifs, iconography and attitude became central to hip hop aesthetics and culture. 1991 also marked a shift toward post-Afrocentric sensibilities within hip hop aesthetics. Conversely, gangsta narratives served as critiques of Black Bourgeois elitism, right-wing political conservatism, *and* uni-dimensional, narrow interpretations of some strains of Afrocentric thought and practice. In the wake of 1980s political conservatism, the solidification of gangsta aesthetics in hip hop represent a delayed response to Reaganomic public policy. The creation of Bad Boy Records, Cash Money and Death Row Records in the early 1990s marked not only toward a shift toward a well-established, clearly articulated gangsta aesthetic within hip hop culture, it also ushered in an unprecedented wave of young, African American entrepreneurship and ownership.

The early 1990s signaled a noticeable shift in hip hop aesthetics—informed by popular media discourse and public policy—which was reflected in the prominence of gangsta aesthetics within hip hop narratives and iconography. By 1994, the post-Afrocentric movement came to a close. *The Chronic* (1992) album by Dr. Dre, which is widely considered a hip hop classic, *The Chronic* explored, among other themes, the

aftermath of the LA Rebellion. It used realist narratives to chronicle gang culture in Compton, California. It is important to my discussion of tragic realism in hip hop for three reasons. One, it influenced hip hop production, upping the ante on melody and musical form in hip hop. Two, the album influenced hip hop aesthetics as a whole and pushed gangster aesthetics to the fore, solidifying the gangster aesthetic as a central characteristic of hip hop expression. Lastly, the album offered a socio-political response to the L.A. Rebellion. It provided a music-cultural context and social commentary to the rebellion and documented the angst, frustration and anger of African Americans living in Los Angeles. *The Chronic* embraced a heightened level of tragic realism in hip hop discourse. It was an extension of the 1980s gangster aesthetic, which was established by groups like Schooly D, N.W.A, BDP, and Ice T.

Gangsta aesthetics were solidified within hip hop by 1992 with the release of Onyx's EP *Throw ya Gunz.* Fredro and Sticky Fingaz, in particular, were skilled emcees. The group was polished by hip hop icon and run-DMC DJ Jam Master Jay. Tupac Shakur singularly ushered in a new brand of tragic realism within hip hop. Shakur's emcee persona was an extension of his biographical narrative, an artistic blend of fact and fiction. Shakur's narrative blurred the lines between artistry and reality, establishing new parameters for hip hop aesthetics while upping the ante on tragic realism. Shakur attempted to reconcile his reality as an African American male and son of a Black Panther member and his public persona as a gangsta emcee. In "Picture me Rollin", Shakur constructs a narrative that foreshadowed his release from jail and subsequent wealth. Pac creates a fantasy realm anchored in autobiography and the O.J. Simpson trial:

Free like O.J all day…

You can't stop/You know I got my niggas in here…

Can you picture me rollin?

Anytime ya'll wanna see me again,

Rewind this track right here, close your eyes

And picture me rollin

Hip hop criticism and scholarship tends to construct hip hop's origins as monolithic. Many scholars point to urban (i.e. ghetto) narratives when discussing hip hop's origins and aesthetics. However, the African American experience, though shared, has always been heterogeneous in nature. Hence, African American middle-class trends, tropes, and sensibilities are often overlooked (or understated) in hip hop scholarship. Urban, lower middle-class sites such as Queens, New York—arguably the mecca of modern hip hop-- are examples of the middle class influence on hip-hop aesthetics. It also reveals the complex discursive and sociopolitical matrix that has spawned hip hop. Run-DMC, L.L. Cool J, Nas, and 50 Cent—to name a few—are from Queens. Aesthetically, hip hop is indebted to Queens, New York, which is a sub-urban, middle-class environment. However, class bears a different weight in the African-American community. Middle class black folk—particularly in the vulnerable 1980s—could not insulate themselves from the ills of poverty in the same way as white folk.

Russell Simmons and Run-DMC are examples of the middle-class influence in hip hop. They hailed from Hollis, Queens and were instrumental in solidifying hip hop aesthetics and economics. Rappers Common, Nas, Lauryn Hill, Mos Def, Kanye West and Talib Kweli all reflect middle-class upbringings. More importantly, their African American middle-class values, attitudes and sensibilities have aesthetic implications.

Their discourse is informed and shaped by middle-class values. Not so ironically, the above-mentioned artists have been labeled "conscious" at one point or another in their careers. Such dichotomization is the byproduct of the very same middle-class value system that nurtured these artists. Hence, the terms "gangsta" and "conscious" reflect the imposition of middle-class values and judgment upon hip hop, in much the same way that middle-class and hyper-religious African Americans criticized blues and bebop.

The expansion of hyper-consumerism via capitalist, mass mediated culture has had a far-reaching impact on hip hop aesthetics. Along with the rise of consumer culture in the 1980s, consumer branding, or name brands, was also an important element in the construction of hip-hop aesthetics. Conversely, as consumer culture began to proliferate within American culture, there was an economic assault on poor communities of color as well. It is no surprise then that these "communities" had to reconfigure their notions of what it meant to be a neighborhood or community. Many factors led to the breakdown of community in the 1980s, which led to the birth of hip hop. Cash Money and Bad Boy Records represent the beginning of the Bling-Bling era in hip hop, a shift toward materialism and social mobility, which was supported by tragic realism and gangsta aesthetics.

Notions of community are central to hip-hop aesthetics and discourse. What are the ways in which this sense of community is filtered through contemporary American culture (i.e. hip-hop)? In the midst of a racist, sexist and classist American environment, how has the fragmentation of urban communities impacted hip hop aesthetics? The decline of urban, working class communities has coincided with a growth in American consumption. The 1980s marked a shift in African-American notions of collective

struggle and group identity. African-American images in popular culture, such as *The Cosby Show, Different Strokes*, and *Family Matters* reflected overarching African American social mobility at the expense of tragic realism.

By 1995 American ideals of commercialism and hyper-consumerism were firmly entrenched in hip-hop aesthetics. Designer brand names appeared conspicuously in hip hop narratives. The increase in consumption coincided with trends in the larger society, a trend that began, at least in mainstream culture, with the release of Run-DMC's single "My Adidas" (1986). "My Adidas" marked the beginning of a long relationship between hip-hop culture and corporate America. Nonetheless, in African-American communities, status was attached to the consumption of designer cars, clothes, and liquor. On the surface, hyper-consumption in hip-hop appears to be a mere extension of American narcissism. Upon closer examination, though, such consumption can function on a psycho-social level. Stated differently, as Atkins asserts, brands have themselves created communities:

> Community has not gone away. It cannot because it's too fundamental to the human condition. It's too fundamental to the human condition, its appearance like any successful organism that survive a change, it has evolved, and has evolved in a way that lends itself to brands becoming a locus of belonging. The time has arrived for brands to take their place among others as new iterations of community in contemporary society (Atkins 62)

Designer branding and hip hop iconography is linked to the primacy placed upon pop icons in American culture is tied, in part, to branding (capitalism, leisure culture, the breakdown of community and family. By the 1950s American iconography began to shift

from religious icons to commercial or popular ones. The surge of underground capital during the crack era of the late 1980s and the fragmenting and subsequent reconfiguration of urban space public space in America undoubtedly contributed to the rise of name brand culture within hip-hop. As Atkins proclaims, community has reconfigured itself in individuals' identification of particular brand names. The distinct sneaker culture within hip-hop aesthetics is an example of the importance of brand recognition within hip-hop. Individual style and group identity are both foci of hip-hop aesthetics. Acceptance is an implicit part of "buying into" a particular name brand. 1980s fashion and consumer sensibilities implied that an individual did not just purchase a particular brand, they bought into a lifestyle or experience. Aesthetic, cultural, and social capital is accrued when wears a certain brand of sneaker or clothing. As Atkins states, brands have led to the formation of post modern, post-industrial, consumer-driven communities. Within hip-hop aesthetics, wearing certain brands signify and translate specific ideas, cultural markers and attitudes.

Fashion is a fundamental component of hip-hop aesthetics. Earlier I discussed the relevance of American popular sports culture and its relevance to hip-hop aesthetics. Fashion, more particularly name-brand fashion, is a central component of hip-hop aesthetics. Professional sports apparel falls into this broad category. Wearing a certain team's jersey, for example, can serve several functions within hip-hop aesthetics. Again, the hip-hop idiom is all about recycling images, themes, and artifacts. An individual may wear a team's apparel and have no loyalty or interest in that team. "Hip-hoppers" wear professional sports team apparel for several reasons: 1) gang affiliation; 2) regional loyalty; 3) iconic status of a certain player on a given team; 5) as a form of creative

expression; 6) mere style; 7) as reclamation of public and personal space. Carnes asserts, "Fashion forms a visible, popular iconology, revealing much about our values, attitudes, and assumptions about 'the good life'"(228).

The ways in which fashion is utilized as a form of expression within hip hop is another example of how hip hop reappropriates cultural matter. An interesting example of such a reappropriation is the formation of New York-based Lo-Lifes crew in 1988. The Lo-Lifes actually comprised of two "boostin" posses from Brooklyn Ralphies Kids and POLO U.S.A. The Lo-Lifes was essentially a band of larcenists that shoplifted famous designer Ralph Lauren's apparel. It is interesting to note that Ralph Lauren's Polo brand reflects a lifestyle that stands in stark contrast to the life that many of the Lo-Life's lived. The majority of the Lo-Lifes were poor Latino and African American males. The Lo-Lifes are significant to my discussion of hip hop aesthetics due to the great overlap between hip hop aesthetics and the Lo-Lifes. In fact, the sport of polo, upon which the Polo Ralph Lauren brand is built, is a socio-economically-exclusive sport.

The Lo-Lifes are important to my discussion of hip hop aesthetics for several reasons: 1) their embrace of a lily-white fashion icon Ralph Lauren; 2) because they represent overarching push within hip hop in the late 1980s and 1990s toward expensive designer brands; and 3) they serve as a site to examine the implications (and contradictions) of hip hop's selection of white-male icons such as Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger.

In the twenty-first century, fashion remains a central component of hip hop aesthetics. Individual style in hip hop is linked to African American folk expression. Moreover, commercialism, the growth of the advertisement industry, hyper-consumerism, and a global mass market economy have all contributed to the

enhancement individual style, via fashion, within hip hop aesthetics. Fashion offers continuity and cohesion for the generation, through the recognition of and affiliation with fashion iconography, namely, designer and name brands.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Hip hop is an American phenomenon. Hip hop aesthetics are grounded in African American aesthetics yet they are greatly influenced by American pop culture iconography, aesthetics, and sensibilities. Hip-hop's existence as a post modern, technologically-global, mass-mediated form of cultural expression engages many figures, paradigms, and narratives across racial, religious, and ethnic boundaries. More importantly, hip hop has embraced the most functional and aesthetically-pleasing apparatus from popular media, discarding that which it deems dysfunctional. This process represents the successes and failures of African American folk and popular culture. At times, hip hop aesthetics appear to be in direct contrast to the ideals of the Civil Rights era and the American Dream. Other times, hip hop aesthetics embrace certain aspects the American Dream and the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. Hip hop aesthetics attempt to reconcile the tension between American idealism and post-industrial, post-Civil Rights economic and social reality. The B-boy/B-Girl emerged as a response to public policy and popular discourse of the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in 1984 with the release of Run-DMC's *Run-DMC* album. The B-Boy stance is a symbolic representation of counter-narrative, bravado, reeappropriation, and the reclamation of public and private space within hip hop aesthetics. Community and fashion are two additional features of hip hop aesthetics that aided in the maturation of hip hop aesthetics. Despite hip hop's commercial acceptance, the essence of hip hop aesthetics remains present.

CHAPTER 5

"EFF HIM AND JOHN WAYNE": AN ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF HIP-HOP
AESTHETICS

Elvis was a hero to most
But he never meant shit to me you see
Straight up racist that sucker was

Simple and plain
Motherfuck him and John Wayne
Cause I'm Black and I'm proud
I'm ready and hyped plus I'm amped
Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps
"Fight the Power" Public Enemy

This chapter identifies specific pre-hip hop iconographic influences and their impact on hip hop aesthetics. I examine the meaning of the acceptance of these icons and their relevance to hip-hop aesthetics within an urban mass-mediated environment, as well identify emerging hip hop icons and archetypes. I explore the meaning behind hip-hop's embrace of certain icons and archetypes within an urban, mass mediated environment. Since the 1970's, academic interest in popular culture icons has waned. This decline in interest among academicians is due to the abundance, permanence and saturation of popular icons within American culture.

Hip hop, since its birth, despite claims by revisionist hip hop scholars, has been *covertly* political. Hip hop's iconography reflects the attitudes, values, and expectations of the hip hop generation. With few exceptions, hip hop's political critiques manifest in hip hop's critique of American culture and media. Hip hop iconography reveals much about hip hop politics and aesthetics. The above quote from public Enemy's "Fight the Power" offers an engagement of American iconography and heroic narratives explicitly. Public Enemy, a foundational and seminal hip hop group, remains an anomaly, with their rich political overtones and Black Nationalist rhetoric. Public Enemy's radical critique of American historiography and popular culture created new, mainstream conceptual space within the hip hop. They represent the struggle within hip hop between post-Black Nationalist ideology and the proliferation and commodification of African-American. Their 1989 hit "Fight the Power' offers a scathing critique of America's racist institutions

via an engagement, rejection, and acceptance of specific America iconography. The above quote is a direct rebuttal to America's edification of white idealism. Public Enemy attempts to contravene traditional American heroic and iconic narratives. Chuck D's revelation that "most of my heroes didn't appear on no stamps" is a radical critique of American institutional racism. It also simultaneously rebukes mainstream American popular iconography. It marks a major shift in hip hop aesthetics. When hip-hop first emerged, its iconography was "sampled" primarily from American—and in some cases African— popular culture. Though the hip-hop idiom would revisit White American iconography en masse in the 1990s—particularly American gangster icons), Public Enemy's critique of American heroes marks a pivotal point in hip-hop aesthetics in general, but especially for gangster and "conscious" hip-hop.
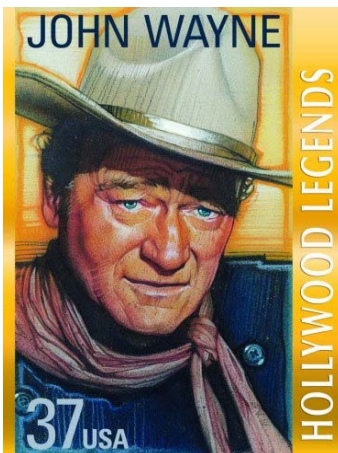
(Illustration 5.1) John Wayne Postage Stamp
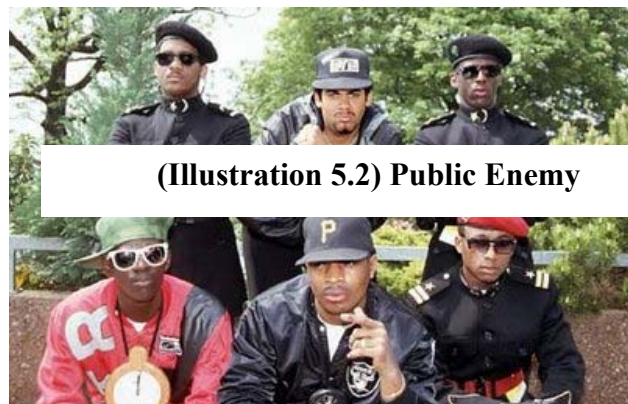
(Illustration 5.2) Public Enemy

Elvis and John Wayne have long been considered American icons. The former represents a cooptation of African-American music culture and the latter represents America's cowboy mentality. America's cowboy mentality was influential to hip-hop. Not only have American conceptualizations of masculinity, vis-à-vis the cowboy as icon, but also cowboy western cinema, with all its gun symbolism, impacted hip-hop aesthetics. Wild West imagery proliferates in hip hop. Many emcees assert that the post-industrial environment is similar to the fabled Wild West. Lawless violence, vigilantism and decadence are themes that were easily transferred to hip hop. Most notably former Treacherous Three member Kool Moe Dee's 1988 hit "The Wild West". Moe Dee illustrates inner-city violence by comparing the inner-city to the Wild West. He extends the heroic Western narrative, offering a gritty explanation for urban violence:

> One day the fellas got together
>
> They vowed that no one would ever
>
> Come on our block, and terrorize us
>
> The gangs that used to do it, now they idolize us
>
> Guns, we don't like to use them
>
> Unless, our enemies choose them
>
> We prefer to fight you on like a man
>
> And beat you down with our hands and body slam you at the...

Wild West narratives have often served as a backdrop for hip hop music. The use of the gun as a prop in Westerns is easily transferable to hip hop aesthetics. However, as illustrated in Kool Moe Dee's "The Wild West", Western motifs and themes such as vigilantism are reappropriated within hip hop narratives. America's World Fairs helped to

establish meta-narratives about the frontier west within the American national consciousness. Western motifs enter hip hop aesthetics primarily through film. As with gangster films later, Hollywood westerns illustrate the interactivity of popular media and hip hop aesthetics. The accessibility of western motifs within hip hop is directly linked to the sheer abundance of western narratives and icons:

> The most substantial of Hollywood's genres, certainly in terms of sheer number of films produced, was the western: until the 1960s, it consistently accounted for approximately a quarter of the industry's output…Like the earlier western dime novels, Hollywood westerns appealed predominantly to an adolescent male audience. (Vasey 222)

Westerns in particular and American film in general have shaped hip hop aesthetics and discourse. Movies, like popular culture icons, reflect societal values and attitudes. Nonetheless, the dearth of viable African Americans in movies had far-reaching implications for hip hop aesthetics:

> Like the press, but to an even greater extent, the movies created a shared vocabulary and cultural consciousness…Hollywood's audience was remarkable for its diversity, and was drawn from all geographical areas, every social class, and every group. Yet the American nation it described had little ethnic diversity. It derived its values from the patriarchal family unit and from corporate enterprise. Its government and business agencies were benign, or at least not corrupt. Blacks and whites invariably moved in separate circles. Poverty could be overcome with sufficient individual initiative, and indeed, material acquisition was a personal objective that carried considerable moral force. (Vasey 224)

From a socio-historical perspective, Chuck D and Flava Flav's rejection of American

iconography and ideals ("F*#$ him and John Wayne"), via United States postage,

illuminates the significance of American symbols and iconography in hip hop. American

signage, brands, symbols, and iconography are extensions of American political interests

and sensibilities, each possessing the power to conjure certain feelings and emotions:

> When paper is so imprinted as to become currency or postage stamps, it becomes
>
> *iconic.* At that moment, the paper takes on a value—both economically and
>
> symbolically—which it could not have had before...the artifact-as-symbol has
>
> taken on a new dimension, and a new role in popular culture. (Skaggs 198)

Public Enemy's reappropriation of American postage stamps, then, can be viewed an

important cultural-historical critique. Chuck D's narrative utilized American postage as a

signifier of American racism is evidence of Public Enemy's genius:

> For postage stamps were dominated by portraits of culture-heroes…[stamps] had
>
> the authority to take documents across the land, indeed around the world. Not
>
> only letters, but all important legal documents must be *stamped.* And what bigger
>
> compliment than to say that a story "bears the stamp of truth". (Skaggs 198)

American postage has historically edified American culture-heroes since they were first

issued in 1847 (Skaggs 198). Public Enemy's critique resonates even more when one

examines the intent and history of American postage:

> Whether the engravings represented individuals, events, symbols, or groups, all
>
> have sought to project the national origin in heroic terms. Most common have
>
> been the representation of individuals associated with the revolutionary age—

Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, and Hamilton usually being the figures used.

(Skaggs 204)

Although Booker T. Washington was the first African American to appear on a U.S.

postage stamp in 1940, it was not until the mid 1980s and 1990s that African American

popular culture and music icons such as Joe Louis, Robert Johnson and Duke Ellington

appeared (more frequently) on postage. Up until the 1980s, American postage featured

Primarily European-American political figures. American political figures such as

Washington and Jefferson serve as iconographic markers of American ideals and cultural

norms (Ebony Society). The reification of American historical figures through American

popular culture iconography and the heroification of these figures in American history

textbooks has compounded the significance of hip hop iconography. Hip hop texts—

through an engagement and revision of these icons—serve as counter-narratives to these

ethnocentric configurations of American history.

Public Enemy masterfully illustrates hip hop's use of post-modern pastiche. Public

Enemy remains somewhat of an anomaly within hip hop. However, Public Enemy's overt

political critique and their utilization and appropriation of myriad mass media texts is at

the core of their hip hop genius. "Fight the Power", prominently featured in Spike Lee's

Do the Right Thing (1989), which chronicled racial conflict in Bedford-Stuyvesant,

speaks to the interconnectivity of various mass-media and hip hop aesthetics**.** *Do the*

Right Thing catapulted Spike Lee to icon status. *Do the Right Thing* solidified visual

media, in this case a motion picture, as an important component of hip-hop aesthetics. In

essence, both Spike Lee and Public Enemy walked the thin line between Black

Nationalist rhetoric and American commercialism. The coupling of African American

cinema and hip hop aided in hip hop's mainstream acceptance, catapulting Spike Lee to icon status.

I cite Public Enemy as an entrée into hip hop iconography. Public Enemy is often cited as a positive and uplifting representation of hip hop. This can be problematic. Although Public Enemy was firmly entrenched in hip hop aesthetics, they remain an enigma within the canon of hip hop narratives. They represent a unique and seminal moment in hip hop history. Brand Nubian, Ice Cube, Dead Prez, Black Star and Tupac extend Public's Enemy's aesthetic, yet gangsta not Black Nationalist symbolism under girded their work. Public Enemy's reference to Elvis and John Wayne highlights the role of iconography within hip hop narratives and aesthetics.

Hip-hop culture and aesthetics have been greatly influenced by American popular culture. In its formative years, hip hop iconography, though influenced by African and African-American iconography, was also heavily influenced by European-American icons. Superheroes were the primary iconographic influence. Icons have been extremely influential in the myriad formulations of African-American youth culture, particularly African-American male youth culture, for numerous reasons, namely because African Americans experience a shared identity. Hip hop icons reflect the influence of African American iconography on African American youth culture positively along the coordinates of African American's collective struggle. I focus on specific African American and European-American icons in order to make broader points about hip-hop aesthetics. Many of the icons adopted into hip-hop aesthetics have also transcended African-American, and often, American culture. In the next section, I focus on African American figures that adopted and reappropriated within hip hop culture and aesthetics

Hip-Hop Icons, Archetypes and Aesthetics

The reification of heroic figures has been a major feature of Black culture, which predates hip hop culture. Nonetheless, in this section I focus on African American and American heroic narratives via hip hop's engagement and reappropriation of American iconography and show how they have contributed to the evolution and development of hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop's engagement of American iconography has also led to the creation of new hip hop iconography and archetypes, which are unique to hip hop culture. African American heroic narratives are important to my discussion of hip hop icons, archetypes, and aesthetics, because African American heroes and archetypes are the cultural and discursive precursors to hip hop icons and archetypes. African American archetypes, ante types, heroes, and stereotypes inform hip hop aesthetics. Folk heroes are fundamental and highly-functional in African American culture. Levine examines African American folk heroes and correctly links them to shifts within the African American experience. Levine sees folk heroes and lore as functional modes of expression for African Americans:

> The enduring plight of black Americans produced a continuing need for a folklore which would permit them to express their hostilities and aspirations and for folk heroes whose exploits would allow them to transcend their situation. Thus it might be argued that all Afro-American folk heroes sprang from the same causes and reflected identical needs…Nevertheless, the specific ways in which hostilities are expressed and transcendence symbolized are revealing…The appearance of new heroes, the alteration of old ones, and the blending of the new and the old that went on continually have a great deal to say about the changes in black

situation and consciousness that [are] occurring…Neither the heroes nor the

consciousness that mold[s] them remain[s] static. (370)

As Levine asserts, though African American iconography has always been fluid and

flexible, whether these icons are religious or secular in origin, they all "sprang form the

same causes and reflected identical needs" (370). The African American folkloric

tradition relies upon folk heroes which provide ready-discursive and aesthetic space for

hip hop culture to engage, edify and revise icons and archetypes to suit its needs.

Moreover, Levine is correct in declaring that the meaning behind the selection of African

American heroes is always in flux. Similarly, hip hop iconography is constantly influx,

reflecting social-cultural attitude and sensibilities of African American youth (i.e. the hip

hop generation).

Heroic narratives are also central to white American, male identity construction. Hip

Hop aesthetics have engaged, reappropriated, critiqued, embraced and discarded

American and African American icons since its inception. I am concerned with the

attitudes (and aesthetics) that have informed the selection of icons within hip hop.

Conversely, the embrace of the bad man, the anti-hero, and supervillain spring forth

within hip hop aesthetics as a critique of American and African American culture, as well

as well-crafted artistic devices. Alsford situates heroes and villains within a larger socio-

political framework:

> The hero and their villainous counterparts have…served as iconic receptacles for
>
> a wide range of cultural values, aspirations and fears. What a culture considers
>
> heroic and what it considers villainous says a lot about that culture's underlying
>
> attitudes—attitudes that many of us may be unaware that we have, and which

represent cultural currents that we may be equally unaware of being caught up in.

(2)

According to Alsford, heroes and villains are "iconic receptacles" that represent cultural

values. Hip hop's reappropriation of certain heroic narratives track cultural values within

hip hop. Goethals links icons to heroic narratives, yet he extends Alsford's treatment of

the icon as hero and constructs icons as cultural archetypes. Generally, icons possess

extraordinary qualities. Within an African American context, icons usually have

overcome personal struggle or loss. Cathartic transcendence is an important characteristic

of hip hop aesthetics and the icons and iconic narratives hip hop embraces. Hip hop icons

provide hope that one can overcome or transcend their post-industrial existence. Goethals

discusses heroes as models within contemporary society:

> One cannot overstate the human hope and comfort provided by such models. The
>
> notion that someone is able to cope or deal with life in an extraordinary and
>
> exemplary way provides comfort and inspiration to a boring and disillusioned
>
> existence…Saints and heroes took on a special power as representative figures
>
> that offer, at the least, a vicarious experience for less privileged human kind. (29)

Goethals analysis is markedly Marxist, yet his construct is especially apropos within

African American culture, particularly in a post-modern environment. Archetypes, heroes

and icons are central to African American culture. Goethals positions popular icons

within a socio-cultural framework. Within Goethal's framework or iconography, icons

are functional, human models, providing hope and comfort to those that embrace them.

Messianic figures are consistently reified in African American culture. Utilizing

Goethal's construct, the power of hip hop icons lies in their ability to sustain hope and the

opportunity to live vicariously through iconic narratives. Moreover, archetypes and icons are important to the construction of American identity. Contemporary American popular media, particularly within advertisement, presents icons as infallible, elevating icons to archetypes. Many scholars feel as though popular media skews the significance of pop cultural icons. As Goethals asserts, icons—even within a popular context—retain much cultural meaning and significance:

> Models, however idealized, falsified, or glamorized, have been an important aspect of the imagery of popular culture. While much of modern high art has been pre-occupied with formal problems and the representation of private realities, popular images have consistently zeroed in on exemplary types, from movie stars of the 20's and 30's to hard hat and superbowl heroes in 70's. Contemporary advertising has been sensitive to the demands for models in minority groups. All such changing patterns are evidence of the power of the traditional sacred image to affect the individual through the lure and mystery of likeness to a model. (30)

Popular icons serve as exemplars within American society. The lack of sacred spaces in late twentieth century American culture is linked partially to the decline of religious institutions, the breakdown of the nuclear family, and the downsizing of public, communal space. Bakari Kitwana raises the point that hip hop generationers often overlook certain aspects of their icon's biography: " When it comes to gender issues, hip hop generationers are willing to disregard the dark side of their heroes " (105) Kitwana , though correct in his analysis, he is does not take into account non-judgment as a blues retention within hip hop. Hip hop reifies its icons for libratory and expressive purposes. This reification often runs counter to mainstream white American sentiment. Mike

Tyson, Bill Clinton, Richard Pryor all represent hip hop's appropriation of the more

liberator elements (i.e. social mobility, badman characteristics, etc.). Hip hop icon Nas

illustrates the importance of icons within hip hop aesthetics:

> I'm not in the top five anymore or the top ten. I look at myself as one of America's
>
> rap icons. There is no number one, no number ten. There are just icons…When I
>
> look at great music people I realize I just started to do something. James brown and
>
> all these cats they are scientists. I got about ten more albums before I can really
>
> consider myself an icon. (Parker 59)

Nas illustrates the lionization and awareness of icons within hip hop. I explore the

significance of icons and archetypes within hip-hop culture. I assert that icons and

archetypes are integral parts of African, African-American, and American cultural

practices. I illustrate how these practices are reflected within hip-hop culture. Moreover,

this chapter identifies specific icons and archetypes within the context of hip-hop culture

and examine the socio-historical, political, and cultural implications of their selection. I

am concerned with how specific icons and archetypes represent a particular era or

perspective of hip-hop.

Often, icons and iconography are viewed as static. However, icons and— more

importantly—their meaning are fluid. Within an African American context, iconic

meaning is also circular. That is, icons within hip hop aesthetics are revisited, revised,

reinterpreted and redefined with an emphasis on linking the hip hop generation to African

American collective struggle. Icons exist in most cultures. Certain icons such as

Muhammad Ali, Jack Johnson, and Tupac Shakur are universal in their appeal, hence--

due largely to the ways in which artistic production is consumed and mediated in a global, technological culture—their meaning is interpreted and absorbed through a cultural-geographic-specific lense. Orr supports this culturally-fluid construct of iconic meaning, stating, "Icons can recur over centuries and various media—stone, wood, metal, steel, cardboard, Styrofoam—and can be found at various times in all parts of the globe. Their meaning can change with each reoccurrence, e.g. the cross and the eagle, but their form survives" (Orr, 13). Within an Afro-diasporic context, African American icons posses an additional layer of socio-cultural meaning. Manithia Diawara reinforces the use of African American iconography as a cultural capital, even as these American icons— for example, Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, Tupac Shakur, etc—are imported abroad, in this case Francophone Mali. As she notes, their cultural significance and libratory essence is not lost:

> You see, for me, then, and for many of my friends, to be liberated was to be exposed to more R&B songs and to be *au courant* of the latest exploits of Muhammad Ali, George Jackson, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. These were becoming an alternative cultural capital for the African youth—imparting to us new structures of feeling and enabling us to subvert the hegemony of *Franicte* after independence (Diawara 288)

Diawara highlights the ways in which African American icons are used as cultural capital. These icons serve as tools of resistance for African-Americans, as well as Africans throughout the Diaspora.

I add two qualifiers to my discussion of icons. A figure is a hip hop icon if: 1)it is widely referenced explicitly and/or explicitly in hip hop narratives and discourse; 2)it can

be proven that it has a major influence musically, aesthetically, stylistically, attitudinally, or ideologically on hip hop aesthetics. This chapter is concerned with four fundamental questions: 1) To what extent are specific icons embraced, signified and utilized within hip hop aesthetics? 2) What are the social, historical and aesthetic implications of these iconic selections in hip hop? 3) What specific pre-hip hop icons have influences hip hop aesthetics? And 4) Where would these hip hop icons be situated within hip hop aesthetics if they were young, African American men in the twenty-first century? In other words, at the risk of being anecdotally anachronistic, to what extent do figures such as Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali, Richard Pryor and George Clinton—though they emerged in the pre-hip hop era—embody hip hop aesthetics?

Though I focus primarily on African-American icons such as Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, and James Brown, I also examine European-American icons—particularly gangsta figures, badmen and ante-villains—such as Donald Trump, John D. Rockefeller and Scarface and their influence on hip hop aesthetics. I assert that the shift in hip-hop iconography marks a shift in the larger African-American and American sensibilities. By the early 1990s, America, as a whole, became obsessed with consumption and celebrity. Overarching trends in popular culture effected and were effected by the emerging hip-hop culture. Popular culture icons were at the forefront of the expansion of American popular culture in the 1980s. As with popular icons in general, but pre-hip hop icons in particular, when iconic figures transcend their field or area and ascend to iconic status in hip hop, meaning is lost *and* accrued. In other words, portions of icons' narratives are omitted or understated while other portions are retained and amplified.

Jay-Z highlights the influence of European American iconography on hip hop aesthetics. On "I Did it My Way" from *The Blueprint 2: The Gift & the Curse* (2002), Jay-Z constructs an intricate self-help narrative over a track that samples Frank Sinatra's "My Way" from his 1969 album by the same name. Jay-Z's sampling of American icon Frank Sinatra is significant not only because of Sinatra's genius as an American vocal master, but also because of Frank Sinatra's connection to the Italian mafia. Jay-Z links Sinatra's narrative to African American entrepreneurship (i.e. hustling) and capitalism:

> Black entrepreneur, nobody did us no favors
>
> Nobody gave us shit, we made us
>
> The Rap Pack, I'm Sinatra, Dame's Sam Davis
>
> Big's the smart one on the low like Dean Martin
>
> We came in this game, not beggin niggaz pardon
>
> Demandin y'all respect, hand over a check

Jay-Z commandeers Sinatra's narrative and utilizes it as vehicle to illustrate African American upward mobility. Sinatra is utilized as a signifier, symbolizing American masculinity and cool. However, Jay-Z does not reappropriate Sinatra wholesale. Sinatra is reconceptualized through hip hop aesthetics. Sinatra is sampled to highlight hip-hop's focus on self-help and self-determination. Jay-Z declaration, "Nobody gave us shit, we made us" and "Demandin ya'll respect, hand over a check" illustrates his keen business acumen. Jay-Z's self-help approach recontextualizes Sinatra's narrative within a post-industrial; Sinatra serves as a signifier, transcending race and culture, serving as a symbol of upward mobility and cool.

Hip hop's iconography—as well as its foundational archetypes and how they have evolved and been reappropriated—tell much about socio-cultural trends and movements within African-American and hip-hop culture. I am concerned with the meaning of such selections. I offer a brief aesthetics analysis of African-American and American icons and archetypes and discuss their influence on hip-or aesthetics. Early hip-hop iconography focused primarily on comic book superheroes. The reappropriation of comic book superheroes represents an attempt by inner-city youth to transcend their postindustrial existence. Superheroes have super powers and are half human. The fact that superhero comics were set in New York (e.g. Gotham City and Metropolis) also accounts for the heavy influence of superhero iconography on hip hop aesthetics in hip hop's formative years (Reynolds, 18). Furthermore, superheroes are always there to "save the day".

Besides comic book superhero iconography, African-American icons have had a profound—pronounced even— influence on hip-hop aesthetics. Many of these icons embody characteristics of the badman archetype. Some icons have had a direct influence on hip-hop aesthetics (i.e. sonically, name adoption, etc.). Others have had a less direct influence (i.e. posturing, ideology, etc.). Herein lies the distinction between hip hop iconography and traditional, sacred iconography. It is the way in which hip hop absorbs icons—stylistically, ideologically, and aesthetically—that makes hip hop iconology unique. Hip hop's unique use of iconography is linked in part to the hip hop's African American heritage, which centrally situate folk heroes and icons within its traditions, as well as the fact that hip hop is a post-modern cultural production. In short, hip hop iconography draws on many cultural traditions. Blues iconography, for example, has been

a major influence on hip hop aesthetics. As Cobb (2007) points out, "hip hop is clearly indebted to the blues in terms of its reigning iconography" (30). However, Cobbs fails to properly account for the implications of hip hop iconography within a post-modern, mass-mediated context. Goethals focuses on three aspects of contemporary iconography that inform this process:

> In contrast to the traditional images, our contemporary icons differ sharply in all three respects; stylistic traditions, techniques, iconography, and context. First, in the making of contemporary images we depend upon a constantly changing, almost kaleidoscopic experience of styles and techniques. Our sense of style and aesthetic power has recently been synchronized with the technological development within media…Secondly, our iconography follows no single scriptural tradition. Our icons are often part of the free enterprise, competitive frenzy of contemporary publicity images….Finally, there are no sacrosanct and exclusive sites in which our icons are placed. When there are so many images competing for our contemplation and attention, they burst out into all of the spaces in which we move. Our "sacred images" roam freely, exuberantly, and aggressively through streets, highways, subways, television channels, museums, theme parks and sports arena. (31)

Goethals highlights the complexity of contemporary iconography and correctly links it to the bombardment of popular images within public space. A decline of traditional sacred sites has aided in development of American popular iconography. The implications of this complex socio-cultural matrix that has spawned contemporary American popular iconography are precisely why investigations of hip hop iconography are important.

The selection, appropriation, reification, and rejection of African American and American icons serve as a critique and embrace of specific schools of thought, philosophies, ideologies, and worldviews. "Name-dropping" and shout-outs are fundamental characteristics of hip hop expression. In Golden Era hip hop, there are explicit references to political and pop culture figures. On Biz Markie's "Make the Music", Biz Markie simultaneously rebukes conservative, right-wing politics while linking his narrative to African American political struggle: "Reagan is the prez/but I voted for Shirley Chisolm." Biz utilized the historical Shirley Chisholm figure as an ideological and rhetorical device, His evocation of Chisholm clearly demarcates Markie's narrative within collective African American struggle; however by referencing Ronald Reagan, he offers a covert critique of Reaganomics. Biz Markie's rejection of Ronald Regan and his acceptance of Shirley Chisolm as icons is itself a veiled political act.

Hip hop icon Nas offers insight into the aesthetic and ideological significance of hip hop iconography. In an April 2008 interview in *King* magazine, Nas reiterates the influence of African American iconography on hip hop aesthetics and discourse. Because the interview touches on three major points relevant to my discussion of hip hop aesthetics, I cite a large portion of the interview directly:

> **Wait. On "These Are Our Heroes," you mentioned Tiger Woods…**
>
> A lot of times, when people look at me, they look too deep into it. Tiger Woods standing up for this white lady who said something about him being lynched is a coon move to me. God bless the brother. I like to see him doing his thing, but that's a flaw to his character. That's an issue I would have with Tiger Woods; not who he is married to. I don't even know who he's married to.

I'm asking because you shouted out him, Cuba Gooding Jr. and Taye Diggs. They're all married to white women.

I saw Cuba Gooding do a hand spin or some shit on an awards show—that's very coonish to me. I can't remember what Taye Diggs did, but I didn't know he was married to a white woman. You know who my hero is? Richard Pryor. He was married seven times. My favorite wife of his is Debra, one of the white girls.

Who else were your heroes?

Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Yoko Ono.

(Golianopoulos)

Nas reiterates the hip hop generation's familiarity with superhero narratives, in this case, Superman. Furthermore, Nas links Superman's narrative to white supremacy. He also explicitly cites Richard Pryor, Malcolm X, and Muhammad Ali as his heroes. However, race is not the only qualifier for hip hop iconography. Equally interesting is the figures Nas explicitly and systemically shuns. Cuba Gooding and Tiger Woods are non-threatening, conservative African American male icons. In short, they are the antithesis of the badman trope. Figures like Woods and Gooding are also derided within hip hop aesthetics because they are accomodationist, in the Washingtonian tradition, and—as such—are free of racial-cultural baggage. Hip hop icon Ice Cube takes pre hip hop iconography a step further, citing Muhammad Ali and Richard Pryor as precursors to "gangsta rap":

A lot of bulls**t last year. From the Don Imus thing to people just appearing on all these shows and just brushing gangsta rap with a broad stroke like this is the reason, when that's bulls**t. We grew up watching these people and then decided

to do what we do. Gangsta rap is the product of…s**t, I mean it's the product of a lot things but when you break it down, you take a little Muhammad Ali and a little Richard Pryor, you throw in some crack and then you throw in some gangbanging, and at the other end of all that s**t, to try to make sense of it all, you get gangsta rap. That's what happened in the 80s that started all this. It's a culmination of that era, combusting into lyrics and poetry. Some people use it like a newspaper, some people use it like a comic book and it's everything in between.

But gangsta rap ain't the reason why all this s**t is going haywire. (Blanco)

Ice Cube references 1980s public policy *and* the influence of popular icons Richard Pryor and Muhammad Ali as aesthetic contributors to hip hop. Much influence is placed upon icons in hip hop. This is partially due to the fact that hip hop in its current form reached maturation during the mid 1980s—a time when two of the most iconic figures of twentieth century popular culture reached prominence: Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan. Both altered the face of popular culture. Interestingly, both icons are engaged by hip-hop artists. And both solidified the marketability of African American, male entertainment figure. The different responses to both icons within hip hop are also noteworthy.

There are four reasons why Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan are important to my discussion on hip hop aesthetics and icons. One, they challenged and redefined Black masculinity in the public sphere. Two, they transcended their respective areas of specialization. Three, they altered American popular culture, brand marketing, record/sneaker/apparel production, consumption, distribution and advertising; for Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan represent the apex of twentieth century iconology

and hyper-consumption. And four, they are icons within hip hop culture and are referenced and engaged by hip hop artists.

Both Jordan and Jackson usher in the era of the deracialized African American icon. Michael Jordan, in particular, whom I discuss in the Chapter 6 in my analysis of 1984, is referenced throughout hip hop discourse and culture. He represents the ultimate competitor, a win-at-all-cost athlete and businessman, who embodied and influenced Black popular culture since the release on the Jordan sneaker brand in 1984 through Nike. When Jay-Z proclaimed he was "the Mike Jordan of recordin" on "Show Me What You Got", Michael Jordan was utilized as a symbol of: a) mastery of skill, and b) financial success; and c) competitiveness. By comparing himself to Michael Jordan— arguably the greatest basketball player of all time—, Jay-Z boldly infers that he is one of the greatest *emcees* of all time. "Greatness" or the notion of one being "the Greatest of All Time" in a given area (i.e. athletics, emceeing) is a prominent trope within African American popular culture, beginning with Muhammed Ali's public narrative. The hip hop community has focused on Jordan's athleticism and financial success. Conversely, Jordan's ambiguity and tepidness regarding grassroots, political issues, his ambivalence toward the working poor, and his reluctance to connect to the African American community in general are often understated within hip hop discourse. Prior to the maturation of hip hop aesthetics and iconography, professional athletes provided the bulk of African American iconography. Yet, Michael Jordan represents the creation of a new type of African American popular culture icon. On one hand, his iconic status represents the accessibility of social mobility and mainstream acceptance for African American, male popular icons. On the other hand, Michael Jordan represents a class and

generational rift within hip hop culture. Jordan's cultural conservatism was not compatible with the hip hop generation's value, expectations, and attitudes concerning collective struggle and upward mobility:

> To be sure, professional athletes, especially basketball players, have for decades been young, Black, highly visible, and extremely popular. Yet, their success just didn't translate into visibility for young Blacks overall. For one thing, the conservative culture of professional sports, central to their identity, was often at odds with the rebellious vein inherent in the new Black youth culture. While household-name ball players towed the generic " don't do drugs and stay in school" party line, rappers, the emissaries of the new Black youth culture, advocated more anti-established slogans like "fuck the police." Such slogans were vastly more in synch with the hard realities facing young Blacks—so much so that as time marched on and hip hop culture further solidified its place in American popular culture, basketball culture would also come to feel its influence. (Kitwana 196)

Kitwana illuminates the shift in African American iconography from African American sports iconography toward hip hop iconography during the 1980s. In short, sports icons became dysfunctional for many African American youth during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The post-Afrocentric movement in hip hop serves as a cultural marker that coincided with this shift in African American iconography. I move from a general discussion of the importance of iconography in hp hop to identifying specific pre-hip hop icons and their influence on hip hop aesthetics. I discuss four pre-hip hop, African

American folk heroes and icons—Jack Johnson, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Richard

Pryor and George Clinton— and explore the ways in which they qualify as hip hop icons.

Jack Johnson

Perhaps more than any other early twentieth century pre-hip hop icon, Jack Johnson

was the embodiment of the bad nigga trope. Jack Johnson serves as a link between the

ante bellum bad man and the twentieth century badman that is activated through popular

media. Jack Johnson represented African American self-determination and agency.

Johnson also serves a foundational model for the performance of African American

masculinity.

> During the 1920s, the heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson was a symbol of the "bad
>
> nigger" for blacks and whites. For whites, Johnson was a man to be feared and
>
> dreaded. For blacks, he was somebody to be proud of, someone who would not
>
> stay in the "place" assigned him by white society (Brown 150)

Johnson's radical positioning as an American ante type and badman laid the foundation

for hip-hop's a conventional and anti-heroic public discourse. Johnson's acclaim within

African American communities stood in direct contrast to the intense contempt and

hatred he conjured within the white American psyche. Explicit references to Jack

Johnson within hip hop discourse are scant. However, Johnson's influence is primarily

discursive, expressive and rhetorical, in that he serves as an archetypal model for future

hip hop figures. He enters the hip hop idiom through more contemporary hip hop icons in

boxing such as Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson and Floyd Mayweather borrow from

Johnson's narrative as badmen.

In order to fully understand Johnson's impact on hip hop aesthetics, one must examine Johnson as a cultural text; for it is Johnson's redefinition of himself as an African American public figure that is pertinent to my discussion of hip hop aesthetics:

> Numerous ideological strands of gender, class, and race positioned Johnson in a web which he could not entirely escape. He was inescapably a man, a black man, the son of a freed slave brought up in poverty, and so on. Yet although these discourses inescapably defined him, Johnson was able to take advantage of these contradictions within and between these ideologies in order to assert himself as a man and a proactive social agent. Recognizing that 'Negroes" were considered less than men, he sometimes asserted his manliness ina race-neutral context, as a champion, a self-made man, and a world-famous hero. In other situations, he played upon his blackness, using his champion's body to present himself as an embodiment of highly-sexed negro masculinity. (Bederman 10)

Johnson's maximization of his hyper-sexuality was linked to his being a Black man. Masculinist hip hop narratives utilize hyper-sexuality in a similar way, Hyper-sexuality is emphasized in hip hop narratives, partially because hyper-sexuality is inextricably linked to African American males position in the market economy.   Furthermore, Johnson benefited financially from is performance of Black manhood.

Jack Johnson was the first twentieth century African American male public figure to challenge white authority in this manner. He served as a bridge linking the Nat figure of the southern plantation to the urban north. Johnson introduced a reconfiguration of Black masculinity; in the process he created an entirely new (and didactic) public discursive space for twentieth century African American public narratives. Jack Johnson's freedom

of expression, more than anything, links Jack Johnson to hip hop aesthetics. Johnson was unwilling to tone down his public persona. He was uninterested in accommodating to white demands to control his discursive space and/or his body, which adhered to prevailing racial-social norms of the time.

The fact that Johnson's biography had been obscured until recently may account for the dearth of explicit Jack Johnson references. However, there are many parallels that can be drawn between Johnson's public performance and the public performance of many hip hop participants. Floyd Mayweather, who has partnered with 50 Cent, follows in the badman tradition of Jack Johnson and Muhammad Ali. However, Mayweather is also the byproduct of American celebrity—his father's Floyd Mayweather Sr. and his own. As a hip hop icon, Mayweather's grandiloquence in refined by a keen economic awareness. Black Jack Johnson, a band formed by emcee and actor Mos Def, pays homage to Jack Johnson. The "Black" in the group's name distinguishes it from indi-rock artist Jack Johnson. The band is a hodgepodge of African American musicians. The band consists of Will Calhoun of Living Colour (drums, percussion), Doug Wimbush of Living Colour (bass), Dr. Know of Bad Brains (lead guitar) and Bernie Worrell of P-Funk (keys). Even though the band is heavily influence by rock aesthetics, it is sonically and thematically grounded in hip hop.

Jack Johnson's contribution to hip hop aesthetics rests on his creation and utilization of public discourse. Johnson challenged white authority. He played into certain prominent stereotypes and transcended them. Johnson's attitude and his candid public discourse created conceptual space within the context of the badman trope. Jack Johnson's performance of bad provides the aesthetic constituents of hip hop aesthetics.

As with Muhammad Ali, professional boxing iconography has appeared prominently in African American popular culture. Jack Johnson and later Muhammad Ali were partially responsible for boxing's appeal in the African American community and within hip hop.

(Illustration 5.3) Jack Johnson

Muhammad Ali

Muhammad Ali's public narrative and historical biography is the precursor for the hip hop emcee. Ali serves as an icon and archetype for hip hop aesthetics. As a heroic popular culture figure, Ali laid a discursive, ideological and aesthetic template for hip hop narratives. His eloquent articulation of Black masculinity and public candor built upon previous narratives of iconic figures such as Joe Louis and Jack Johnson. Nonetheless, Muhammad Ali represented a new type of iconic figure. Ali represented a convergence of Black Power sentiment, soul aesthetics, and an emerging post modern,

media-driven American pop culture aesthetic. Muhammad Ali's aesthetic contribution to hip hop aesthetics has been well-documented. His use of rap as a poetic, rhetorical device was unprecedented. Ali was voluble and principled. He was a master of lingual (and kinesthetic) rhythm and rhyming couplet. His appeal as a hip hop icon is grounded in his reappropriation of the English language and American public discursive space. Ali's aesthetic styling aside, what is the significance of Muhammad Ali as a pre-hip hop icon?

Muhammad Ali's notoriety in the white media was matched only by its intrigue and interest in him. He was always willing to express himself candidly in the media, and the popular media indulged Ali's willingness to speak freely. Far from a caricature, Ali was clearly an African American icon, but unlike African American sports icons before him such as Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, and Arthur Ashe, he was not as marketable to mainstream (i.e. white) America. Ali was a complex and introspective figure. Similar to Miles Davis, Ali was simultaneously a (pugilistic) genius, a cultural enigma, an alluring sex symbol, a valuable commodity, and a menace, all within the context of America's most pronounced capitulation of White, American masculinity: American heavyweight boxing. Race and the politics of the Black male body intersected at the core of the American boxing tradition. Ali offered radical critiques of the American political system, yet he enjoyed the financial rewards of his American celebrity. Ali represented a new type of African American icon. His celebrity was an outgrowth of his outspokenness as a Black Nationalist political figure. His embrace of Black Nationalist politics is at the core of his acceptance as a pre-hip hop icon.

Besides Ali's overall ideological and creative influence on hip hop aesthetics, Muhammad Ali (or his Christian name Cassius Clay) is explicitly referenced in numerous

hip hop narratives. Ali is referenced more than any other pre-hip hop sports icon. Cassius Clay and Muhammad Ali are utilized interchangeably. The failure to delineate between Cassius Clay and his more ideologically radical Muhammed Ali identity is evidence of the ambivalence toward overt politics within hip hop aesthetics. Nonetheless, Ali's aesthetic qualities are retained. L.L. Cool J references Ali, utilizing a third-person narrative to chronicle his return to emceeing on his commercial hit "Mama Said Knock You Out" (1990):

> Don't u call this a regular jam
>
> I'm gonna rock this land
>
> I'm gonna take this itty bitty world by storm
>
> And I'm just gettin warm
>
> Just like Muhummad Ali they called him Cassius

The Genius from Wu-Tang Clan references the famous 1975 Muhammad Ali/Joe Frazier boxing match, which took place in Quezan City in the Philippines. The matched was dubbed The Thriller in Manila. Don King, hyperbolic and marketing genius was on full display for the event. On "Wu-Tang: 7th Chamber - Part 2" (1993), The Genius appropriates the poetic language of the boxing match's moniker to create a grandiose, super heroic narrative:

> My Clan is thick like plaster
>
> Bust ya, slash ya
>
> Slit a nigga back like a Dutch Master Killer
>
> Style jumped off and Killa, Hill-er
>
> I was the thriller in the Ali-Frazier Manila

I came down with phat tracks that combine and interlock

Like getting smashed by a cinder block

The Genius' Ali reference links his narrative to the badman trope. The Genius samples Ali's badman persona; but, he also reappropriates the popular media frenzy that surrounded the match. Hence, Ali's pop culture value as a badman and icon subsumes his religious awakening and his radical politicism. Here, Ali's religion and politics are eschewed as Ruck from Helter Skelter implores Cassius in "Leflah Leflour Eshkoshka" (1996), a farcical collaboration with The Originoo Gun Clappaz.. Ruck appropriates a pre-Black Muslim Muhammed Ali—Cassius Clay—as a vehicle to illustrate his badman persona:

I control the masses, wit metaphors that's massive

Don't ask if the nigga Ruckest bash shit like Cassius

I'm drastic, when it comes to verbs I be flippin

Cuz herbs jus be shittin off the words I be kickin

I scold you, double headed swords for the petty

but I told you, bitch niggaz that Headz Aint Ready

Now I mold you, back to the bitch that you are

fuckin wit the Ruckest get bruised, battered and scarred

Again, Muhammed Ali is utilized as an extension of the badman trope within hip hop aesthetics. His creative influence on hip hop has been well-established. However, Ali's attitude and candid rhetorical approach in popular media have also greatly influenced hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop has reappropriated Ali, focusing less on his religious and Civil Rights narrative and more on his radical posturing in the public domain and his physical

prowess. Muhammad Ali's style, attitude and swagger trump the political and religious portions of his narrative within hip hop aesthetics. Ali's style was embodied in his poetic use of language, his theatrical approach to public space, and his use of hyperbole. Hip hop aesthetics have built upon Ali as an archetypal model, reconfiguring Ali's narratives in such a way that make such a way that they make sense within the post-modern, post-Civil Rights mass media landscape. I provide a mere sampling of references to Muhammad Ali to illustrate his prominence and functionality as a hip hop icon.

(Illustration 5.4) Ali vs. Superman, DC Comic

Malcolm X

Malcolm X—perhaps more than any other pre-hip hop icon—has been embraced by the hip hop community. His influence is polemical, discursive, ideological, existential, and aesthetic. The impact of popular media on the profundity of the selection of Malcolm X as a hip hop icon cannot be understated. Spike Lee's *X* and Alex's Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, for example, have both contributed to the accessibility of Malcolm X's historical narrative. However, his significance as a hip hop icon is much more complicated. Malcolm X as hip hop icon represents cathartic transcendence and redemption. As with many hip hop icons, Malcolm X was targeted by white America as an enemy of the state. Furthermore, many parallels can be made between Malcolm X's struggle to overcome the pitfalls of an urban, oppressive environment and the struggle that many hip hop generationers face in a post industrial environment. Robin D.G. Kelley, correctly posits, "For if we look deep into the interstices of the postindustrial city, we are bound to find millions of Malcolm Littles, male and female, whose social locations have allowed them to demystify aspects of the hegemonic ideology while reinforcing their ties to it" (Kelley *Race Rebels* 181). Malcolm X's catharsis from drug dealer and pimp to righteous Muslim resonates with poor African American men. Malcolm's unflinching and outspoken stance toward white supremacy within the public sphere is also appealing to hip hop. Moreover, the hip hop community tends to focus on Malcolm's more militant narratives:

> What Malcolm's narrative shows us (unintentionally, at least) is the capacity of
> cultural politics, particularly for African American urban working-class youth, to
> both contest dominant meanings ascribed to their experiences and seize spaces for

leisure, pleasure, and recuperation…Whatever academicians and self-styled

nationalist intellectuals might think about Malcolm Little's teenage years, the

youth today, particularly the hip hop community, are reluctant to separate the

hipster from the minister. (Kelley, *Race Rebels,* 180)

The hip hop community's propensity toward non-judgment pushes the hip hop

community to parse out the redemptive qualities of a particular historical figure, despite

their shortcomings. In fact, Malcolm's evolution from street gangster to religious leader

is a major part of Malcolm's appeal within hip hop. In other words, Malcolm X is

embraced within the hip hop community *because* of his fallibility as a working class

African American man. Griffin links the hip hop community's embrace of Malcolm X to

the African American historical legacy of racial uplift politics:

It is quite significant that X's role of ancestor is most evident in black popular

culture, because it is this very culture that served as "safe" space" for him during

homie days…The Malcolm who denies the resistant capacities of black popular

culture is the same Malcolm who is resurrected in the most influential form of that

culture, film and rap music. Many of the rap artists who resurrect him would claim

that by so doing, they are indeed acting in resistance to black oppression.

(Griffin 139)

Though the adoption of Malcolm X as an icon within hip hop is connected to African

American struggle and resistance, the utilization of Malcolm X as an icon is also an

aesthetic imperative within hip hop. Hip Hop icon KRS-One offers perhaps the most

well-known reference to Malcolm X. The cover photograph for *By All Means Necessary*

(1989) features an image of KRS-One peering out of a window with an Uzi gripped

firmly in one hand. The photo was a sample of the famous 1964 photo of Malcolm X

vigilantly peeking out of a window in his East Elmhurst home. What did Malcolm's

photo symbolize? Why did KRS-One choose this particular image of Malcolm? Surely,

Malcolm X's "By Any Means Necessary" speech was an aesthetic influence.

Nonetheless, the fact that Malcolm X advocated armed self-defense as a means to protect

one's family, home and principles—particularly in light of the murder of his DJ Scott la

Rock—was the ideological and theoretical impetus of KRS-One's sampling of Malcolm

X.

(Illustration 5.6) KRS-One *By All Means* album cover

(Illustration 5.5) Malcolm X

On Styles P's "Cause I'm Black" from his *Super Gangster* album, Black Thought

references the historical Malcolm X. He links his intellectual and philosophical mindset

to Malcolm's, "Take one step forward and do the moonwalk back/Give me the peace prize like Al Gore/I got a mind like Malcolm X/How bout yours?" On the same track Styles reiterates his ideological affiliation with Malcolm X. Malcolm X is elevated to martyrdom. Styles' reference to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King and links him to African American struggle: "Too black to not dream like Martin did/Die like Malcolm or Martin to be part of it/Came from the ghetto/You know the heart of it/We just wanna finish it we ain't even started it". Interestingly, Styles P juxtaposes Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Nas channels Malcolm X on "Project Window" featuring Ron Isley from Nastradamus:

> Stack loot and guns, teach the girls karate, school your sons not to hate
>
> but to stay awake, cus the scars a razor make is nothin' in comparison
>
> to the gas left on this whole mass, if we don't get it controlled fast
>
> might as well be, laughin' with Malcolm X's assassin as we die slow

On' "Halftime", Nas takes a more light-hearted approach to the allegorical Malcolm X figure, employing satire as a vehicle to signify Malcolm X:

> Before a blunt, I take out my fronts
>
> Then I start to front, matter of fact, I be on a manhunt
>
> You couldn't catch me in the streets without a ton of reefer
>
> That's like Malcolm X, catchin' the Jungle Fever

Nas uses Cheech and Chongesque humor and the Malcolm X figure as a platform to discuss interracial dating. Moreover, Black Nationalist ideology, and the Nation of Islam specifically, had a major influence on hip hop aesthetics. The Nation of Islam's influence

on hip hop aesthetics is evidenced in hip hop's adoption of NOI figures as icons such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. Ice Cube and Public Enemy have also utilized Nation of Islam imagery in their music and videos. Similar to Ali, hip hop aesthetics have appropriated certain portions of Malcolm X's biography. Hip hop aesthetics, as evidenced in the cited references to Malcolm X, activate X's advocacy of armed self-defense and his transcendence of the urban, working-class environment. Within hip hop aesthetics, the religious portion of Malcolm X's biography is secondary to his personification of a self-determined Black man. .

Richard Pryor

Richard Pryor's influence on hip hop aesthetics is profound. His impact on American and African American popular culture is far-reaching. African American comedic texts have influenced hip hop aesthetics, yet Pryor's influence on hip hop aesthetics and his artistic genius transcends the American comedic tradition. Pryor's influence on hip hop culture is linguistic, philosophical and aesthetic. When hip hop emerged in the early 1970s, Richard Pryor's albums were staples in many African American record collections. Linguistically, his extensive use of the term "nigger" desensitized the hip hop generation to the term. Not only did Pryor's use of nigger expand on earlier uses of the term within the African American oral tradition, it provided a discursive outlet and artistic license for hip hop aesthetics. Pryor's candid nihilism, his acute awareness of African American socio-political realities, his personal issues with drugs, his use of tragic realism and humor, and his self-critical, autobiographical approach are responsible for his appeal as hip hop icon. Boyd identifies Pryor's candid, and often profane expression, as a foundation for hip hop aesthetics:

[Pryor's] "I don't give a fuck" attitude was certainly a precursor to and for the
hip hop generation that grew up in his shadow…So many of them decided that
instead of destroying themselves, they would turn this same attitude of supreme
indifference into a weapon against their detractors and use this distinct form of
cultural identity as a visible force. (Boyd 24)

Richard Pryor's comedic narrative was poignantly autobiographical. His brand of stark,
tragic, comedic realism ushered in a new conceptual/discursive space for articulating
African American male angst and nihilism. He openly discussed themes such as drug
use, domestic violence, and sexuality. Richard Pryor as hip hop icon is an extension of
the badman archetype. Nonetheless, hip hop appropriates Pryor within a much larger
socio-cultural context.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, as America became an increasingly
"sexualized society," we witnessed an explosion of recorded sexually explicit
comedy routines by black comics like Rudy Ray Moore, Redd Foxx, and Richard
Pryor, as well as the publication and popularization of so-called genuine "pimp
narratives." The *Pimp,* not just any "baaadman," became an emblematic figure of
the period, elevated to the status of hero and invoked by Hollywood as well as in
writings of black nationalist militants like H. Rap Brown, Elderidge Cleaver,
Bobby Seal and Huey P. Newton. (Kelley, Race Rebels, 214)

Pryor's portrayal of African American folk life, or "the folk," in the popular media
chartered new thematic terrain. Pryor's sexual candor and his use of profane language
brought African American socio-cultural "secrets" to the masses. Black comedians of

1960s and 1970s such as Richard Pryor helped to reify the pimp as an African American archetype, Pryor's influence, though, is much more complex.
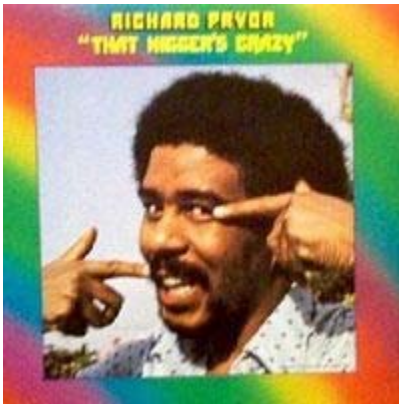
(Illustration 5.7) Richard Pryor
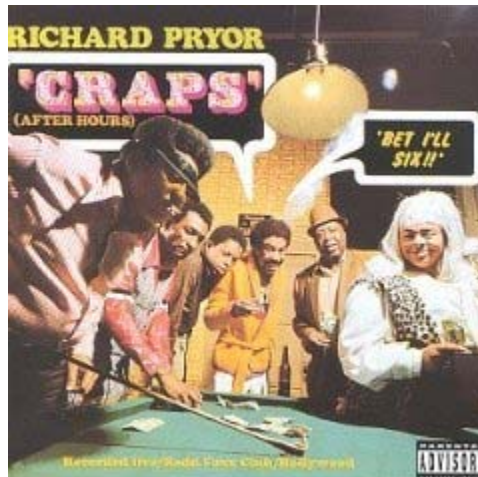
(Illustration 5.8) Richard Pryor

(Illustration 5.9) Richard Pryor

The release of Pryor's *Craps* (1971) and *That Nigga's Crazy* (1973) signaled a shift in Pryor's approach to comedy, which reflected cultural reverberations of the late 1960s and 1970s:

> Pryor had a decent career as a clean-cut joke-telling Bill Cosby-type of comedian, a fake persona that led him to an on-stage nervous breakdown. The civil rights and free speech movements radically affected his way of thinking, speaking and style of comedic presentation and after several years of dwelling in the underground fringes, he re-emerged on the comedy scene as streetwise, truthful storyteller. Pryor would now discuss whatever was on his mind – religion, politics, sex, racism – everything you weren't supposed to talk about in public. Where he used to perform impressions of celebrities he now performed

impressions of people he knew from his childhood, many of whom were pimps

and whores, thieves and junkies. But he gave them all a clear humanity, and they

all seemed like people we might know. (French)

Hip hop producer and icon DJ Premier sampled Richard Pryor on Gang Starr's

"ALONGWAYTOGO" from their *Hard to Earn* album. Erykah Badu samples Pryor on

"The Grind" featuring Dead Prez. Quinn cites blue comedians such as Pryor as major

influences on producer Dr. Dre's aesthetic. On "Niffaz 4 Life":

> The inspiration that Dre drew from Moore (and Blowfly, Richard Pryor, Redd
>
> Foxx) sprang from the blue comedian's vulgar, underground status. It
>
> encapsulated the non-legitimacy and working-class identification of bad lore. The
>
> badman as emblem of poor black insurgency, deliberate vulgarity, and violent
>
> alienation, willfully rebutted ideas of black gentility and assimilationist aspiration.
>
> (Quinn, 113)

Overall, Richard Pryor's influence on hip hop aesthetics is rooted in his use of tragic

realism. Pryor incorporated working-class, African America themes, characters, and

language into his performance. His work was auto-biographical. Pryor channeled his

personal pain into his performance and transformed it into graphic comedic narratives.

His work was commercially-viable across racial boundaries *and* culturally-relevant. Pryor

affirmed the notion that an African American artist could be true to his art and become

commercially successful. Hip hop aesthetics have appropriated Pryorian approaches to

subject matter, extending his use of the term "nigger" as well as his candid treatment of

urban, Black life.

Super Hero Iconography and Hip Hop Aesthetics

African American icons and archetypes such Muhammad Ali, Richard Pryor and the badman trope provide the socio-cultural and historical foundation of hip hop aesthetics. Comic book superheroes add an additional layer of contextual meaning to hip hop iconography. Comic book aesthetics have had a far-reaching effect on hip-hop culture and aesthetics. The influence of comic book superheroes is seen in not only graffiti, but also b-boying, emceeing, and djing. Though the explicit influence of comic book culture has waned, the hip-hop idiom continues to embrace superhero aesthetics. As hip hop evolved it began to embrace anti-heroes. Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash (The Flash) , Kool Keith, The Fantastic Four, Funky Four Plus One are all examples of the influence of comic culture on hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop's affinity for superheroes is linked to its American and African American cultural heritage. However, dual-identities—for example, the villain, the bad man, and the super hero/superheroine—as interpreted through the lens of hip hop aesthetics draw heavily from heroic narratives. In fact, comic book superheroes and supervillains are hip hop's first iconographic selections. Superhero narratives are borrowed from American popular culture. Heroic narratives act as important social modalities of expression within hip hop aesthetics. Coogan positions the superhero archetype within the framework of a larger socio-cultural context:

> In the case of the superhero, one of the cultural conflicts the genre animates and resolves the problem of binding adolescent males to the larger community. Hero stories traditionally have fulfilled this function by narrating the adventures of young men who learn to apply their strength to benefit their social group. (2)

In the absence of traditional societal rituals that bond young men, the escapism of comic book superheroes, via hip hop, serves to supplant this process. Hip Hop culture emerged in the early 1970s, its aesthetic constituents crystallizing by 1985. During the 1970s and 1980s, representations of African American males within the popular sphere were decidedly one-dimensional. During the 1980s, heroic African American male narratives were largely absent in popular media. The embrace of comic book culture in general and the superhero in particular is an aesthetic attempt at transcending the post-industrial landscape, more specifically the criminalization of working class African American men. Although hip hop's embrace of comic book superheroes represents trends in American popular culture in general, the ways in which hip hop aesthetics employ superhero narratives is unique.

Comic book superheroes, in the tradition of American heroic mythology and folklore that precedes them, serve as a receptacle and embodiment of American masculinity. Jeffrey Brown adds an additional layer of meaning to the reading of comic book superhero mythology. He asserts that black masculinity parallels comic book conventions:

> With its reliance on duality and performative masquerade, the popular image of black masculinity seems to parallel comic book conventions of masculinity. Clearly superhero comics are one of our culture's clearest illustrations of hypermasculinity and male duality premised on the fear of the unmasculine Other. (Brown 31)

Within the context of mass-mediated American popular culture, out of which hip hop emerges, the implications of superhero narratives are far-reaching. Brown cites the

creation of Milestone Comics as an important aesthetic marker of the evolution of the

Black superhero. Brown also notes that milestone represents, ironically, a turning away

from previous conceptualizations of African American superheroes, which were heavily

influenced by Blaxploitation era stereotypes:

> Prior to the emergence of Milestone [comics], the dominating image of the black
>
> superheroism was the often embarrassing image of characters inspired by the brief
>
> popularity of blaxploitation films in the mid-1970s. Such comic book heroes as
>
> Luke Cage, Black Panther, Black Lightning, and Black Goliath emerged during
>
> the blaxploitation era and were often characterized in their origins, costumes,
>
> street language, anti-establishment attitudes as more overtly macho than their
>
> white-bread counterparts. (34)

Superhero narratives, via comic books, cartoons and other popular media, greatly

influenced hip hop aesthetics between the 1970s and the early 1990s. Newark, New

Jersey emcee Redman, who utilizes dual-identity and the superhero narratives, explains

the significance of early superhero-influenced identities in hp hop. When asked what

advice he would give to an aspiring emcee, he advises a return to superheroic identity

constructions:

> But the first couple of mother f***ers that retract and start becoming superheroes
>
> again, and what I mean by superheroes is what I mean by names you can
>
> remember for the longest like Salt 'n' Peppa, Big Daddy Kane, Biz Markie,
>
> Rakim, LL Cool J…The legends. See those are superhero names. Even when it
>
> came to the next generation up, like then when it came to '92 and '94 it was like
>
> with Wu-Tang, Redman, Busta Rhymes, Keith Murray. Those are big—those are

superhero names…Like Redman. Those are big superhero names right now. See now you got names like—everybody name is like what's going on now, like, every name is "Lil", and it's cool because that's the trend and I love it because if I was young I probably would have been like, "Yo, all right, well my name is Lil' this, Young this, whatever," it don't matter. And I love it because it's providing jobs. (Winnington)

Redman reiterates the importance of superhero iconography within hip hop aesthetics. He acknowledges the superhero tradition within hip hop aesthetics. However, he is fully aware that hip hop aesthetics have shifted away superhero-influenced identities and narratives.

(Illustration 5.10) Spiderman graffiti, N. Philadelphia

The characteristics of superhero mythology partially account for its viability and functionality within hip hop aethetics. According to Coogan, there are three 'primary conventions or definitional characteristics of the superhero: mission, power and identity. The appeal of superhero narratives hinges upon two main components. Hip hop aesthetics utilize superhero narratives to: 1) work out identity politics, through artistic expression, in a post-modern environment; and 2) as a rhetorical and linguistic tool used to creatively, and allegorically, transcend the post-industrial environment. I examine superheroes and their link to super heroic narratives within hip hop aesthetics. Coogan declares that "superpowers are one of the most identifiable elements of the superhero genre" (31). References to superheroes are abundant within hip hop discourses; so much so that the superhero (and supervillain) has become foundational components of hip hop aesthetics. The B-boy and B-Girl, by definition, possess superhuman abilities. Whether the B-Boy is a dancer, emcee, DJ, scholar, or graffiti artist, the expectation is that the individual be highly-skilled. It is inferred that the b-Boy's abilities are otherworldly, transcending time, space, and convention, while overcoming socio-economic and technological constraints. Moreover, comic book superhero references are present in every element of hip hop culture including graffiti and djing (see illustration 5.1).

By the late 1980s, the influence of comic book superheroes began to wane within hip hop aesthetics. As hip hop narratives shifted even more toward tragic realism in during the early 1990s, there was a decrease in the influence of superhero iconography within hip hop aesthetics. Nonetheless, the superhero and super villain—or more accurately the notion of superhuman powers/skills---was still an important aspect of hip hop aesthetics.

Brooklyn-based emcee Jeru the Damaja sampled directly from superhero iconography

through the construction of his alter-ego Jeru the Damaja as well as lyrically. On "You

Can't Stop the Prophet," Jeru the Damaja embodies the persona of African American

superhero Prophet. Prophet was created by Stephen Platt and debuted on October 1, 1993,

Jeru intermingles superhero iconography with inner-city imagery and esoteric religious

references:

> I, leap over lies in a single bound (Who are you?)
>
> The Black Prophet
>
> One day I got struck by Knowledge of Self
>
> It gave me super-scientific powers
>
> Now I, run through the ghetto
>
> Battlin my, arch nemesis Mr. Ignorance

Jay-Z illustrates the centrality of superhuman abilities and post modern mythology within

hip hop aesthetics. On "Hovi Baby" (2002), he establishes his narrative within the

context of the invincibility of Roc-a-Fella Records. On the chorus, he introduces the

listener to the surreal world of his alter-ego, J.Hova, "Can't touch the untouchable, break

the unbreakable/Shake the unshakeable (it's Hovi baby)/Can't see the unseeable, reach the

unreachable/Do the impossible (it's Hovi baby)":

> So I got the WHOLE rap world on my shoulder they tryin to see
>
> further than I am.. (than I am..)
>
> And I have been tryin to be patient with they preoccupation
>
> with David and Goliath.. (Goliath..)
>
> But sooner or later, that patience gonna run it's course

and I'm forced to be a tyrant.. (be a tyrant..)

But bein tyrant, comin through your environment

Iron mask, nigga iron gas, nigga I am back

Superhuman abilities are central to hip hop narratives. Superman, the penultimate American superhero, serves as a common trope in hip hop narratives. Superhero iconography and symbolism are prominent in hip hop narratives. On "Kingdom Come" from Jay-Z's *Black Album* (2006), Jay-Z intermingles 1980s drug tales and the Superman persona:

Sellin blow in the park, this I know in my heart

Now I'm so enlightened I might glow in the dark

I been up in the office you might know him as Clark

But, just when you thought the whole world fell apart

I - take off the blazer loosen up the tie

Step inside the booth Superman is alive

Jay-Z appropriates the Superman/Clark Kent persona as a metaphor for his superhuman lyrical ability. The recording booth serves as a metaphor for the telephone booth in the Superman narrative. For Jay-Z, the recording booth is symbolic of the transformative power of hip hop music. Whereas a telephone booth—a representation of the intrinsic link between technology and superpowers in Superman narratives—served as the conduit for Clark Kent's transformation into a superhero (Superman), Jay-Z supplants the recording booth as a pathway to superhero emceeing ability, and—in turn, a new, hip hop identity. He takes the Superman analogy further in "Kingdom Come" proclaiming that he is "Not only N.Y.C. I'm hip hop's savior". When Jay-Z announced his retirement as a hip

hop artist became of Def Jam Records in 2004, he became a full-fledged corporate executive. In "Kingdom Come", Jay-Z also employs Clark Kent, Superman's alter-ego, to illustrate his diversity as artist and businessman.

Another component of the identity convention within the superhero genre that is pertinent to my discussion of hip hop aesthetics is the use of a codename. Though the codename "clearly marks the superhero as different from his predecessors, the heroic identities of these characters do not firmly externalize either their alter ego's character or biography" (32). The superhero and super villain's biography (or past) is crucial to his/her identity. The codename or alter ego is a fundamental aspect of hip hop aesthetics. Codenames are integral to every element of hip hop culture. Nonetheless, one's biography is the foundation of the alter-ego in hip hop aesthetics.

The emergence of 50 Cent marks a shift in superhero *and* gangsta iconography and iconology within hip hop. 50 Cent's reappropriation of notorious 1980s Brooklyn stick-up kid Kelvin "50 Cent" Martin, which was personified in his debut single "How to Rob", and his being shot numerous times and surviving collectively led to his superhuman yet realist narratives. Moreover, on "What up Gangsta" from his debut album *Get Rich or Die Tryin,* 50 Cent references then rejects Superman as icon, "I walk around like I got a S on my chest/Naw, that's a semi-auto/ and a vest on my chest." As noted, 50 Cent appropriates, engages, then rejects Superman iconography and supplants it with gangsta symbolism and post industrial realism. 50 Cent clearly targets a hardcore, gangsta demographic, yet, his articulation of gangsta sensibilities is anchored in superhero mythology and an acute business acumen. On "What Up Gangsta" 50 Cent intermingles Superman iconography, "Gangstas, they bump my shit/ then they know me/I

grew up around some niggaz that's not my homies/ Hundred G's I stash it (what) the mack I blast it (yeah)." Here, superhero mythology is trumped by gangsta iconography and ethos.

In opposition to the superhero, there is the supervillain. Within hip hop aesthetics, the strict binary between bad/good dissolve when filtered through African American folk cultural traditions—namely the blues and the badman trope. Hip hop does not adopt superhero narratives uncritically. Hip Hop reconciles the philosophical tension between good/bad aesthetically, drawing upon the African American badman trope. The badman in hip hop is serves as a "reconstituted trickster" (Cobb 30). Yet, Cobb declares that the trickster in hip hop is a secondary figure, the Thug Icon being the primary figure within hip hop (30).

> The trickster is secondary in hip hop; in this arena the boulevard 'hood—at least since the inception of Topic's ghetto ontology "thug life"—has reigned supreme. And the lauded Thug Icon is nothing if not the remix version of the blues' Bad Nigger archetype. Whereas the Bead nigger and the trickster exists as parallel types in the blues, the thug alone has become the patron deity of hip hop. (30)

First, Cobb overstates the significance of the Thug Icon. Artists such as Common, Kanye West, and Lupe Fiasco are the antithesis of the thug archetype. Even self-proclaimed thugs such as Nas, Styles P and Tupac attempt to reconcile the thug persona with more progressive conceptualizations of Black male identity. On Nas's "Made You Look", he iterates that women should make sure their mate is "a thug but intelligent too", signaling the recognition that street-knowledge is essential to post-industrial survival. However,

Nas problematizes the archetypal thug, advocating rational, etiquette and systematic thinking *as well* as thug qualities.

Unfortunately, Cobb's emphasis on the Thug Icon fails to track trends in American popular culture and media in general that have impacted shifts in hip hop iconography. The super villain too, then, can be viewed as an extension of the badman trope as it is reinterpreted through hip hop aesthetics. Within hip hop aesthetics the badman and supervillain are often conflated. Nonetheless, the supervillain—as with the superhero—is a reflection of the society that he emerges from: "[The supervillain] represents an inversion of [societal] values. But more than that a supervillain has the ability to enact that inversion, to bring the normal activities of a society to a halt and force a hero to arise to defend those virtues" (Coogan 61). The supervillain exists alongside blaxploitation and Black Nationalist representations of African American men in the late 1980s.

Gangsta iconography has been present in hip hop culture since its inception. Although N.W.A. elevated tragic realism to the forefront of hip hop narratives--which tapped into the badman trope, blues sensibilities and popularized the use of gangsta aesthetics in hip hop narratives, it was not until the early 1994 that gangsta iconography was cemented within hip hop aesthetics. By the late 1990s, there was a decline in superhero narratives within hip hop discourse and an increase in gangsta iconography. By 1997, hip hop aesthetics were firmly enmeshed in gangsta iconography. Groups like CNN (Capone and Noreaga), Tupac's Outlaws—featuring Khadafi, Fatal Hussien, Mussolini—, Scarface, Irv Gotti, et al, represent a full embrace of gangsta aesthetics within hip hop. On "Respiration" Black Star and Common simultaneously engage and reject the superhero

narrative. They utilize the post-industrial and the post-modern landscape as a backdrop for a reconceptualiztion of superhero iconography within hip hop:

> Skyscrapers is colossus, the cost of living
>
> is preposterous, stay alive, you play or die, no options
>
> No Batman and Robin, can't tell between
>
> the cops and the robbers, they both partners, they all heartless
>
> With no conscience, back streets stay darkened
>
> Where unbeliever hearts stay hardened

Because hip hop emerges as counter culture, the supervillain as social agent or critic is important to hip hop aesthetics. Artists such as Big pun (Punisher), MF Doom, and Ghostface (Iron Man, Tony Starks) borrow heavily from supervillain narratives. Of the five types of supervillain Coogan identifies, the mad scientist (the lab), the criminal mastermind, and the inverted-superhero are most common in hip hop narratives (61). Furthermore, "many supervillains suffer a wound—typically psychological and emotional but often with a physical component—that shapes their lives and which they are unable to recover from" (70). The permanent wound, whether physical or psychological, is a characteristic of the supervillain that appeals to hip hop aesthetics. Within hip hop aesthetics, the supervillain's wound serves as a creative backdrop, providing allegorical-meaning within a post-modern, post-industrial context. Supervillains often have superiority complexes that originate from childhood. Such childhood experiences leave the supervillain emotionally scarred:

> [The supervillain] creates a superiority complex that most often emerges as a
>
> defense mechanism to make up for feelings of inferiority and inadequacy that

arose from maltreatment received when he was younger, often in childhood, that

made him feel inferior—they are defective physically or socially (or both) and are

only superior mentally they are, as therapists say, in love with the story of their

wound, unable to get past whatever happened in their past and turn their energies

toward healing or redemptive therapy. (84)

The psychological, economic and sociological effects of institutionalized racism and

white supremacy upon African Americans is well-documented. Historically, then, it is not

difficult to see the symbolic parallels between African American experiences and the

wounded supervillain. The bad man trope informs hip hop's embrace of the supervillain.

However, the supervillain's appeal in hip hop is linked to the supervillain's superior—

albeit criminal—mind.

Criminal behavior is another characteristic of the supervillain that is embedded in hip

hop discourse. The supervillain approaches crime artistically, linking the supervillain,

aesthetically, to hip hop. For the supervillain, "crime is a theatrical art, with actors,

audience, and performance and it can be appreciated aesthetically. The criminal, the

supervillain is the impresario who puts on a show for the world that is far superior to the

pecuniary plunderings of ordinary bad guys" (Coogan 80).

(Illustration 5.11) Punisher

(Illustration 5.12) The Hulk and David Banner

(Illustration 5.13) Superman

Things Done Changed on This Side: Tracking Shifts in Hip Hop Iconography from

Comic Book Superhero Iconography to Gangsta Icons and Archetypes

The shift from comic book superhero iconography to gangsta iconography began in 1987 (Schooly D, KRS-One, Hip-hop iconography shifted from fantasy (super heroes) to realism (Scarface). N.W.A is usually credited with the monumental shift in hip-hop aesthetics toward so-called gangsta rap. However, the shift toward gangsta iconography was solidified in the early 1990s. The gangsta archetype—though present before the late 1980s within African American culture—was refashioned and reinterpreted within hip-hop culture. Crack cocaine, the growth of the prison industrial complex, and the proliferation and promotion of violent imagery in popular culture all aided in the prominence of the gangsta archetype in hip-hop. Dimitriadis discusses the importance of the gangsta archetype in American culture:

> The violent outlaw, living his life outside of the dominant cultural constraints, solving his problems through power and domination, is a character-type with roots deep in American popular lore. Indeed, the gangster holds a very special place in the American popular imagination. He embodies such capitalist values as rugged individualism, rampant materialism, strength through physical force. (188)

The outlaw and badman are prominent archetypes within American and African-American culture. I am concerned with the transference of these two archetypes to hip hop aesthetics. Historically, what has been the appeal of these archetypes, particularly for Black men? What does the wholesale or parcel adoption of gangsta archetypes say about both American idealism and Black masculinity within hip hop? Hip-hop…

The gangsta aesthetic has been a part of the hip-hop idiom since its beginning. In *Wild Style* (1983)*,* the seminal hip hop film by Charlie Ahearn, Double Trouble can be observed toting what appears to be fake machine guns on stage in the final scene. However, gangster motifs and iconography were not as prominent as they would become in the 1990s. KRS-One, a hip-hop archetype and icon, represents the convergence of the gangsta aesthetic and hip-hop's more progressive components. BDP's first album, *Criminal Minded* (1989), is a good example of the struggle between Black Nationalist iconography and gangsta aesthetics in hip hop. The post-industrial landscape and all its ills is a recurring theme throughout this album. Scott La Rock, KRS-One's DJ, was fatally shot August 27, 1987. This marked a shift in KRS-One's aesthetic impetus, evidence of the cathartic aspects of hip-hop. It also served to bridge the aesthetic gap between naturalism and realism in hip-hop. La Rock's death was a grim reminder that recognition as a hip-hop artist did not necessarily offer a buffer from one's socioeconomic reality.

KRS-One's next album *By All Means Necessary* (1989) drew heavily from Black Nationalist iconography and imagery, specifically Malcolm X. The album was lyrically-advanced, catapulting KRS-One to icon status and had a major impact on hip-hop aesthetics. Many of the new hip-hop archetypes and icons represent a convergence of previous African-American and American archetypes and iconography. Many socioeconomic and cultural factors were responsible for the creation of new archetypes within the hip-hop idiom. I identify several new archetypes and icons within hip-hop and discuss their significance.

New(er) Hip Hop Icons and Archetypes

Not only have hip hop's icons changed since its inception in the early 1970s, hip-hop archetypes have also reflected shifts in American culture. Several archetypes have emerged within hip hop. Most build upon previous African American and American stereotypes and archetypes. The Video Vixen, for example, is unique as a hip hop archetype in that it relies primarily in popular media (i.e. video, magazines, etc.). The Video Vixen is a post modern construction. I do not project an aesthetic or cultural assessment onto hip hop's archetypal models, but rather I explore the influences and origins of prominent hip hop archetypes within hip hop aesthetics. Contemporary hip hop archetypes reveal much about the socioeconomic and cultural realities of the hip hop generation. Stated differently, many hip hop archetypes were created in response to *real* experiences in working-class, post-industrial America. What is the socio-cultural significance of the emergence of these new hip hop archetypes?

Keyes identifies four distinct categories of women rappers emerge in rap music performance: "Queen Mother" "Fly Girl" "Sista With Attitude" and "Lesbian" (Keyes, 266). Though Keyes' categories inform the female archetypes, my analysis extends beyond women emcees. I focus on archetypes that appear consistently in hip hop narratives and discourse. The video vixen is the by-product of video mediation in hip hop. The video vixen is a voluptuous, often scantily clad woman, who resembles the female groupie stereotype. However, whereas the traditional groupie was only interested in having sex with famous figures, the video vixen uses her body to attain material gain. The publication of Karrine Steffens' *Confessions of a Video Vixen* solidified the video vixen as a hip hop archetype. Stephens tell-all book chronicled her sexual escapades with

hip hop artists. Steffens' entrée to celebrity was the result of her being cast in numerous hip hop videos. Unlike the groupie, Stephens sought to capitalize on her sexual trysts to acquire financial gain. Various hip hop media outlets, such as *King*, *The Source* and *XXL* aid in the proliferation of the video vixen, offering features dedicated to video models.

The Gold digger archetype emerged during the 1980s Crack Era. The gold digger archetype emerged as the result of surplus illicit revenue from the crack era economy. She is portrayed as a money-hungry temptress. The gold digger archetype emerges out of African American urban, post-industrial male paranoia, emanating from a distrust and fear of African American women's hyper-consumption and materialism The gold digger is always female, and, like the stick-up kid archetype, is unwilling—not unable—to support herself financially. The gold digger archetype is often closely associated with another female ante type, the ho. The "ho" ante type is connected to previous African-American narratives which reflected pimp dialect and discourse. Pimp culture has undoubtedly influenced hip-hop aesthetics. The pimp/ho dichotomy is often used allegorically to represent capitalism in America and the reality that there are clear economic winners and losers. It is a critique and admission of (unbalanced) power constructs in America. It is an African American trope that critiques *and* accepts capitalist exploitation. Though the gold-digger and ho archetype reflect patriarchal and misogynistic tendencies within hip hop, the gold digger--in particular—is a critique of materialistic women with ulterior motives.

Many female hip hop archetypes and icons are recycled from 1970s Blaxploitation era cultural production. The African American women characters portrayed in popular media during this era of Black Popular culture were created in axiological opposition to

male heroic figures of the time. Pam Grier, for example, "established a template for a new kind of "Black bitch" '(*Black Sexual Politics,* 125) Movies such as *Foxy Brown* reinforced such imagery:

> During the early 1970s, when films such as *Shaft* and *Superfly* presented African American women as sexual props for the exploits of Black male heroes, Pam Grier's films signaled the arrival of a new kind of "bitch." As a "Black Bitch," Grier's performances combined beauty, sexuality, and violence. For example, in *Sheba, Baby* (1975), Grier is routinely called a "bitch" by the bad guys, a derisive appellation that does not seem to phase her. In other places in the same film when she is called a "Bitch" the term seems to signal admiration. She becomes a "Bad bitch" (e.g., a good Black woman), when she puts her looks, sexuality, intellect, and/or aggression in service to African American communities.
>
> (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics,* 124).

Both Pam Grier as pop icon and Pam Grier as the "bad bitch" portrayed in blaxploitation films have been reappropriated by hip hop. Female emcee Foxy Brown, born Inga Marchand, borrows heavily from Grierian narratives and imagery. Foxy Brown's hip hop narratives are propelled by gangsta aesthetics. Brown's frequent run-ins with the law have added street credibility to her hip hop persona. Moreover, an examination of Pam Grier as hip hop icon and archetype sheds light on hip hop's position as part of an African American pop culture continuum. Misogyny, though accentuated within hip hop narratives, is the cultural residue of previous strains of African American popular discourse.

Male emcees clearly delineate between the gold digger and "the queen" (i.e. a "respectable woman"). This is delineation is made across "gangsta" and "conscious" discourse. On Jeru the Damaja's The *Sun Rises in the East (*1994) "The Bitches", which is a quasi-diatribe directed toward undignified Black women, the Damaja clearly discerns between the gold digger or "bitch" and a respectable Black women i.e. a Black Queen:

> Now a queen's a queen and a stunt is a stunt
>
> You can tell who's who by the things they want
>
> Most chicks want minks, Diamonds, a Benz
>
> Spend up all your ends Probably fuck your friends
>
> High-post attitudes, real rude with fat asses
>
> Think that the pussy is made out of gold
>
> Try to control you by slidin' up and down on the wood
>
> They be givin' up sex for goods
>
> Dealin' with bitches is the same old song
>
> They only want you 'til someone richer comes along
>
> Don't get me wrong, strong black women
>
> I know who's who so due respect I'm givin'

Clearly, the Damaja's "bitch" is linked to amorality and economically-parasitic behavior. The Damaja's patriarchal critique of lasciviously materialistic Black women lies in his juxtaposition of the bitch and the queen, pointing out that Black Queens are loyal, whereas a bitch/gold digger will suck the Black man dry, spiritually and financially:

> While queens stand by you, and stick around
>
> Bitches suck you dry and push you down

So it's my duty to address

This vampiress

Givin' the black man stress

Recognize what's real and not material

Or burn in hell, chasin' Polo and Guess, dumb bitches

Hip hop's fixation on the Black queen is on one hand linked to hip hop's acceptance of Black Nationalist rhetoric and symbolism. Clearly, the construction of the queen/bitch binary is problematic. It portrays women as simple, flat character props, stand-ins that often propel male hip hop narratives. The appearance of the Queen archetype can be linked more directly to the Native Tongue and Black Watch Movements (see X Clan). Female emcee Queen Latifah helped to solidify the Queen archetype within hip hop. Her debut album *All Hail the Queen* also aided in he proliferation of the Queen archetype in hip hop discourse. Queen Latifah represented the righteous, Afrocentically-tuned emcee.

Kanye West attempted to reconcile the tension between the gold digger and the progressive, successful Black woman. On "Gold Digger" (2005) featuring Jamie Foxx, West makes a clear distinction between a gold digger and a woman who desires a man with means. On the hook, he repeats "I ain't sayin she a gold digger, but she ain't messin wit no broke niggaz…". The gold digger and ho ante types exist in direct contrast to "the queen" and "wifey". Kanye directs the majority of the first two verses to an archetypal, trifling woman: the archetypal gold digger:

I know somebody payin child support for one of his kids

His baby momma's car and crib is bigger than his

You will see him on TV Any Given Sunday

> Win the Superbowl and drive off in a Hyundai
>
> She was spose to buy ya shorty TYCO with ya money
>
> She went to the doctor got lypo with ya money

On the second verse, Kanye resolves the tension created through the gold digger archetype. He uses irony, satire to illustrate African American men's abandonment of African American women once they are upwardly mobile:

> He gone make it into a Benz out of that Datsun
>
> He got that ambition baby look in his eyes
>
> This week he moppin floorz next week it's the fries
>
> So, stick by his side
>
> I know his dude's ballin but yea thats nice
>
> And they gone keep callin and tryin
>
> But you stay right girl
>
> But when you get on he leave yo a** for a white girl

Wifey is retention of the "traditional" black woman. The inherent tension between the ho/wife binary becomes more complicated in delineating between liberation and objectification. Again, these archetypal models within hip hop are borrowed from previous African American stereotypes and archetypes, "the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass media" (*Black Sexual Politics,* 1270).

The 1990s saw the emergence to several new stereotypes and archetypes such as the uber-thug and pimp, the video vixen, the gangster, the pimp, the crack fiend mama, the player, and the baller. On one hand these figures represent a morphing of previous icons

and archetypes. On the other hand these new archetypes represent shifting socio-economic trends within the African-American community. The new hip hop icons and archetypes also reflect trends in American popular culture. American film culture in particular has done much to reinforce and accelerate the development of many of the new archetypes and icons in hip-hop culture.

The Stick up kid is another new hip-hop archetype to emerge within hip-hop discourse. The stick-up kid archetype was established in the early phases of hip hop culture. The stick-up kid represents all that is negative in the underground street economy and within urban, street culture. Greed, graft, betrayal, individualism, intimidation, and violence are all trademarks of the stick-up kid. The stick-up kid represents individuals who are unwilling to "work" for wealth, but merely want to strong-arm and rob individuals for material gain. The stick-up kid also reinforces the need for one to always keep one's guard up in the African American community, particularly when one has reached a modicum success. The stick-up kid, literally and allegorically, is frequently referenced in hip-hop lyrics. The stick-up kid operates as a poignant signifier, an extension of the hater antitype. Nas targets the stick-up kid in "N.Y. State of Mind" raps:

> Got younger niggaz pullin their triggers bringing fame to they name
>
> and claim some corners, crews without guns are goners
>
> In broad daylight, stickup kids, they run up on us
>
> Fo'-fives and gauges, Macs in fact
>
> Same niggaz'll catch a back to back, snatchin yo' cracks in black

The stick-up kid archetype is a byproduct of the post-industrial crack economy. Nas highlights the mendacity of urban violence, with the revelation the shootouts occur in "broad daylight".

Wu-Tang Clan's "C.R.E.A.M" Inspectah Deck utilizes the stick-up kid as a sublime signifier. For Deck the stick-up kid represents the realities of "hood life", visual imagery incorporated into Deck's poetic collage, "We got stick-up kids, corrupt cops and crackspots." The stick-up kid typically targets drug dealers and other individuals involved in illicit activities. On "Got My Eyes On You" by Styles featuring Akon, the duo evokes the stick-up kid in the refrain:

I got my eyes on you,

And I'm posted on the corner with that thing on my side

I got my eyes on you

A message to the stick-up kids don't even try.

Here, the stick-up kid is positioned as a signifier. The stick-up kid represents an individual that will steal and rob to attain material wealth and status. The stick-up kid is generally reviled, an outcast. Members of the community, particularly those living a "street life", must always remain vigilant of the stick-up kid. Vigilantism is usually the option of choice for dealing with the stick-up kid in hip hop narratives, which speaks to the policing, or lack of policing/low conviction rate for violent offenses, within African American and Latino communities.

The stick-up kid archetype is the theme of Mos Def's "Got". He does not identify the stick-up kid explicitly, because he does not have to. He assumes that the listener is already familiar with the stick-up kid archetype:

Cause while the goods glisten, certain eyes take position

To observe your trick, and then catch that ass slippin'

Like, come on now Ak, what you expect?

Got a month's paycheck danglin' off your neck

And while you Cristal sippin', they rubbin' up they mittens

With heat in mint condition to start the getti-gettin'

They clique starts creepin' like Sandinistina guerrillas

You screamin' playa haters, these niggas is playa killers

Mr. Fash-ion, that style never last long

The harder you flash, the harder you get flashed on

Mos refutes the notion that the stick-up kid is a hater. He explains that the hater preys on those that flaunt their riches. In the next verse, Mos links the stick-up kid to a type of Darwinism:

There's hunger in the street that is hard to defeat

Many steal for sport, but more steal to eat

Cat's heavy at the weigh-in, and he's playin' for keeps

Don't sleep, they'll roll up in your passengers seat

There is universal law, whether rich or poor

Some say life's a game, to more, life is war

So put them egos to the side and get off them head-trips

'Fore some cats pull out them heaters and make you head-less...

Mos Def's rendering of the stick-up kid is farcical, however, he does illuminate the centrality of the stick-up kid within hip hop culture. Because self-defense is a major

tenant of hip hop aesthetics, many hip hop narratives deal with the stick-up kid in a violent manner. That is homicide is justifiable within the context of the stick-up. It is inferred amongst hip hop generationers that one can resort to violence to protect one's material interests.

As stated, the stick-up kid archetype can be viewed as a hater. Though there is overlap, the hater is a distinct hip hop archetype. The hater archetype is one of the most prominent archetypes in twenty-first century hip-hop aesthetic. The hater is referenced often in contemporary hip hop discourse. The hater can be either male or female. Created in opposition to love, the hater is seen as a figure that attempts to curtail or derail an individual's progress. An extension of the "crabs-in-a-barrel" trope so prominent in African American discourse, the hater expresses disdain, envy and jealousy toward an individual because of that individual's status, success, or material possessions. The hater is distinct from the stick-up archetype. Whereas the stick-up kid robs for material gain or street credibility, the hater hates, seemingly, for no reason. In other words, the hater's motivation is motivated by pure jealousy, envy, and is void of honor and respect. The Spit character in *Beat Street* represents of the earliest poplar culture texts that utilized the hater archetype. Spit is a B-Boy, or B-boy wannabe. However, Spit lacks the graffiti skills of his arch-nemesis, Ramone, or Ramo, is a master graffiti artist. Spit's identity remains unknown throughout most of the film. He is merely known by his graffiti tag, which is consistently scrawled across Ramone's elaborate graffiti "burners". Spit's identity is revealed when Ramone catches Spit in the act, vandalizing his art. A chase ensues along the subway tracks, until Ramone tackles Spit. Tragically, they both are electrocuted-to-death from the powerful current of the subway's "third rail". Spit's

motivation for defacing Ramone's burners is never revealed, nonetheless, Spit is one of

the first representations of the hater in popular media.

"All About the Benjamins" from Puff Daddy's *No Way Out* featured Lil Kim, The

Lox, and The Notorious B.I.G. The song is an ode to capitalist individualism, opulence,

and materialism. Lil' Kim introduces the hater in her verse, "Take your pick, got a

firearm you shoulda toted, suck a dick/All that bullshit you kick, playa hatin from the

sideline, Get your own shit, why you ridin mine? (uh-huh)". The Notorious B.I.G

provides a tangential response to Lil Kim's hater-reference. Through violent gangsta

imagery and tragic realism, B.I.G warns haters that he will to their encroachment with

excessive violence:

> Attack with the mac, my left hand spit, right hand
>
> Grip on the whip, for the smooth getaway
>
> Playa haters get away or my lead will spray
>
> Squeeze off til Im empty, dont tempt me
>
> Only, to hell I send thee, all about the benjis
>
> What!?!?!?!?

Redman referenced the hater on "Da Rockwilder" from his *Blackout* (1999) album with

Method Man. Redman inserts the hater ante type in his classic, farcical tag team, verbal

exchange with Method man:

> Haters don't touch (what?) weigh us both up
>
> Now my neighbor dope up
>
> Got the cable hooked up, all channels
>
> Lift my shirt all mammals

You ship off keys and we ship Grand Pianos

One of the strongest indictments of the hater is put forth by the LOX. "Fuck You", from *We are the Streets* (2000), is dedicated almost entirely to the hater. The hater archetype is prominently referenced in the song's hook:

If your hoped we wouldn't make it, fuck you (fuck you)

Talk with a heart full of hatred, fuck you (fuck you)

And you said we wouldn't cake it, fuck you (fuck you)

Only my man blood is sacred, cocksucker, fuck you

However, the hater can also represent someone that stands in opposition to hip-hop posturing, attitudes or values. Popular cultural pundits and politicians fall into this realm. Bill O'Reilly, Oprah Winfrey, sports columnist Jason Whitlock, Bill Cosby and Stanley Crouch are examples of the hater archetype, "although it is far from monolithic, the hip-hop nation has demonstrated no tolerance for Bill O'Reilly, John McWhorter, or Robert H. Bork. (Ogbar, *Hip hop Revolution,* 138). As Ogbar points out, hip hop culture engages the "political-hater" directly. Unfortunately, these cultural critiques have built upon earlier critiques of African American folk culture; they represent class fissures, that were informed by the culture wars of the late 1980s and 1990s (Ogbar, *Hip hop Revolution,* 110). Many of these critiques view hip hop culture as monolithic, and they fail to contextualize hip hop within the socio-economic conditions that have impacted hip hop's emergence and evolution:

While the struggle over hip's soul has unfolded, outside critics have lambasted

hip –hop for being responsible for myriad of social ills. Several high-profile

politicians, academics, journalists, and activists have held hip hop culpable for

violent crime rates , sexual irresponsibility, poor academic performance, and general social dysfunction….These pundits have offered little more than recycled fear of black youth as a social danger. More specifically, anti-rap pundits have pandered to racist and class-based fear of young black people and created untenable arguments to bolster their claims. These attacks have not been ignored by the hip hop community, which has consistently engaged in vigorous intellectual exchange over its own destiny and that of society at large.

(Ogbar *Hip Hop Revolution* 106)

50 Cent singles out this political strain of the hater archetype on "Lifetime Achievement" from the *Elephant in the Sand* mixtape. The entire song operates as a signifier of the hater archetype. He directs his distaste and disdain at Oprah Winfrey and Bill O'Reilly's for criticizing his critique of the America's current political state, "Bill O'Reilly called me pinhead for saying that shit,/ Well him and Oprah Winfrey both can suck on some dick." Tony Yayo references the hater explicitly, later in the track:

Niggas tried to kill me on three different occasions

I guess that's life when niggas just hatin

Came a long way from slingin' dope and that hard white

And my neighbors don't speak (why?)/ they all white

and the homies don't speak cause I'm rich now

My life is Hermes, haze and Cristal

And ménage trios out in Moscow,

 I got them Trojans, Magnums and Lifestyles.

Tony Yayo's reference to the hater draws attention to the fact that the hater is not racial-specific. It is important to note that the hater can be categorically characterized as a "good nigga". This is particularly true if the hater is an African-American *and* male. Because of hip-hop aesthetics extensive use of the badman trope, the hater is maligned within hip-hop culture. The hater archetype appears prominently on Nas's "Hate Me Know" featuring P. Diddy and Black Star's "Hater Players. The Clipse reference hate on "Trill":

> Why does wealth make them hate me
>
> And make chicks hearts so achy breaky
>
> Rarely do I toot my own horn
>
> But y'all fellas got too far gone, now come back

The Clipse clearly link the hater to their newfound wealth and stardom. On "Mr. Me Too" from their *Hell Hath No Fury* album*,* the Clipse utilize intricate boasts about their jet setting and epicurean hedonism to signify and taunt the hater. N.E.R.D member Pharell inserted the hater in the first line of the song, establishing the hater as an important signifier and aesthetic marker in the song:

> Niggas is haters, I'm doin deals like the majors
>
> Ice Cream sneakers, I signed my first skater
>
> You can pay 3 and buy yourself some Bapesters
>
> Bullet-proof under t-shirts because they hate us

Producer and emcee Kanye West regularly utilizes the hater as a signifier in his lyrics. On his *Graduation* album, West references the hater on several tracks. On "Everything I Am", West uses the barbershop as a social context to invoke the hater archetype, "And

I'm back to tear it up/Hater's start ya engines/I hear I'm gearin up/People talk so much

shit about me in barbershops, that they forget to get they hair cut." The hater has

developed into one of the most widely-recognized archetypes in hip hop aesthetics.

Jesus Christ is another prominent iconic figure within hip-hop culture. As a

historical, spiritual and religious figure, references to Jesus Christ are sometimes literal

and at other times allegorical in hip hop narratives. However, hip hop's reapprporiation

of Jesus is post-modern in its usage. During the late 1960s and early 1970s works such as

Jesus, the Superstar reconceptualized Jesus as an American pop icon. The growth of

megachurches and evangelical television programming have also lent cultural capital to

the Jesus figure. Within hip hop, the historical Jesus figure segues purely religious

interpretations. Instead, hip-hop recycles and reconfigures Jesus the historical figure, a

Jew who was persecuted at the hands of institutionalized religion and politics. Hip hop

narratives also juxtapose Jesus' burden on the cross with the plight of African American

men in post industrial America. The influence of the Black Church and the Rastafarian

movement on African-American public discourse makes Jesus an organic iconic selection

within hip hop.

Yonker's emcee DMX— who has penned hardcore tracks entitled "Crime Story",

"We Don't Give a Fuck", "Keep Your Shit the Hardest", and "What these Bitches

Want"—included a "Prayer" track on all but one of his albums. He mentions Jesus, the

religious figure, throughout his work. Kanye West introduces Jesus into his discourse

with the crossover "Jesus Walks".

Fashion is a foundational component of hip-hop expression. The adornment of "Jesus

pieces", long gold or platinum necklaces with a diamond encrusted charm of Jesus, are

common within hip-hop culture, particularly in Latino American communities. The

Notorious B.I.G references the Jesus-figure, as a fashion icon, on "Hypnotize":

> So I just speak my piece, (c'mon) keep my piece
>
> Cubans with the Jesus piece (thank you God), with my peeps
>
> Packin, askin who want it, you got it nigga flaunt it
>
> That Brooklyn bullshit, we on it

B.I.G positions the Jesus-icon within a fashion context. As such, Jesus serves as both

symbolic martyr and politically-laden fashion icon. He explicitly mentions a "Cuban with

the Jesus-piece," a reference to a Cuban-linked gold chain with a gold and diamond

encrusted medallion bearing a likeness of an Afrocentric Jesus. More recently, Nas

released *God's Son,* an explicit and allegorical reference to the religious Jesus figure. Nas

explores many spiritual and existential issues on this album. Yet, the aesthetic value of

the Jesus figure is consequential. Because cutting-edge fashion/style is a prominent

characteristic of hip hop expression, Jesus' likeness is adorned on jewelry and tattooed on

individuals' skin.

A juxtaposition of Nas's exploration of spiritual and esoteric themes on *God's Son*

with more materialistic approaches to the Jesus figure on "Take it in Blood" from his

debut album *It Was Written* elucidate the tension between Jesus the religious figure and

Jesus the icon: "Yo; I never brag, how real I keep it, cause it's the best secret, I rock a

vest, prestigious,/Cuban link flooded Jesus in a Lex watchin Kathie Lee and Regis/My

actions are one with the seasons." Because hip hop aesthetics can be viewed as a form of

expression, the utilization of Jesus a trope, signified through hip hop fashion, can not be

understated. Virginia-based collective The Clipse, approach the Jesus figure from an

aesthetic perspective On "Ride Around Shining," they place the Jesus figure within the context of post-industrial self-defense:

> Keep guns stashed under the floor board
>
> Enough to start world war
>
> Paradise in reaches, home next to beaches
>
> Hair pressed, blowin' in the wind, shit 'bout long as Jesus
>
> I still leave *Struggle.* Kweli speech for Gospel, so match this

Jesus serves as an aesthetic vehicle upon which The Clipse attempt to reconcile worldly pleasure with Christian pragmatism. Their references to the "Gospel" and "paradise" serve as a counter-balance to their worldliness (i.e. materialism) and hedonism. Jesus acts as an aesthetic bridge—"shit bout long as Jesus"—which links The Clipse narrative to less secular themes. Some emcees emplace Jesus within the Judeo-Christian tradition, yet the Jesus figure is inserted within a broader context of a post modern hip hop pastiche. Talib Kweli approaches the Jesus figure as a historical, pseudo-religious figure on "Around my Way" from *The Beautiful Struggle* situates Jesus alongside other religious figures as well as contemporary martyrs*:*

> Spit the gospel, truly knowing Jesus like apostles do
>
> Return like the prodigal son to honor Mohammed too
>
> Stay away from ham like Abraham, Lord'll follow you
>
> Even when you took my man Chaka God and what I'm a do
>
> You gave the hood a modern day martyr in Brother Amadou

Kweli demystifies the Jesus figure, linking him to African American struggle. Jesus is an accessible and approachable figure within hip hop narratives, quite often utilized allegorically or symbolically. Nonetheless, despite various religious influences as diverse as the 5% Nation, Rastafarian, Nation of Islam, and Sunni Islam, the Jesus figure remains at the forefront of hip hop aesthetics and epistemology. The Jesus figure represents death, rebirth, political persecution, and transcendence within hip hop aesthetics. The Jesus figure can also be linked to blues narratives and spirituals.

(Illustration 5.14) Jesus Piece

(Illustration 5.15) Kanye West Jesus Piece

Hip hop icon Jay-Z's alter-ego is an example of the Judeo-Christian influence within hip hop aesthetics. His alias J-Hova is a not-so-thinly-veiled reference to the Hebrew word for God: Jehovah. On "A Dream" (*The Blueprint 2: The Gift & the Curse,* Disc One, 2002), which is an ode to the Notorius B.I.G, Jay-Z compares his suffering and struggle to Jesus'. Again, the Jesus figure serves as a trope, linking his post modern narrative to African American struggle via. African American musical and religious tradition (i.e. spirituals and blues):

I see I said, jealousy I said

> Got the whole industry mad at me I said
>
> Then B.I. said, "Hov' remind yourself
>
> nobody built like you, you designed yourself"
>
> I agree I said, my one of a kind self
>
> Get stoned every day like Jesus did
>
> What he said, I said, has been said before
>
> "Just keep doin your thing," he said, say no more

Jay-Z reappropopriates Jesus' persecution at the hands of the Romans as a metaphor for his struggle and subsequent rise to hip hop stardom. Jay-Z, and the Notorious B.I.G and the Bad Boy Movement/Record label created new conceptual and aesthetic space for hip hop narratives. They served as precursors to a new type of hip hop iconography and archetype. Hip hop emcee and businessman 50 Cent represents a culmination of these trends within hip hop aesthetics. He is a synthesis of Tupac Shakur's tragic realism and P.Diddy's business acumen. However, it is 50 Cent's appropriation of real-life Brooklyn stick-up kid, Kelvin "50 Cent" Martin's street moniker, 50 Cent, that signaled a new era of hip hop iconography. Kelvin "50 Cent" Martin was unique to hip hop iconography because 1) he was an African American gangster; and 2) he represents the 1980s crack era in New York City. The recentness of Martin's narrative speaks to a younger demographic within the hip hop generation, the end of 1990s crack narratives in hip hop and the beginning of ultra-violent, yet commercially-viable narratives within hip hop.

50 Cent's was an aesthetic departure utilized 1980s gangster icons and draws on 50 Cent's narrative as an infamous Brooklyn stick-up kid that also robbed and extorted rappers. 50 Cent, the stick-up kid, had an intimate relationship on hip hop, as he was

featured prominently on the cover of Eric B. and Rakim's classic hip hop album *Paid in Full* . 50 Cent represents the quintessential twenty-first century businessman. He extends Robert Johnson's (founder of BET), aggressive, a-cultural approach to business and politics. *Get Rich or Die Trying* (2003), the subsequent entrepreneurial success of 50 Cent's business venture, and his take-no-prisoners, aggressive approach to both business and his music content is the embodiment of the best and worst of American capitalism. In other words, 50 Cent's individualism, his annihilation of competitors, the use of violence or death—if necessary—to protect his business interests, and his rags-to-riches biography are all trademarks of American self-help, entrepreneurial narratives.

The G-Unit movement and brand was the brainchild of 50 Cent. The group, which currently consists of Lloyd Banks, Tony Yayo, and 50 Cent, has also become iconographic within hip hop. As with their leader 50 Cent, G-Unit represents the end of twentieth century hip hop aesthetics, business, and attitude and the beginning of a new era in which corporate partnerships, frequent "beef" with peers, and commercially-friendly ghettocentric narratives predominate hip hop aesthetics.

On "Lifetime Achievement" (2008), Young Buck, a former G-Unit member, illustrates how the new wave of hip hop generationers are less concerned with popular culture icons than they are upward mobility:

> Purple label tags, Cartiers, and all them designer bags
>
> Its something you might want, but not what ya gotta have
>
> These kids want money, nigga, fuck an autograph
>
> How can you be mad, when they just following yo' path

Young Buck illustrates the hip hop generation's outward rejection of American celebrity and iconography. He suggests that the second wave of the hip hop generation is more concerned with social mobility and survival than they are with celebrity-worship:

> Hip hop generationers identify with not only [Jay-Z and Allen Iverson's] success but where they came from, who they continue to be, *and* the success. This adoration goes beyond simple fascination with or worship of pop culture icons. These hip hop generation icons have been effective at what Mike Tyson called, in describing the secret to his success, "turning the fear into fire." These icons may stand out in terms of visibility, but they are not alone. (Kitwana 140)

Indifference has replaced reification within hip hop iconography. Socio-economic developments have lead to a reconfiguration and repositioning of hip hop icons. Though still significant, current hip hop iconography and archetypes reflect the hip hop generations desire for upward mobility.

<p align="center">***</p>

Icons and archetypes are vital components to hip hop aesthetics. Icons operate as signifiers, voyeuristic vehicles and social cues that reveal much about the attitudes of the "hip hop generation". Because hip hop is grounded in African American culture, the icons and archetypes that hip hop has absorbed represent the most radical and functional portions of African American and American figures' biographical narratives. The newer archetypes that emerged within hip hop aesthetics represent an extension of previous African American and American archetypes. The new hip hop archetypes also reflect overarching societal socioeconomic and cultural trends.

The shift from superhero to supervillain narratives in hip hop discourse represents: 1) a crystallization of the hip hop aesthetics (i.e. attitude, iconography, etc.); 2) the growth of the underground crack economy; 3) an increase in the criminalization and incarceration of African American and Latino men; 4) the growth of the prison industrial complex during the 198os and 1990s; and 5) a rhetoric and discursive response to the mounting anti-Black male sentiment in America.

Hip hop offers a new reading of American and African American history. Traditional political, racial, religious and cultural paradigms are usurped. Hence, hip hop iconology is primarily concerned with themes of self-definition, self-expression and social mobility. Hip hop iconography and iconology are only secondarily concerned with the political and religious portions are secondary. As had been discussed in this chapter, African American heroic figures and American popular culture iconography serve as human models. The power of hip hop aesthetics, iconography, iconology, and archetypes lies in its ability to utilize two disparate—and sometimes competing—worldviews, theories, etc simultaneously.

Hip Hop Archetype and Iconography Timeline
(Table 5.1)

Hip Hop Artist	Origin, Iconic and Archetypal Influence	First Album, Track, etc.	Year
Kool Herc	Hercules (S)	N/A	1973
Afrika Bambaataa	(A)	N/A	1977
Grand Master Flash	Flash Gordon (S)	"Superrappin"	1979
Kool Keith (Ultramag)	(S)	"To Give You Love"	1985
Just Ice		*Going Way Back*	1986
Luke Skywalker	Star Wars (S)	*As Nasty as They Wanna Be*	1989
NWA	(BM) (GI)	*N.W.A and the Posse*	1987
The Jungle Brothers		*Straight Out the Jungle*	1988
Queen Latifah	(A)	*All Hail to the Queen*	1988
Scarface	(GI)	*Making Trouble*	1988
Brand Nubian	(A)	"Brand Nubian"	1989
Super DJ Clark Kent	(S)	"Top Billin" (Remix)	1988
De La Soul		*Three Feet High and Rising*	1988,1989
Freddie Foxx	Redd Fox (C)	*Freddie Foxxx is Here* (LP)	1989
Onyx	N/A, (GI)	"Ah, And We Do It Like This"	1989
X-Clan	(A)	*To the East Blackwards* (1990)	1990
South Central Cartel	(GI)	South Central Madness(1991)	1991
Cash Money Records	*New Jack City* (GI)	Founded in 1991	1991
Death Row Records	(GI)	Founded 1991	1991
Redman	(S)	*Whut?The Album* (1992)	1992
Naughty By Nature	(GI) (BM)	"O.P.P."	1991
Daz Dillinger		*The Chronic*	1992
Buckshot Shorty	(GI)	"Who Got the Props" (1992)	1992
Kurupt	(BM) (GI)	*The Chronic,* Dre Dre (1992)	1992
Bad Boy Records	(BM) (GI)	Founded in 1991	1993
Ghostface aka Tony Starks and Iron Man	*The Mystery of Chess Boxing,* (KF) Ironman (S)	*Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers),* (1993)	1993
Smif-n-Wesson	(GI)	Black Moon's *Enta Da*	1993

		Stage	
Nine	(GI)	"Six Million Ways to Die" (1993)	1993
Souls of Mischief	(BM)	*93' til Infinity*	1993
Mobb Deep	(GI)	*Juvenile Hell*	1993
Trends of Culture	(A)	*Trendz*	1993
The Notorius B.I.G Frank White	Frank White, *King of New York* (GI)	*Ready to Die*	1994
Jeru the Damaja	(S)	*The Sun Rises in the East* (	1994
Mac 10	(GI)	*Mack 10*, (1995)	1995
Group Home		*Living Proof*	1995
Originoo Gun Clappaz	(GI)	Appeared on Smif-n-Wesson's *Dah Shinin'*	1995
Gangsta Boo	(GI)	Mystic Stylez (1995)	1995
Yaki Kadafi	(P)	Tupac's *Me Against the World*	1995
Napoleon, E.D.I Mean, Kastro, Hussein fatal, Mussolini, Komani	(P)	Tupac's *Me Against the World*	1995
Roc-A-Fella Records	John D. Rockefeller (E)	Founded 1996	1996
Capone-n-Noreaga	Al Capone/Manuel Noriega (GI)(PF)	The War Report (1996)	1996
Foxy Brown	Pam Grier as Foxy Brown (GI)	*Ill NaNa* (1996)	1996
Murder Inc. Records now The Inc	Murder Inc./Brownsville Boys (GI)	Founded 1997	1997
Big punisher	The Punisher (S)	"I'm Not a Player", (1997)	1997
Jim Jones	Cult-leader Jim Jones(E)	The Diplomats (1998)	1998
C-Murder	(GI)	*Life or Death,* (1998)	1998
MF Doom	Doctor Doom (S)	*Operation Doomsday,* (1999)	1999
Techn9ne	(GI)	"The Anthem" (1999)	1999
David Banner	The Incredible Hulk (S)	*Them Firewater Boyz,* Vol. 1	2000
Beanie Sigel	Assasin Bugsy Siegel (GI)	The Truth	2000
Pimp C (UGK)	(GI)		
50 Cent	Infamous Brooklyn Stickup Kid (GI)	*Get Rich or Die Tryin* (2003)	2003

Young Gunz	(GI)	"Can't Stop Won't Stop" (2003)	2003
Freeway	(GI)	*Philadelphia Freeway*	2003
Souljah Boy	(GI)(S)	"Crank Dat (Souljah Boy)"	2007
Rick Ross	Cocaine kingpin Freeway Ricky Ross (GI)	*Port of Miami,* Rick Ross, (2007)	2007
Uncle Murda	(GI) (BM)	*Say Uncle 2 Hard for Hip Hop*	2006

Key

S-Superheroes

GI -Gangster Iconography/Imagery

  Note. This category covers names that reference gangsta signifiers such as guns, gangster icons, violent attributes, etc.)

C-Comedic icons

A-Afrocentric/Black Nationalist Iconography

E-European-American Icons and figures

KF-Kung Fu Films

BM-Badman narratives

P-Political Figures

CHAPTER 6
CHARACTERISTICS OF HIP-HOP EXPRESSION

Scripting "Bad" Within Hip-Hop Aesthetics

Not meaning bad, but bad meaning good.
"Peter Piper", Run-DMC

This chapter tracks the evolution, reconceptualization, and utilization of badness as a mode of expression within hip hop aesthetics and discourses. I examine the badman and position him as an archetypal model within hip hop aesthetics, mapping shifts in the badman trope since the blues era. I focus on the early 1980s and 1984 in particular as a watershed moment for hip hop aesthetics. I explore the ways in which hip hop aesthetics activate the badman trope as a response to anti-African-American, working-class male sentiment. I examine Black male identity construction as it relates to hip-hop aesthetics and archetypal influences, particularly the development of 'bad" and "cool" within hip-hop culture. Some social scientists have viewed hip hop as a socio-political response to post-industrialism, postmodernism, and white supremacy. No doubt the postindustrial, postmodern environment has influenced the form and content of contemporary hip hop culture. However, masculine identity construction and aesthetic value, within the context of individual style and artistic production, is often understated when examining hip hop. Aesthetically, then, hip hop must be viewed—first and foremost—as a form of expression. Kelley addresses expressive culture within the context of masculinity, "Expressive cultures, then, were not only constructed as adaptive, functioning primarily to cope with the horrible conditions of ghetto life, but were conceived largely as expressions of masculinity (*Yo' Mama*, 23). I approach hip hop in much the same way.

Perhaps more than any other African-American archetype, the badman/bad nigga archetype has survived within African-American male narratives. This chapter explores the complex nuances, variations, meanings, interpretations and constructions of the badman/bad nigga archetype in relation to hip-hop aesthetics. Even though hip-hop scholars have discussed the bad man's influence on hip-hop, I contextualize the badman trope within the framework of hip-hop aesthetics, connecting it to overarching cultural develops within African (American) popular culture. I am interested in the construction, function, and origin of "bad" within African-American cultural production particularly hip-hop. Badness is a recurring theme within hip-hop culture, however in the 1980s and 90s, badness crept into the mainstream's consciousness. I explore the ways in which notions of bad have changed within African-American culture, particularly within hip-hop culture, as well as the influence and trajectory of the Bad nigga trope within African-American culture practice. Essentially, I am concerned with the trajectory and origin of "bad" within hip hop aesthetics.

Notions of bad are central to African-American male identity construction. "Badness" is inextricably linked to hip-hop aesthetics. The badman is not only a central figure in African-American culture, but is also central to white American identity. White American identity is constructed in dialectical opposition to "bad", in other words, the embodiment of good (morality, democracy, prosperity, freedom, etc.). Yet European American constructions such as the cowboy and superhero are key components to hip-hop's construction of bad. Badness within hip-hop aesthetics borrows heavily from American popular culture icons, both aesthetically and ideologically, Popular icons such as Clint Eastwood, Charles Bronson, Superman, Rambo, Scarface, The Terminator, et al

build on superhero mythology and the badman trope. These figures are not "sampled" wholesale. Specific themes and motifs—i.e. vigilantism, the importance of heroic male figures saving the day, and self-defense—are selected from these masculinist narratives and reinterpreted within hip-hop culture.

The bad man trope—which emerged on southern plantations in the antebellum south—and its impact on the development of hip-hop aesthetics is examined in this dissertation. The bad man as archetype, as will be shown, serves as a foundational model for hip-hop. On one hand, the "bad nigga" or rebel represents a pure unadulterated survival mechanism. However, upon further examination, the emergence of the "bad nigga" represents a divergence from accepted norms and an attempt to gain Black male selfhood, which was fundamental to the evolution of African American culture.

The bad nigga archetype has survived African American cultural expression, despite the fear, disdain and contempt it conjured in mainstream white America. I am interested in the aesthetic implications of the retention of the badman trope in hip hop. The Nat figure falls along the cultural continuum of the badman. In *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South,* Blassingame identifies Nat as one of three literary stereotypes:

incorrigible runaway, the poisoner of white men, the ravager of white women who defied all the rules of plantation society. Subdued and punished only when overcome by superior numbers or firepower, Nat retaliated when attacked by whites, led guerilla activities of maroons against isolated plantations, killed overseers and planters, or burned plantation buildings when he was abused. (225)

As a counter-cultural movement, hip-hop draws from culture figures such as the Nat figure. Moreover, these archetypes became keystone figures within the hip-hop movement. The Nat figure—the embodiment of Black male agency and masculinity—is another example of African-American resistance. It must be noted that the rebel slave was dialectally opposed to the obedient, law abiding enslaved African. The Nat and the rebellious fugitive were considered outlaws. As Blassingame observes:

> The rebellious fugitive was very artful, cunning, a "well set, hardy villain," "of good sense, and much ingenuity," "saucy,' 'very surly," 'very great rogue," 'sober and intelligent," 'bold," "fights like the Devil when arrested,' and often stole large sums of money and took along a "nice short shot gun." (206)

The Nat figure resisted and critiqued white authority and control. He was a threat to the southern plantation system and lived outside the confines of respectable "Negro" behavior. The iconic folk hero Stagoleee has been the primary vehicle upon which the badman trope has entered twentieth century African American popular culture. Brown asserts that the Stagolee narrative represents "a perspective, a point of view…Stagolee becomes, ultimately, a form of post-modernity"(Brown 227). Hip hop aesthetics, then, draw from the badman's attitude and value system. The badman trope was absent from Harlem Renaissance literature (Brown 197). Nonetheless, the badman trope Stagolee as signifier of the "bad nigger" has continued to shape African-American culture in both literature and politics (Brown 216).

Though it can be problematic to over generalize the connections between past racial formations, stereotypes and notions with contemporary ones, a historical examination into the causes and effects of white supremacy (i.e. systemic American racism) on the

psyche and socioeconomic state of Africans in America can be instructive. Hip-hop's emergence, on one level, is an engagement of such systemic oppression. Orlando Patterson's notion of social death addresses, at least partially, the social effects of racism, in this case the period encompassing American slavery and the ante bellum South, on African- Americans. I extend Patterson's conceptualization to include other forms of death including spiritual, physical, psychic, and emotional death.

Since the emergence of African-American historical figures and hip-hop icons Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman, the bad (wo)man has provided hope and inspiration for African-Americans, while simultaneously conjuring disdain, indifference, or loathing among European-Americans. Tubman and Turner are commonly referenced within hip-hop lyrics and discourse and are pre-hip hop icons. Concepts, notions, themes and ideas that caused disdain on behalf of white America and some middle-class African-Americans were recycled and given new meaning within hip-hop aesthetics. Not to say that such interpretations of American existence were not already present, but hip-hop added an additional layer of ideological and philosophical meaning to the badman. Culturally and linguistically this process is evident within the funk movement. The concept of bad within African-American musical traditions embraced those characteristics that outsiders (i.e. the mainstream) would consider profane or undesirable. Baraka highlights this point in "Jazz and the White Critic". He links notions of bad to the African-American blues tradition and Eurocentric aesthetics:

> As one Howard University philosophy professor said to me when I was an undergraduate, "It's fantastic how much bad taste the blues contain!" But it is just this "bad taste" that this Uncle spoke of that has been the one factor that has kept

> the best of Negro music from slipping sterilely into the echo chambers of middle-
> brow American culture. And to a great extent "bad taste" was kept extant in the
> music, blues or jazz because the Negroes who were responsible for the best
> music, were always aware of their identities as Black Americans and really did
> not, themselves, desire to become vague, featureless, Americans as is usually the
> case with the Negro middle class. (179)

It is important to note that notions of bad have not been static within African-American
cultural traditions. Not only do notions of bad track male identity construction, they also
highlight socio-cultural trends within hip-hop aesthetics. Since the 1940s, jazz icons
Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong dealt with conceptualizations of bad in their work.
In their collaboration "I Got It Bad and That Ain't Good", they utilized bad within a
blues idiom, which reflected African-American musical sensibilities of the time. Hip hop
reconceptualizes notions bad through various aesthetic tropes, for example, the king
trope.

The conceptualization of "King" within hip-hop aesthetics is closely tied to the bad
man trope. The king trope within hip hop aesthetics is also due to hip hop's close
association with boxing, as well as hip hop's competitive nature. As Lock explains, "In
jazz, …there was an early tradition in New Orleans of the black community renaming its
most eminent musicians "King," the best-known example being King Oliver" (Lock 45).
As hip hop aesthetics evolved, this type of renaming and edification can be seen in Run-
DMC's declaration that they were the "Kings of Rock". This is interesting considering
that Run-DMC was firmly rooted in the hip-hop not the rock aesthetic. Run-DMC's
aesthetic influence within hip hop is far-reaching. Their proclamation that they were the

"Kings of Rock" (and by inference hip-hop) was an extension of the badman trope. Their engagement of rock and roll in their discourse was a direct challenge to rock and roll music in general, but is was also a covert critique of rock and roll's sensibilities, attitudes and style.

More recently, Atlanta emcee TI utilized the king trope. By proclaiming himself the "King of the South", he fomented an intense competition and rivalry—which in one instance became physical. Emcees such as Lil Flip and Ludacris were offended by TI's declaration. An analysis of the king trope within hip hop narratives reveals how certain attitudes, icons, tropes, rituals, etc.—when they enter hip hop aesthetics accrue additional layers of socio-cultural meaning. Jay-Z employs the king trope as a means of establishing his dominance within the hip hop arena:

> Ma, show me what you got
>
> Hovie in the spot tried to told you I was hot
>
> Tell these other dudes it's a wrap
>
> Get the fuck out the throne you clone, the King's back!
>
> Y'all got less than 2 months to get y'all thing together
>
> Good luck!

Run-DMC aided in extending and solidifying the badman trope in hip hop aesthetics. Since the release of *Run-DMC*, Run-DMC has established badman iconography and posturing as a major precept of hip hop aesthetics. On "Peter Piper" from Run-DMC's *Raisin Hell* (1986) album, they illustrate their connection to the bad man narrative:

He's the better of the best best believe he's the baddest

Perfect timin when I'm climbin I'm a rhymin apparatus

Lot of guts

Tricks are for kids he plays much gigs

He's a big bad wolf and you're the three pigs

He's a big bad wolf in your neighborhood

Not bad meaning bad but bad meaning good

Run-DMC juxtaposes traditional Euro-American nursery rhymes with gritty, urban tragic realism. The double entendre in their use of the words "bad" and "hell" are also significant. Run-DMC's use of the badman trope aided in the establishment of aggressive posturing and attitude within hip hop aesthetics. and From a socio-political perspective, the "bad attitude" implicit in hip-hop aesthetics can be viewed as both a-cultural and revolutionary in tone. Wheeler concedes, "Rappers also subvert other people's definitions through "bad attitude," a cornerstone of ghetto ideology. Bad attitude refuses to play by the rules of white culture, middle-class decorum, and the law" (Wheeler 198). Conceptualizations of bad in hip-hop can be viewed as counter cultural imperatives linked to hegemonic resistance and cultural expression. Up until the 1960s, the Stagolee song and mythology was performed in informal settings and was dependent on working-class social spaces (Brown 121). By the 1960s, African American icons cultivated the badman trope through musical toasts:

During the early 1960s, Stagolee finally became fully visible. Black musicians such as James Brown, Wilson Pickett , and the Isley Brothers recorded versions of Stagolee that expressed a newly acquired sense of power among black males….In

reciting the Stagolee toast, the speaker "performed" Stagolee, taking on the hero's

character along with the role. The toast became an instrument enabling young

black men to assert themselves as bullies and bad men, and thus be powerful and

charismatic. (Brown 178)

Brown lists five influences of the Stagolee figure on hip hop culture: "Stagolee's

influence persists in rap music in the use of the first-person narrator, the performer's

adoption of nicknames, the social drama, the humor, and participation in the commodity

culture" (Brown 221). Hip hop aesthetics' African American folk roots transforms the

badman into as an artistic and political approach through hip hop aesthetics'

reconceptualization and badman through popular culture iconography:

Black folklore can take a hero like Stagolee and apply his ethos to that of living

figures. This can be seen in the identification of political figures such as Adam

Clayton Powell Jr., Huey P. Newton, and Malcolm X with the "bad nigger." All

three men, coming from very different backgrounds, came to be political

representations of the Stagolee figure in African-American culture. (Brown 215)

On "Bragging", The Jungle Brothers extend their cultural nationalist ideology and

incorporates elements of traditional African-American tropes and practices, in this case

boasts and the dozens. This excerpt also illustrates the badman trope, which is so crucial

to hip hop aesthetics:

Well, I'm a sure shot shooter and I'm the big shot

The big shot, yes the biggest, and I know I'm hot

Say I'm the baddest, just the baddest and I'm on the top

Sucker MC's try to stop me, but I won't stop

Even though the Jungle Brothers are part of The Native Tongue Movement, they still utilize the bad man trope. Undoubtedly, the bad man is a prominent influence on 21st century hip hop. It has survived assaults by conservative pundits and culture critiques.

The divisions, subgenres, etc. used to classify hip hop can obfuscate its cultural meaning and impact. Not only are these explanations abstract, they do not account for the common themes, motifs, and attitudes that exist across these artificial boundaries within hip hop. Stated differently, there is much intra-genre discourse within hip hop. For example, so-called backpack/underground emcees engage, collaborate with and listen to hip hop that is considered gangsta. They also share in the themes and subjects they explore in their music. This wholistic, inclusive and non-judgmental approach to culture and culture production is a carryover from African and African American cultural practices. Hence, badness is a central component of hip hop aesthetics.

Bad is a recurring theme and aesthetic modality within hip hop aesthetics. Linked to the African American badman trope and American bad man icons, badness is essential to hip hop aesthetics. In 1987, hip-hop icon L.L.Cool J released "I'm Bad" from his *Bigger and Deffer album.* The single was a commercial success. A young L.L. Cool J appeared in the hip-hop rags-to-riches narrative *Krush Groove.* L.L's single was significant not only because it was a commercial success, but also because it established "badness" as a characteristic of hip-hop aesthetics. L.L. extends the badman narrative, building upon an aesthetic approach that was established by Run-DMC in 1984.

It is also interesting to explore the evolution of bad outside hip hop since L.L Cool J's "I'm Bad". When the badman is removed from its hip-hop (i.e. African American) cultural context, the meaning, tone, and attitude is altered. Several artists outside of hip-

hop inserted the badman trope into their musical narratives during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Michael Jackson offers the most well-known usage of the badman trope in contemporary popular culture. Jackson's *Bad,* the album, debuted in 1987. Though Jackson's interpretation of the badman was culturally sanitized.

In the video for "Bad", the album's lead single, the pop icon borrows heavily from hip hop motifs. In the video, directed by famed movie director, Martin Scorsese, Jackson's backup dancers don hip hop fashion iconography (i.e. Adidas sweat suits, Jordan sneakers, etc.). Furthermore, the video's setting, an uninhabited subway station, is reminiscent of the memorable subway b-boy battle scene in the seminal hip hop film *Beat Street* (1984). The hip hop influence on the videos aesthetic is palpable. Jackson had not released an album in five years since he released his chart shattering and industry changing *Thriller* album. *Bad* was an attempt to reconnect with a younger demographic. Jackson utilized hip hop aesthetics to gain mainstream, consumer acceptance. Jackson, though, was nonetheless *performing* bad. Jackson began to explore tragic realist themes on *Thriller* such as "Billie Jean" and "Beat It". Tragic realism was a divergence from the wholesome pop of the Jackson 5 and the party themes of *Off the Wall*. Jackson's performance on "Bad" marks a transmutation of Jackson's culturally-ambiguous persona. "Bad" was an aesthetic choice, based partially on market forces. Jackson's bad persona on "Bad" was constructed as a post-modern, minatory narrative employed to garner mainstream appeal.

In 1991, Color Me Badd—an all-male, multi-racial pop group –-released *C.M.B.* The groups' name conjoins the term "color" and "bad". The former is a subtle reference to the group's multi-ethnic, multi-racial composition. The latter is an extension of the

badman trope filtered through hip hop and pop music production. What was to be gleaned from the group's name Color Me Badd? What does the name infer about the groups racial identity? How does the altered spelling of bad, b-a-d-d, alter the meaning and impact of the badman trope? The connotations, meanings and socio-linguistic history of the term "colored" in African American culture are well-documented. The name Color Me Madd conjoins the term "color", and links it to African-American (or ethnic i.e. non-Anglo-Saxon) identity to bad.

Both Michael Jackson and Color Me Badd's use of bad borrowed from hip-hop aesthetics use of the term. The authenticity and believability, though, is diluted as bad is filtered through a pop aesthetic. Nonetheless, the badman trope has survived and flourished, evident in hip hop's appropriation and utilization of it. The badman gains meaning and significance as it is filtered through hip hop aesthetics, and—conversely— loses much of its cultural meaning when it is filtered through a pop aesthetic. The functionality of the badman rests in the authenticity and believability of its execution. The badman is approached as an aesthetically. Tragic realism and dual identity construction are artistic constituents of the badman trope.

In 1993, bad reemerged once again as a predominant theme and attitude within hip-hop aesthetics. The formation of Bad Boy Records in 1993 signaled a reconceptualization of the badman trope in hip hop. On the Notorious B.I.G's "Respect" from his *Ready to Die* album, he constructs an elaborate, semi-biographical narrative chronicling his birth. B.I.G utilizes the badman trope as an identity marker and aesthetic device:

> 2:19, that's when my momma water burst
>
> No spouse in the house so she rode for self/to the hospital,

to see if she could get a little help

Umbilical cord's wrapped around my neck

I'm seein' my death and I ain't even took my first step

I made it out, I'm bringin' maaaaad joy

The doctor looked and said, "He's gonna be a Baaaaad Boyyyy!!"

B.I.G details the frenetic circumstances of his birth, but he also manages to interject his mother and the joy his birth brought her into his narrative. B.I.G masterfully employs the badman trope in his hyperbolic description of his own birth. B.I.G eschews the multiple layer of his autobiography—i.e. Christopher Wallace. Instead, he employs the badman trope through his alter-egos, Frank White and The Notorious B.I.G.

(Illustration 6.2) Michael Jackson, *Bad*

(Illustration 6.1) Color Me Badd

The badman is reinterpreted and filtered through hip hop aesthetics, adding multiple layers of meaning in its transference. On "Unbelievable", a hip hop classic, B.I.G uses the badman trope, to tap into white fear of young African American men:

My forte causes Caucasians to say

He sounds demented, car weed-scented

If I said it, I meant it

Bite my tongue for no-one

Call me evil, or unbelievable

B.I.G. employs the badman trope to express the value he places upon freedom of speech. He punctuates his critique with an ultimatum: white America can either embrace him or vilify. Either way, listeners get the sense that B.I.G will stand morally-resilient and upwardly mobile in spite of the white establishment's adoration.

Hyperbole and double-entendre are core components of the performance of the bad in hip hop aesthetics. Newark, New Jersey born emcee Redman is an example of the artful use of hyperbole and double entendre in hip hop aesthetics. Reggie Noble's alter egos, Doc, Funk Doctor Spock, and Redman are the vehicles upon which Nobles activates the badman. On "I'm a Bad" from *What the Album*, Redman actuates the badman trope throughout his lyrics and through his performance:

Cause my brain is twisted, so I cock the biscuit

Cause shit's thick, some say I'mma bastard of a swift bitch

negro, funkin it with the style in your ear bro

To make you _Fear_ me like _Cape_ without Robert DeNiro

You big pussy, so funky that you have to douche me

You can't hear me then my record label didn't push me

I know I'm sayin fuck too many times in my rhymes

but if I wasn't bad, I wouldn't freak it in the line

Redman creatively incorporates the badman trope into his narrative, which rests heavily on Clintonesque funk aesthetics. By 1994, as hip-hop gained more mainstream acceptance, articulations of badness changed. These shifts reflected hip hop's transition into the post-Afrocentric moment. Though not considered a true emcee by many hip hop purists, MC Hammer's contribution to hip-hop aesthetics and commerce is undeniable. In 1994 Hammer released "It's All Good" from his *The Adventures of the Funky Headhunte*r. The release and acceptance of "It's All Good" by mainstream audiences signaled a shift in hip-hop production, record sales, theme and attitude. The song marked a shift from tragic realism to party aesthetics within the hip-hop idiom. Though bad was still a major theme during this time in hip hop aesthetics, gangsta aesthetics cloaked in party themes:

> Hammer was attacked by many in the hip hop community for his lack of skill as a rapper and for pandering to a mass audience. There can be no denying that Hammer's success pushed rap fully into the mainstream, continuing a trend started in the mid-1980s by Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys. At the same time, Hammer's pop-friendly rap style opened the door for an artist widely considered hip hop's icon of "wackness", the white rapper Vanilla Ice. (Starr 420)

Yonkers emcee Style P explores the bad man persona throughout his work. The badman is activated through Styles P's various alter-egos: "The Ghost", Paniro, Holiday Styles, and S.P. On "Alone in the Street" fleshes out the bad man in a first person narrative:

Mad live

I learned to bounce out on a bad vibe

Or either keep a gun in your cab ride

Have I,

Thought about my life as a bad guy,

Made a little money sellin rocks that was cap sized

Robbed a lot of people like I never was baptized

Although Styles P's work embraces gangster aesthetics, his narratives are honest,

introspective, and socially-conscious. Bad is used as an aesthetic prop. Within Style's

badman narrative, he manages to insert religious references and symbolism. At the

beginning of "Alone in the Street", Styles's approaches the track from an existential,

spiritual perspective. He mumbles, "Fuckin wit my soul right here". This informs the

listener that Styles is experiencing a spiritual conflict based on his past transgressions. In

the above verse, he admits to selling crack and robbery, nonetheless, Style's is deliberate

in his reference to his righteous/religious roots, in this case baptism. Nonetheless, I have

shown through a cursory examination of specific hip hop texts that have contributed to

the extension of the badman trope in hip hop culture. The badman attitude has informed

hip hop's aesthetic response to popular, mass media. In the next section, I examine socio-

cultural developments that took place during the early 1980s in American popular culture

and the ways in which the badman trope has informed the hip hop generation's response

to popular culture texts. During the early 1980s, represent an establishment and

solidification of hip hop culture's aesthetic boundaries and principles.

Hard Times: Hip Hop Discourse circa 1984

1984 was a watershed moment for hip hop discourse and aesthetics. This section

offers a social, cultural and aesthetic analysis of 1984, identifying specific icons (e.g.

Run-DMC), trends and narratives that shaped both hip-hop culture and American popular

culture. I explore the ways in which hip hop aesthetics utilized badman posturing and positionality, urban blues sensibilities, and American popular culture iconography to engage American popular culture narratives during the early 1980s. 1984, in particular, is an ideal site by which to examine the interface between race, class, sex, politics, American violence, technology, and pop culture. Indeed, by 1984, it was clear that America (African-Americans included) was in the throws of cultural change. 1984 was a watershed moment for hip hop aesthetics. Furthermore, hip hop aesthetics coalesced into a unified and coherent form of cultural expression in 1984. Furthermore, the aesthetic framework of hip-hop culture was laid during the early 1980s.

The early 1980s marked a significant shift in the American popular culture landscape. The proliferation of cable television and the expansion of American popular sports culture, for example, had profound and far-reaching implications for hip-hop culture. The American music industry struggled during the early 1980s, hitting "rock bottom in 1982 ($4.6 million), down half a billion dollars from the peak year of 1978 ($5.1 billion)" (Starr 369). American popular culture icons in general during the 1980s reflected a shift in American sensibilities of consumption; they also reflected shifts in racial dynamics. As optimism surrounding African American social mobility and assimilation intensified, hip hop emerged as an African-American male counterstatement to middle-class, upwardly mobile meta-narratives. By 1984, the American popular cultural landscape had begun to embrace, and at times encourage, or at the very less tolerate, African-American male celebrity. The rise, and in some cases the fall, of the African-American-athlete was at the center of this emerging American popular culture. The sagas and impending media frenzy

behind Washington D.C mayor Marion Barry, Mike Tyson, Len Bias, and O.J. Simpson all support this notion.

Many important cultural markers were laid during in 1984. The early 1980s represent a whirlwind of cross-cultural, trans-Atlantic commercial activity. 1984 provides an ideal site by which to examine the formation of hip hop aesthetics and the interplay between race, class, sex, politics, American violence, technology, and pop culture. Indeed, by 1984, it was clear that America (African-Americans included) was in the throws of cultural change. My goal is not to feed into some spooky conspiracy theory, however, I am concerned with the conditions and occurrences that spawned hip hop aesthetics, as well as provide a historical backdrop by which to examine hip-hop culture. By examining hip-hop culture, this research seeks to elucidate the state of both African-American, and Americans as a whole.

In regard to American popular culture, 1984 is an excellent site by which to examine the interplay between race, class, sex, politics, American violence, technology, and pop culture. By examining hip-hop culture, I elucidate the state of both African-American, and Americans as a whole. Run-DMC marked a new era in global and urban marketing. They signal the emergence of a "new" African-American male global sensibility (and visibility). They are both iconic and archetypal figures in hip hop. The year 1984 marked a major shift in the political, social and economic Even though Run-DMC experienced much commercial, they remain foundational figures in reference to the hip-hop aesthetic. They serve as archetypal figures within hip-hop culture.

There were myriad events that occurred within pop culture in and around the year 1984 that greatly impacted hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop's engagement and incorporation

of these developments within the context of hip hop aesthetics illuminate the interactivity between hip hop aesthetics and American popular media. I identify several primary and secondary socio-cultural events circa 1984 that collectively—directly or indirectly—impacted hip hop aesthetics, for example, the success of Michael Jackson, the debut of *The Cosby Show,* the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, California, which featured a b-boy exhibition and the popularity of the Sony Walkman and "boomboxes". Collectively, these events affected the form, content, function, tone and trajectory of hip hop aesthetics. Here, I focus on popular culture iconography, mass-media, and specific African American popular culture texts as a means to explore the evolution of hip hop aesthetics. How have specific cultural moments, icons, etc--circa 1984—influenced the contours, content and context of hip hop aesthetics?

MTV has been a major vehicle for the global dissemination, cultivation, commodification and exploitation of hip hop culture. However, the history of African American artists' relationship with MTV reveals discrimination and prejudice. Initially, MTV served as a platform for rock music and culture. The network reluctantly aired Michael Jackson's videos. Ironically, though, Michael Jackson's videos were instrumental in MTVs success in the mid and late 1980s:

> MTV's relentless focus on white rock artists reminded many critics of the exclusionary practices of album-oriented rock radio of the 1970s. Out of more than 750 videos shown on MTV during the channel's first eighteen months, only about twenty featured black musicians (a figure that includes racially mixed bands)…The mammoth success of Michael Jackson's *Thriller,* released by

Colombia Records in 1982, forced a change in MTV's essentially all-white rock

music format. (Starr 370)

MTV did not change its discriminatory practices willingly. They refused to air Michael

Jackson's videos until "Colombia Records threatened to ban its white rock groups from

performing" (Starr 393).

Hip hop was not supported by MTV in any significant way until the creation of

YoMTV Raps! in 1988. My point here is that although Michael Jackson was excluded

from MTV's programming initially, his appeal and acceptance by MTV and popular

culture lay in his androgynous, non-threatening, somewhat emasculated persona. Jackson

sang in falsetto was a soprano. By the release of *Thriller,* Jackson had become racially

ambiguous. He was apolitical, and his public narrative was a-historical. Michael

Jackson's identity was a post modern creation. Prince and Madonna, like Michael

Jackson, used alter-ego and were racially-ambiguous:

Both are self-conscious authors of their own celebrity, creators of multiple alter

egos, and highly-skilled manipulators of the mass media. Both experienced a

meteoric rise to fame during the early 1980s and were dependant on mass media

such as cable television and film. And both Madonna and Prince have sought to

blur the conventional boundaries of race, religion, and sexualities and periodically

sought tot rekindle their fans' interest by shifting shape, changing strategy, and

coming up with new controversial songs and images (Starr, 395).

The economic success of post modern popular culture icons such as Prince, Madonna and

Michael Jackson literally saved the music industry in the mid-1980s (Starr 369). The

intersection of various 1980s popular media created a new commercial space for music icons and created a new archetypal model for American popular iconography:

> The release of a potential hit album—and of those individual tracks on the album thought to have potential as hit singles—was cross-promoted in music videos, television talk show appearances, Hollywood films, and newspaper, magazine, and radio interviews, creating the overall appearance of a multifront military campaign run by a staff of corporate generals. (Starr 393)

Hence, developments within the music industry shaped and were shaped by the emergence of a new type of American popular icon. These icons were linked to celebrity charisma, which was conveyed through a mass-mediated, corporate-driven popular culture apparatus:

> The power of mass-mediated charisma is rooted in the idea that an individual fan can enter into a personal relationship with a superstar via images and sounds that are simultaneously disseminated to millions of people. The space between the public image of the star and the private life and personality of the musician who fills this role is where the contemporary industry of celebrity magazines, television exposes, "unauthorized" biographies, and paparazzi photographers flourishes, providing fans with provocative tidbits of information concerning the glamour, habits, and character traits of their favorite celebrities. (Starr, 393)

Nonetheless, the appeal of the new, popular culture iconography of the late 1900s and early twenty-first century was buttressed by two types of popular culture narratives: self-help, rags-to-riches narratives and "bad boy" narratives:

This field of popular discourse is dominated by certain well-worn narratives. In what is perhaps the most common of these storylines, the artist, born into humble circumstances, rises to fame, is overtaken by the triple demons of greed, lust and self-indulgence, falls into a deep pit, and then repents his or her sins and is accepted by the media and millions of fans. Other celebrities manage to flaunt convention and maintain their "bad boy" or "bad girl" image throughout their careers, while others are portrayed as good-hearted and generous from the get-go. Of course, these storylines are as much about the fans themselves—and the combination of admiration and envy they feel toward their favorite celebrities—as about the particular musicians in question. (Starr 394)

Both self-help narratives and "bad boy" posturing have contributed to the legitimacy and appropriation of hip hop icons. What are the implications of African American, self-help hip hop narratives? Television and film were integral parts of the growth of popular icons during the 1980s. These megastars represented a new type of American popular icon. This new iconography was primarily corporate-driven and appealed to American aesthetic desires and socio-economic expectations. The rise of the megastar had a determinant effect on hip hop production and aesthetics.

Hip-hop aesthetics, with its hyper masculinity and patriarchy, emerged as a backlash to not only popular music, but other mass media as well. Perhaps more than any other medium, cinema offered questionable images of Black masculinity. Black male intellectualism was also called into question in various popular media during the 1980s, most notably in film. From this perspective, a new interpretation of Black male angst and nihilism in hip-hop can be observed. Several films, both directly and indirectly, at least

anecdotally, influenced hip-hop aesthetics during the 1980s. Hip-hop aesthetics emerge as a discursive response to these films. In the 1984 film *Revenge of the Nerds,* the character Lamar, played by Larry B. Scott, elucidates the skewing of African American male, experience Lamar was the only African-American character in the film. It was inferred that he was homosexual, though he did not have a love interest. Ironically, Lamar was supposed to be an emcee.

Working class, African American narratives were also scant in television in the early 1980s. With the tagline "Heroes for Hire", *The A-Team* debuted in 1983. The lone African American male character, Sgt. Bosco "B.A." Baracus, served as a foil for the other white protagonists of *The A-Team.* The A-Team was an outlaw band of misfits that were vigilantes who fought crime but somehow attempted to avoid violence when apprehending criminals. The show signaled a shift from superheroic narratives in popular culture toward supervillain narratives. B.A. Baracus, played by south side Chicago native Laurence Tureaud, was an extension of the badman trope. B-A stood for "bad ass" or "bad attitude".

(Illustration 6.3) Lamar *Revenge of the Nerds*

(Illustration 6.4) Mr. T

Slick Rick incorporated Turead's Mr. T persona as an aesthetic marker. On his 1988 "Mona Lisa" (1988) Slick Rick makes one of the most well-known references to Mr. T in his ode to a fictional love interest, Mona Lisa, "Over 18…wear more gold than that man on A-Team". On "Lifetime Achievement" from G-Unit's *Elephant in the Sand* mixtape, Lloyd Banks utilizes simile and Turead's, Mr. T badman persona to connote his adornment of ostentatious jewelry, "I slide through the P's, Neck like Mr. T's/ It's 99 degrees, but my wrist on freeze." Interestingly, Turead's biography speaks to the utilization of dual identity construction in American popular culture, which is utilized within hip hop aesthetics. Turead stated that he adopted the name Mr. T as a response his father being called boy as a child. He lamented that by incorporating "Mr." into his name, so they would be forced to call him mister. Mr. T is also a hip hop icon. Along with his bad attitude, Mr. T's adornment of numerous gold chains, rings, and earrings resonated within hip hop aesthetics. Though Baracus had minimal dialogue in *The A-Team,* his presence served to further solidify the badman in American popular culture and, in turn, hip hop aesthetics.

The significance of icons in hip hop can be observed in not only the icons that are embraced by hip hop aesthetics, but also in the icons that hip hop chooses to engage and reject. Killer Mike illustrates the ways in which emcees simultaneously engage and reject certain African American icons. On *I Pledge Allegiance to the Grind* (2006) Killer Mike engages Black bourgeoisie iconography and sensibilities directly;

> They say I dissed Oprah, I'm like "so what?"
>
> I never get to jump up and down on a sofa (that's life)
>
> Now watch me as I Cruise like Tom through the slums
>
> Where the education's poor and the children growing dumb
>
> In the section of the city where civilians don't come
>
> Where Mr. Cosby and Mrs. Winfrey won't come…
>
> You be hard pressed to find another rapper smart as me
>
> Maybe Jay-Z, Tupac, C-U-B-E
>
> But Oprah'd rather put Supahead on TV
>
> Now whatcha white audience gon' think about we?
>
> The same white audience that watch Bill O' Reilly

The Cosby Show and The *Oprah Winfrey Show* emerged in 1984. Although both shows put forth "positive' representations of African Americans, they articulated very narrow constructions of African American identity. Both shows featured African American icons, Oprah Winfrey and Bill Cosby. It is worth noting that both figures support the status quo, and are therefore more palatable to white America. Cosby and Winfery build on previous African American archetypes and stereotypes. Cosby, in contrast to his comedic peer Richard Pryor—who reveled in the badman tradition—, was

safe. His comedy and politics were not radical. As with Winfrey, Cosby was publicly,

uncritical of systemic white supremacy and racism. Winfrey and Cosby were clearly

African American, culturally-speaking, yet in many cases, their public narratives failed to

address deeper racial issues. As African American icons, their narratives effected public

discourse, opinion and perception within and outside the African American community

during the 1980s. As " true power brokers, they were able to "exert a creative control

previously denied to most African Americans in Hollywood" (Bogle, 363)

The Cosby Show was extremely popular. The show was a critical and commercial

success. Its popularity partially rested upon its ability to adhere to the sociopolitical status

quo. The Cosbys were a respectable Black family, headed by the family patriarch and

central character, Heathcliffe Huxtable. Deep-seated African American socio-economic

issues were rarely addressed. On *The Cosby Show,* "The Huxtables also escaped and

provided escape from social problems then plaguing large numbers of Americans. On

The Cosby Show, drugs, crime, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, discrimination

happened to other people. The family itself was immune" (Collins *Black Sexual Politics,*

139). Thrift, hard work and moral respectability was the overriding message of *The*

Cosby Show. It championed a middle-class, bourgeoisie work ethic. Cosby's mainstream

appeal as a comedian and actor served as the conceptual backdrop of the show. Bill

Cosby's iconicity as a "good nigga" cannot be understated when analyzing the success of

The Cosby Show. Due to Cosby's middle-class sensibilities, as well as his presentation as

a "good nigga", Bill Cosby is not a hip hop icon. Donald Bogle discusses Cosby's

exoteric relationship with African American politics (not culture):

Though the mainstream culture always considered [Cosby] Black, he nonetheless

was not perceived as being ethnic; he never had the heavy cultural baggage that

might have made him seem like the Other. With his concerns about family and a

bourgeois lifestyle, he seemed to be the embodiment of the cultural mainstream

itself… He proved ideal: playful, engaging, inventive, and reassuring; adroitly

brushing aside fears of Black male power and sexuality, yet again (paradoxically)

without ever desexing himself. (289)

Cosby's lack of cultural baggage and his ambiguous stance on his sexuality—as

compared to, say Richard Pryor— is responsible for his mainstream appeal *and* his

omission as a hip hop icon. Cosby's biography is particularly significant within a

postmodern context. *The Cosby Show* blurred "the lines between Cosby the star and

Cosby the man, which worked splendidly to Cosby's advantage" (Bogle 292).

Lastly, *The Cosby Show* rarely dealt with hip hop, which— at the time—was closely

linked to African American and Latino folk culture. The show gave only scant

consideration to hip hop music. Musically, the show drew upon jazz aesthetics, which is a

sign of the generation gap, which plays out aesthetically, between many Baby Boomers

and the Hip Hop Generation. Winfrey's public and biographical narratives, on the other

hand, are protractions earlier African American stereotypes:

Winfrey constitutes the penultimate successful modern mammy whom African

American and, more amazingly, White women should emulate. Winfrey markets

herself in the context of the synergistic relationship among entertainment,

advertising, and news that frame contemporary Black popular culture.

(Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 142)

Oprah Winfrey's public narrative can be linked to Washingtonian approaches to Black public discourse. Self-help ideology under girds Winfrey's public discourse. However, Winfrey's discourse hinges upon a bourgeois post modern, de-culturalized narratives. Winfrey rarely links her self-help narrative to the collective struggles of African Americans, particularly African Americans in the greater Chicago area. Like Cosby, Winfrey does not engage institutionalized racism and European hegemony:

> Winfrey reinforces an individualistic ideology of social change that counsels her audiences to rely solely on themselves. Change yourself and your personal problems will disappear, advises Winfrey…Winfrey's message stops far short of linking such individual changes to the actual resources and opportunities that are needed to escape from poverty, stop an abusive spouse from battering, or avoid job discrimination. The organizational group politics that helped create the very opportunities that Winfrey herself enjoys are minimized in favor of a message of personal responsibility that resonates with the theme of "personal responsibility" used by elites to roll back social welfare programs.
>
> (Hill-Collins *Black Sexual Politics* 143)

Bill Cosby and Oprah Winfrey's focus on personal responsibility fails to take into account the impact of American racism and classism. Though their narratives are embraced by mainstream (i.e. white) America and with some African American Americans, their narratives have been largely rejected by working-class African American men. More recently, Winfery and Cosby have been extremely critical (and vocal) of hip hop culture. Unfortunately, their critiques are often misinformed, ahistorical, and culturally insensitive.

Two seminal hip hop-oriented films debuted in 1984: *Beat Street* and *Breakin*. Both films signaled the mainstreaming and commodification of hip hop culture. They offered narratives that reflected shifts in the hip hop worldview and hip hop iconography. *Beat Street* and *Breakin* accentuated the viral transmission of hip hop culture across the country. *Beat Street* chronicled east coast developments in hip hop culture, and *Breakin* documented developments in west coast in hip hop culture. Collectively, the films simultaneously brought cohesion and visibility to hip hop aesthetics, while aiding in hip hop cultures transition from folk to popular culture. Last, *Beat Street* and *Breakin* solidified hip hop archetypes and icons aesthetics (e.g. the hater and B-Boy) and aided in establishing the parameters and contours of hip hop .

Major developments in professional and college sports in 1984 influenced hip hop aesthetics. I identify four specific developments within sports culture that occurred in 1984, which had a profound and determinant effect on hip hop aesthetics: 1) The 1984 NBA Championship series—which pitted the storied Los Angeles Lakers and Magic Johnson against Larry Bird and the Boston Celtics—; 2) 1984 NBA Draft in which Michael Jordan, Akeem Olajuwan, Charles Barkley, and John Stockton; 3) Michael Jordan's endorsement deal with Nike—which was the genesis of the Air Jordan; and 4) the 1984 NCAA Division I Men's Basketball game, in which the all-black Georgetown Hoyas, coached by African American John Thompson defeated Akeem Olajuwan and the Houston Cougars. These events forever altered the NBA aesthetic and socio-economic landscape, and turn, American popular culture iconography.

African American popular culture iconography was in flux and brought to the surface many racial dynamics in America during 1984. All four events have been

sampled and utilized in hip hop's post-modern pastiche, illustrated in the exchange of style and attitude between the hip hop generation and basketball iconography. Furthermore, the 1984 basketball texts are referenced throughout hip hop narratives since 1984.

The 1984 NBA championship was one a seminal historical moment of the Magic/Bird era, which itself became an iconic binary within hip hop aesthetics. Boyd explains, "though hip hop would seem to have little to do with the Magic/Bird era, the racial conflict that engulfed this time certainly set he table for what was to come later" (69). The interplay between style and race during the Magic/Bird era influenced hip hop aesthetics and the hip hop worldview:

> While much of the racial discourse of their time was embedded in the competition of these two players, the issues of both race and class would burst out in the open by the time hip hop came to have an influence on the way the game is played, around the late 80s. (69)

The 1984 NBA draft is important to my discussion of hip hop aesthetics because two primary hip hop icons, Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley and two secondary icons, Akeem Olajuwan and John Stockton were drafted. If the Magic/Bird era highlighted racial fissures in America, the Michael Jordan era ushered in an era of depoliticized and deracialized African American popular culture iconography. Nonetheless, Michael Jordan was firmly rooted in urban aesthetics. Jordan and Barkley represented two diverse African American perspectives. Jordan represented a reconstituted All-American "gold boy". Charles Barkley on the other hand was outspoken, less-sophisticated, and was prone to violent "self-defense" both on and off the court. Barkley's badman approach is

responsible for his iconic status in hip hop. The mash-up hip hop group Gnarls Barkley,

which consists of avant-garde producer Danger Mouse and former Goodie Mob member

Cee-Lo, utilize Charles Barkley as an iconic influence. Michael Jordan, however,

qualifies as a hip hop icon more because of his financial success and stylistic influence on

hip hop aesthetics than his embodiment of the badman trope. In this sense, Michael

Jordan is a unique figure within hip hop iconography:

> Jordan, unlike Muhammad Ali, for instance, came along at a time when it was
>
> *political* to be Black, wealthy, and empowered by one's own image. He was able
>
> to use individuality not only to win basketball games but to change the terms of
>
> the culture in the process. Jordan, then, broke away from the group concept and
>
> established his own sense of being, relative not only to his Blackness, but often
>
> above and beyond his racial identity. There was now a price that one could garner
>
> from being Black and visible, thus Jordan's allegiance was to himself and not
>
> necessarily to the race. (Boyd 104)

Jordan's individualistic approach, his lack of outspokenness in the popular media on

cultural affairs and his distancing himself from African American politics in any

significant way represents a divergence in hip hop iconography. Jordan's disconnect from

urban, African American, working-class issues signaled a shift in African American

iconography. Jordan did not appear to be concerned with political and socioeconomic

issues:

> Though Jordan was not hip hop per se in his politics, his timing on the NBA scene
>
> closely connects to the emergence of hip hop as the primary way of representing

Blackness in the culture at large. On the other hand, Jordan's shaved head, his

long shorts, and his Air Jordans all became staples of hip hop style. (104)

Because hip hop iconography samples only parts of icon's narratives, Jordan's financial

success and basketball mastery are focal points and his politics and racial allegiance are

deemphasized. Nonetheless, hip hop aesthetics have borrowed most heavily from

Jordan's competitive nature and his urban style. Jay-Z references Michael Jordan on his

crossover hit "Show Me What Ya Got" (2006) as a metaphor for his mastery of hip hop

lyricism:

> Shots of Patron, now she's in the zone
>
> I ain't talking about the two-thee
>
> Mami in the zone like the homie 2-3
>
> Jordan or James, makes no difference
>
> Boo I'm ballin the same
>
> I am the Mike Jordan of recording
>
> You might want to fallback from recording

G-Unit's 2008 mixtape *Elephant in the Sand*, which was a taunt directed at Fat Joe's

Elephant in the Room (2008) album, exemplifies the competitive, take-no-prisoners

attitude that is sampled from Michael Jordan. On "Sunroof Open," Lloyd Banks asserts,

"I got a conquer and win passion." 50 Cent buttresses Lloyd Banks cocky, egotistical

diatribe. Similar to Jordan, 50 Cent implies that he is unconcerned with critiques of him,

whether they emanate from popular media *or* the certain sectors of the African American

community, ""I got a fucked up attitude, I don't care/ rock hanging from ear like a

chandelier".

On "Sunroof Open", 50 cent admits that he has a "bad" attitude, yet he is indifferent. However, 50 Cent links his ambivalence to external critiques to his material success. Michael Jordan aided in the establishment of this type of capitalistic approach. Michael Jordan represented a new type of African American icon, and he also created new conceptual space for African American public narratives. Aside from Jordan's aesthetic contributions to hip hop culture via his Air Jordan brand, Michael Jordan's approach to business and his superior confidence—which bordered on arrogance and was the result of his superior athletic ability—have had a profound influence on hip hop aesthetics and public discourses.

The 1984 NCAA Division I Men's Basketball championship game featured the Georgetown Hoyas versus the Houston Cougars. The game was significant to hip hop aesthetics and narratives for several reasons: 1) John Thompson became the first African American coach to win an NCAA Division I title; 2) the intra-racial overtones of Nigerian-born Houston star Akeem Olajuwan; and 3) the racial overtones and aesthetic approach of the all-black Georgetown Hoyas. Georgetown's win over the University of Houston in the 1984 NCAA Division I championship title game, similar to the 1984 NBA Championship series, which pit Larry Bird against Magic Johnson, was symbolic and representative of American racial dynamics. More importantly, the 1984 Georgetown Hoyas :

> The critical mass of Black men also foreshadowed the arrival of hip hop and its relationship to the game of basketball. Hip hop often intimidated many because, at its core, it is a site defined by large gatherings of Black men. Georgetown demonstrated this on a basketball court....Georgetown, like hip hop, never

attempted to minimize these fears by softening its image. The Hoyas used the

negative perceptions against them as a form of intimidation. The team could be

called an early version of "niggas with attitude" (Boyd 78)

The Georgetown Hoyas represented African American male agency. The significance of

their aesthetic contribution to hip hop aesthetics is evidenced in the popularity of

Georgetown paraphernalia in hip hop culture during the 1980s, as well as the introduction

of the Nike Terminator basketball shoe in 1984, which was created specifically for the

Georgetown Hoya basketball team. The socio-economic implications of the release of Air

Jordans and Nike Terminators for corporate America are illustrated by Nike's surpassing

$1 billion in 1986.

Hip hop aesthetics borrowed heavily from professional and college basketball

iconography, but besides popular culture iconography, a dearth in strong African

America, working-class narratives in mass media—which served as implicit critiques

African American masculinity, and cross-currents in the NBA in 1984, there were eight

additional socio-cultural developments in American popular media that influenced hip

hop aesthetics.

One, Clara Peller's appearance in a Wendy's commercial on January 10, 1984 in

which she introduced the popular catchphrase "Where's the Beef?" illustrates hip hop's

reappropriation of popular media. The phrase "Where's the Beef?" has been appropriated

by hip hop aesthetics. It has morphed and evolved into an abbreviated version, "beef"

and, and has been fully absorbed into hip hop's lexicon. Beef connotes a disagreement or

a physical altercation (or the threat of bodily harm) Quincy Jones' son Quincy Jones III

(QD3) further popularized the term with his *Beef* DVD series. (B.I.G "What's Beef")

Two, Hulk Hogan's January 23 WWF Championship win over the Iron Sheik introduced the world to Hulkamania and the reinvention of the white superhero. Three, Michael Jackson's scalp receiving second and third degree burns due to pyrotechnics during filming of a *Pepsi* commercial illustrates hip hop's reappropriation of and interplay with popular media. Four, Marvin Gaye's murder on April 1 at the hands of his father signaled highlighted African American inter-generational shifts between baby boomers and the hip hop generation. Marvin Gaye is a hip hop and African American icon. His murder represented the growing generational rift within the African American community, which was exacerbated by drug culture, gun violence and overall difference in worldview. It reinforced the hip hop generations' notion that violence was inescapable even if one receives fame and fortune.

Five, Vanessa Williams becoming the first African American Miss America and the first to resign when she surrendered her crown for after nude photos of her appear in "Penthouse" magazine highlighted gender dynamics within the African American community. This event further obsfucated and complicated African American feminity for African American hip hop genrationers. Six, the release of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* on November 9, 1987 influenced hip hop aesthetics and increased the threshhold of blood and gore within hip hop narratives. Dana Dane's "Nighmares" from *Dana Dane with Fame* is an example of the early influence of horror films in general and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* in particular.

Seven, the release of Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do With It" impacted gendered, malecentric hip hop narratives. "What's Love Got to With It" represented a shift in African American women's discourses. Turner's narrative enouraged anti-African

mle sentiment in popular media. As a feminst text, the song documented the spousal abuse Turner experienced at th hands of her then husband Ike Turner. However, "What's Love Got to Do With It" heightened the tension between African American men and women in the early 1980s. And eight, the shooting of four African American youth (Barry Allen, Troy Canty, James Ramseur, and Darrell Cabey) by Bernhard Hugo Goetz on December, 22 in the Bronx heightened racial tensions for hip hop generationers, which aided in the embrace of Black Nationalist discourse in hip hop.

By 1988, "elaborate props and rigid codification all give their performances a kind of large-scale grandiosity foreign to most early –clearly less formal—hip-hop music" (Dimitriadi 187). Not so ironically, the gun became a recurring symbol within hip-hop culture during the 1980s. As noted, post-modern constructions of male identity with in American popular culture gave way to realist renderings of urban life. "The gun came to signify (referentially) a gun and gun alone. The power of this symbol stood on its own. Realism in the realm of the mass-mediated became more important than engaging live crowds or working with the language itself (Dimitriadi 188).

Urban, young African-American male voices did not reappear on American television until 1989 with the debut of the Arsenio hall Show and the sketch comedy series *In Living Color*. Hall, who was a 33 year-old comedian at the time the show aired and a burgeoning actor, introduced a witty, hip hop influenced talk show. *The Arsenio Hall Show's* represented a toned-down version of what was "hip" in the late 1980s. It clearly catered to the hip hop generation featuring African American guests such as Minister Louis Farrakhan, De La Soul, Buster Rhymes, et al. *In Loving Color* on the other hand adhered to a much younger, and one could say, more urban, hard-edged

aesthetic. Executive produced by Keenan Ivory-Wayans--the boding patriarch of the Wayans comedy klan—the show featured a hip hop influenced theme some performed by emcee Heavy D. Similar to *The Arsenio Hall Show, In Living Color* definitely hip hop as a musical and aesthetic backdrop.

The Arsenio Hall Show and *In Living Color* served as cultural agents in the sustenance, proliferation, dissemination, commodification and cultivation of hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop music enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with *In Living Color* and *The Arsenio Hall Show.* The shows marked a shift in working-class, African American male voices in American popular culture. The interplay between comedy and hip hop aesthetics can be seen in the appeal of both shows as well as the maturation of hip hop discourse in the late 1980s, which were anchored by these two shows.

Run-DMC's *Run DMC* and *Raising Hell, NWA and the Posse* (1987), and KRS-One's *Criminal Minded* served as tragic realist narratives that chronicled the emerging crack economy, the AIDS epidemic, and American public policy of the early 1980s. Not only did these albums foreshadow the post-Afrocentric movement in hip hop texts, these narratives stood in direct contrast to more mainstream, middle-class African American narratives, which were generally more light-hearted, Television shows such as *The Oprah Winfery Show, The Cosby Show, Revenge of the Nerds,* and *Family Matters* represent this trend. By 1989, the expansion of urban, working-class African American male discursive spaces aided in the rise of more aggressive and explicit content in hip hop discourses.

(Illustration 6.5) Run-DMC

Run-DMC as Hip Hop Icons and Archetypes

In the previous section, I offered an analysis of early 1980s popular culture texts. In this section, I examine the significance of Run-DMC—particularly their debut album *Run-DMC—* as countercultural text in order to highlight the emergence of a distinct hip hop worldview. However, I extend Kitwana's hip hop worldview rubric and illustrate how the hip hop worldview reached maturation within the context of a unique cultural moment. 1984 marked a dearth of resilient and viable representations of working-class African American men, as well as a shift in African American popular culture iconography.

Run-DMC serves as hip hop archetypes that solidified numerous features of hip hop aesthetics and expression. Numerous hip hop scholars have studied Run-DMC's musical and physical texts. However, many have overlooked the significance of their debut, self-

entitled album, *Run-DMC* within the context of early 1980s American popular culture discourse. *Run-DMC* was a seminal and foundational album in its carving out of discursive space in American popular culture, as well as its influence upon hip hop aesthetics. *Run-DMC* serves as a blueprint for hip-hop posturing, style and discourse. The emergence of Run-DMC also marked a significant shift in hip hop aesthetics. On one hand, the group solidified bad as an aesthetic in hip hop. On the other hand, Run-DMC signaled a shift from folk hip hop culture to popular, mass-mediated popular culture production:

> Run-DMC played down the body because they saw themselves above all as *professionals.* By acting normal and solemn, they played out their audiences fantasies and maturity…[Their] personae represent a 'narrowing down" of the broad scope of festivity.(Wheeler, 213)

As a seminal rap group, they serve as iconographic, and as archetypal figures in hip-hop culture. Aesthetically, they serve as foundational figures. Run-DMC embodied the attitude of the 1980s b-boy. They challenged notions of rock star masculinity. There were several prominent features of Run-DMC's brand of cool. Bravado, name brand clothing, street vernacular and aggressive posturing were all part of Run-DMC's aesthetics and narratives.

A juxtaposition of African American public discourse in popular media and Run-DMC's narratives on *Run-DMC* illustrate the existential and discursive disparity and ideological fissure between working-class, urban African American men and middle-class African Americana in 1984. While popular renderings of African American life in television and film chronicled upward mobility and middle-class values, *Run-DMC* stood

in direct contrast to these narratives. The albums first track "Hard Times" served as a response to the candy-coated and/or emasculated African American narratives of the early 1980s. "Hard Times" raised the ante on tragic realism in mainstream hip hop discourse. Ironically, Run-DMC's appeal lay in the group's ability to balance mainstream appeal with gritty, realist narratives. As a response to more mainstream narratives of American social mobility within popular culture, Run-DMC made an aesthetic choice to deal with themes such as inflation and unemployment:

> Hard times spreading just like the flu
>
> Watch out homeboy, don't let it catch you
>
> P-p-prices go up, don't let your pocket go down
>
> When you got short money you're stuck on the ground
>
> Turn around, get ready, keep your eye on the prize
>
> And be on point for the future shock ("Hard Times")

"Hard Times" was unabashedly poignant, offering listeners a glimpse into the realities of the post industrial environment, while offering glimmers of hope (e.g. "keep your eyes on the prize"). Run-DMC's narratives were linked to African American, urban struggle. Yet, Run-DMC's stylistic choices—tightly wound call-and response flows, aggressive posturing, donning all-black attire, their utilization of the B-Boy stance—became the foundation for an emerging hip hop aesthetic. On "It's Like That", they expand upon their tragic realist narratives, emphasizing their discontent with the lack of economic opportunity within a post-industrial economy, "Unemployment at a record highs/People coming, people going, people born to die/ Don't ask me, because I don't know why/But it's like that, and that's the way it is."

Run-DMC was the first rap group to headline a national tour and the first to appear on MTV. They popularized rap among the young, predominantly white audience of rock music; gave the genre a more rebellious image; and introduced hip-hop sartorial style—hats, gold chains, and untied Adidas sports shoes with fat laces—to millions of young Americans. The now familiar connection between rap music and athletic wear was established in 1986 when the Adidas corporation and Run-DMC signed a $1.5 million promotional deal (Starr 414).

During the 1980s, popular culture media rarely dealt with the ills of America's urban poor. As discussed, the urban African-American male narratives was absent from popular media, particularly heroic African-American figures. Due to the absence of radical, heroic narratives and anti-working class African American male sentiment in popular culture during the 1980s, the badman trope was embraced within hip hop aesthetics, and, in turn, became a central feature of hip hop aesthetics. The badman—a carryover from pre-hip hop African American iconography—served as a creative vehicle upon which certain expressive modes—hyperbole, bravado, double-entendre— were accentuated in hip hop narratives.

In sum, the year 1984 marked the maturation of hip hop aesthetics. The emergence of Run-DMC signaled shifts in American popular culture, as well as an overall shift within hip hop aesthetics. Run-DMC solidified hip hop aesthetics through their use of aggressive posturing and attitude and their use of fashion to convey messages. Hip hop sensibilities emerged during this era as a response to a rise in African American male visibility in American popular culture on one hand and a blatant invisibility on the other hand. Popular media represented working-class African American men as caricatures. By 1985,

films such as *The Color Purple*, though a powerful womanist account, supported the proliferation of flat African-American male characters. In other words, it was not the portrayal of Black male violence in *The Color Purple* that was problematic, as Crenshaw (1995) observes, but "the absence of other narratives and images portraying a fuller range of black experience" (362). Developments in American popular media and culture in 1984 influenced the trajectory and contours of hip hop aesthetics. Professional and college basketball, popular culture texts, and popular culture icons interfaced with hip hop culture and created a new worldview that would serve as a socio-cultural foundation for hip hop aesthetics.

Although hip hop aesthetics have subtle socio-political underpinnings, hip hop aesthetics are covertly political. The badman trope activated through an engagement of popular culture texts and iconography is an example of how hip hop aesthetics capture discursive space and cultural capital. In other words, the badman trope is utilized as a form of creative expression. The badman as literary devise is utilized not only in hip hop lyrics, but also hip hop attire, posturing and attitudes. The badman trope was embraced within hip hop culture and aesthetics and operated within the context of pop culture, counter-narratives. The dearth of strong African American male characters, figures and icons within popular media (with the exception of professional sports icons), the rise of the megastar, and public policy all contributed to the development of hip hop aesthetics. Furthermore, 1984 was an important year for hip hop culture and aesthetics. Numerous crosscurrents, ambiguities, and contradictions operate concurrently within hip hop culture and aesthetics, which reflect America's historical inconsistencies, African American's

quest for upward mobility, and the skewed representations of African Americans in popular.

Characteristics of Hip-Hop Expression

This section "Characteristics of Hip Hop Expression" is an attempt link hip hop to African American cultural traditions. Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" serves as a crucial link between hip hop culture and early twentieth century African American cultural practices. I utilize Hurston's construct as a starting point to create a theoretical framework to examine and understand hip hop aesthetics. Characteristics of Hip Hop Expression outlines prominent features and characteristics within hip hop aesthetics. This is not an exhaustive analysis of hip hop aesthetics. Based on Hurston's construct, Characteristics of Hip Hop Expression is based on ethnographic observation and textual analysis (i.e. music videos, interviews, songs, etc.). It is an attempt to identify specific characteristics of hip hop aesthetics, building upon Hurstons' earlier narrative describing inner-city African Americans of the early twentieth century. In short, I provide a perfunctory rubric—Characteristics of Hip Hop Expression—, which identifies thirty-two characteristics of hip hop expression. By discussing hip hop aesthetics within the context of expression in order to move away from approaching hip hop culture as a political movement and to broaden discourses on hip hop which take into account hip hop's focus on style and its reconfiguration and renegotiation of African American epistemology, ontology, and axiology.

Table 6.1 Characteristics of Hip Hop Expression

Characteristic	Example(s)
1) The Concept of the Underground	See Dissertation Text (SDT)
2) Cultural/Economic Alchemy (i.e. scratching, graff, entrepreneurship)	-Transformation of experience into capital via lyrical content -Scratching is a manipulation of time space
3) The Hater	-Spit in *Beat Street* -C. Delores Tucker -Bill O'Reilly -(SDT)
4) Self-Critique	N/A
5) Collectivity/Cooperative Economics	-A strong team (e.g. the Zulu Nation, Wu-Tang, -G-Unit, Death Row, Bravehearts, etc.) -The Crew
6) TransGeographic, diasporic dialogue	N/A
7) Place Symbolism (representin')	-See also Nas' "Represent" from *Illmatic* (1994) -"L.A, L.A." The Dogg Pound
8) Upward mobility	-*Get Rich or Die Trying*, 50 Cent -Bootstrapping (Washington)
9) Self Defense	-"Death before dishonor."
10) Lived Practice	-(SDT)
11) Hyperbolic Expression/Exaggeration	-Rerun from the (*Freshest Kids*) -(SDT)
12) Symbolism	N/A
13) Attitude/Swagger	(SDT)
14) Signifying	(SDT)
15) Dual Meanings/Encoded Messages	(SDT)
16) Attidtude/Keepin it Real/Bad	-"I'm Bad" LL Cool J -(SDT) -"The Realest Nigga" Styles P -(SDT)
17) Absence of the Concept of Privacy	(SDT)
18) Street Knowledge	(SDT)
19) Postmodern pastiche	(SDT)
20) Da Hustler (Trickster, Etc.)	N/A
21) The badman/badwoman trope	(SDT)
22) Being "Fresh"	-Hurston "The will to adorn" -(SDT)
23) Style relayed through non-verbal communication of symbols, signs, and meaning	(SDT)
24) Freedom of speech	

25)	A message	-Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five circa 1982 ("The Message")
26)	Competition	N/A
27)	Double-Entendre, allegory, double meaning and signifying	-Run DMC -Jay-Z -(SDT)
28)	Tragic reaslism	-(SDT)
29)	Cathartic	-Jay-Z -LL Cool J -Russell Simmons
30)	Respect for the dead	-R.I.P. murals -Libations
31)	Non-judgement	-(SDT)
32)	A commandeering and reappropriation of public space (the boom box, b-girling, block parties (pinkster celebrations, graffiti)	-(SDT)

(SDT)-See Dissertation Text

CONCLUSION

Like its African American-influenced predecessors blues, jazz, and so-called rock and roll, hip-hop culture is in desperate need of critical analysis and scholarly input. As early African-American scholars such as Zora Neale Hurston have attempted to tease out "characteristics" of African American expression, so must the new cadre of scholars within the academy. Hurston, as well as other early African American scholars, laid an adequate theoretical and methodological foundation from which hip hop scholars can operate. By making connections with earlier scholarly works, analysis of African and African American musical production situates hip hop as part of a cultural continuum and not an abruption. Unfortunately, many contemporary scholars have not examined these texts closely and have in turn created somewhat ahistorical/acultural analyses of hip-hop culture.

African American popular culture iconography and iconology are important, yet neglected, spheres of twenty-first century African American life. Since hip hop's birth, American popular culture iconography has gone through many phases. Nonetheless, the 1980s witnessed the emergence of a new media landscape, which spurned the birth of the mega star (e.g Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson, and Bill Cosby. The rise of celebrity, product branding, hyper-consumption, and middle-class optimism undoubtedly impacted shifts in African American iconography. Moreover, critical analysis of hip-hop culture, icons and aesthetics is paramount to its preservation and its maturation. Without a historical context from which to do so, though, hip-hop runs the risk of cooption, exploitation and/or extinction.

In QD3's *Beef* series*,* which chronicles internecine rivalries in hip hop music culture, hip hop icon KRS-One labeled the current era of hip hop as the Ice Age. Hip hop's Ice Age is marked by the increase of corporatization, commercialism and conspicuous consumption within hip hop. It also marks a distancing from hip hop's essence (or Golden Age). The current state of hip hop iconography and iconology reflects not only trends within larger American society, but they also represent trends, currents and attitudes of the hip hop generation. Many hip hop artists, purists, casual listeners and aficionados are beginning to echo KRS's sentiment concerning the current state of hip hop. However, art never exists in a vacuum. Hip hop music is an extension and representation of African American cultural attitudes, on some level, no matter how distorted. This was true since hip-hop's beginning, even though hip hop has become increasingly mass mediated. I am not suggesting that hip hop culture represents a facsimile of African American existence. The tension between authentic African American imagery and African Americans' heterogeneity cannot be neglected. In its popular phase, hip hop emerges out of a complex matrix which include market forces, corporate interest, musical tastes and trends, racially influenced mass media and socioeconomc factors.

If hip hop aesthetics reflect African American attitudes and sensibilities, then what is to be said of hip hop's current state? Hip hop narratives draw attention to the exigent and tenuous circumstances many face in African American Latino community. In 2008, *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America* published by The Brookings Institute surveys the prospects of upward mobility. This research debunks the myth of the American Dream, pointing out that upward mobility through hard work is

often out of reach for many poor, African Americans. In short, economic opportunities for this demographic remain bleak. For many hip hop generationers, violence has become quotidian. What are the implications of downward mobility and rampant gunplay, for example, on hip hop aesthetics?

Many contemporary hip hop icons are ostentatious sybarites. Despite the attempts of many culture critics and pundits to traduce hip hop, hip hop—at least in its more pop-oriented variant—remains a viable and, arguably, functional form of creative expression and entertainment for America's youth. The 2008 Forbes Celebrity 100 List, which is a list of the 100 top earning celebrities, illustrates the economic and social capital that hip hop culture has garnered young African Americans. The Forbes Celebrity 100 list is telling in what it reveals about the twenty-first century American popular culture landscape. The list elucidates the centrality of hip hop in American popular culture. If earnings are socio-cultural indicators in a capitalist context, then the upward mobility of hip hop icons such as Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and P.Diddy reaffirms self-determination as an important characteristic of hip hop aesthetics. Hip hop's underdog aesthetic, undergirded by the hip hop characteristic "hustle and flow", bleeds into all sectors of American society. Because hip hop culture is a form of expression, hip hop manifests itself as an attitude, an aesthetic approach to existence. Armed with valuable African American historical narratives and iconography, hip hop culture approaches the American landscape and its challenges with a competitive aggression.

Jay-Z underscores the acute historical awareness within hip hop culture. Historical awareness informs hip hop culture's proclivity to economic mobility. On "Izzo (H.O.V.A)", Jay-Z interposes legendary rap pioneers Cold Crush into his narrative,

connecting the group's exploitation in the record industry to historic wrongs committed against African Americans in the music business:

> I do this for my culture
>
> To let 'em know what a nigga look like, when a nigga in a Roaster
>
> Show 'em how to move in a room full of vultures
>
> Industry shady it need to be taken over
>
> Label owners hate me I'm raisin the status quo up
>
> I'm overchargin niggaz for what they did to the Cold Crush
>
> Pay us like you owe us for all the years that you hoed us
>
> We can talk, but money talks so talk mo' bucks

Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and P. Diddy followed an economic blueprint that emerged in hip hop aesthetics in the mid-1980s. Jay-Z's reference to Cold Crush—"I'm overchargin niggaz for what they did to Cold Crush"— and his explicit reference to the industry being 'shady exemplify hip hop's awareness of past exploitation of African American artists. This awareness informs these hip hop icons' aggressive approach to business, whether illicit or licit.

50 Cent's critically-acclaimed debut album, *Get Rich or Die Trying,* takes the hip hop characteristic of self-determinative upward mobility to another level. *Get Rich or Die Trying* also signaled the acceptance and entrenchment of capitalist ideals within hip hop aesthetic. Hence, upward mobility—as opposed to mere collective struggle—has become a central theme of contemporary hip hop. What does twenty-first century hip hop discourse's embrace of upward mobility say about the state of poor, African Americans and Latinos? To what extent does this trend reflect the actual circumstances of the hip

hop generation? As discussed in chapter 2, the shift toward upward mobility is reflected in African American popular culture texts of the 1980s. Moreover, this decline in Black Nationalist narratives in hip hop is also reflected in the transition from the Afrocentric movement to the post-Afrocentric era in hip hop discourse.

These hip hop icons' earnings surpassed many film and sports icons. Historically, sports icons were at the top of the African American iconographic hierarchy. This trend reflects not so much a decline in interest in sports icons in hip hop aesthetics, for sports icons remain lionized figures in the African American community and within hip hop aesthetics; nonetheless, it does speak to hip hop's renown amongst African American youth. More importantly, these African American, male icons are anomalies. They represent new archetypal models. For the hip hop generation, though influenced by older African American iconographic and iconological models, professional sports icons have taken a backseat to icons and figures that necessarily reflect the hip hop generation's values, expectations, worldview and aesthetics. Within in this new iconological model, politics are secondary to social mobility and expression (i.e. style, freedom of speech, etc.). Lil Wayne provides insight into the hip hop generation's apathy toward sports culture and icons in general:

They said I couldn't play football, I was too small

They said I couldn't play basketball, I wasn't tall

> They said I couldn't play baseball at all
>
> And now everyday of my life, I ball
>
> And they say you ain't great, 'til someone assassinate
>
> And I feel like MLK
>
> Yeah, +I Have A Dream+ to be your worst nightmare

Corporate Titaness and American icon Oprah Winfrey was the highest-earning celebrity to make the list for 2008. Winfrey's ascendance represents on one hand the upward mobility and palatability of as an African American women in popular culture. On the other hand, Winfrey's ascendance ushers in a more stringent—albeit misinformed—critique of African American male hip hop figures and discourse. Though Oprah Winfrey's success remains somewhat of an anomaly—Winfrey is a testament to African American women's resiliency and agency, she has successfully managed to ignore and silence many of hip hop's more provocative male voices. She has eagerly joined the chorus of critics such as Bill Cosby, John McWhorter and Jason Whitlock who have lambasted and vilified hip hop culture instead of dealing with the deeper systemic and historical factors that have led to hip hop's emergence. Because Winfrey and Cosby are African American icons, they have become bellwethers of African American public opinion.

Hip hop mogul Jay-Z ranked ninth behind Winfrey, Madonna (3) and the Rolling Stones (4). Jay-Z, who earned $83 million, earned more than Steven Spielberg (10), Tom Hanks (11), David Letterman (17), Donald Trump (19) and Kobe Bryant, who ranked twenty-three. 50 Cent ranked 32 ahead of Michael Jordan (35), Rush Limbaugh (36), and Jerry Seinfeld (42). P.Diddy ranked 43 ahead of Lebron James (49) and Derek Jeter (50).

Jay-Z, Diddy and 50 Cent represent a new wave of African American business moguls. They differ in tone, approach and intent from previous African American business archetypes such as Jack Johnson, Michael Jordan, and Michael Jackson. 50 Cent, in particular, represents a new breed of hip hop archetype and icon.

The Forbes Celebrity 100 List has far-reaching implications for hip hop scholarship. It illustrates the importance placed upon American celebrity evidenced in the market value of celebrities and icons. What does the Forbes Celebrity 100 reveal about the economic, aesthetic, social, and discursive changes/current that have occurred within (and outside) hip hop culture since its birth in 1973? What are the implications of Jay-Z's high-ranking as a young African American male from the Marcy Housing Projects in Brooklyn, New York? Lastly, has hip hop culture reached its apogee?

In this dissertation, I have attempted to show how hip hop has proliferated partially because it has filled a void in what the hip hop demographic would consider strong African American male voices and leadership in popular media. The invisibility and emasculation of working-class African American, men's discourses in American popular media was the spark that led to hip hop's flowering. Hip hop emerged in the maelstrom of anti-working class, African American male sentiment that augmented American popular culture of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since the institution of American slavery, radical African American male narratives have been overlooked, rebuked, silenced, and ignored. Don Imus' derogatory description of the Rutgers Women's basketball team and the subsequent hip hop bashing campaign it ignited are glaring examples of how race and gender dynamics play out in popular media. Furthermore, many Winferian critiques of hip hop echo older critiques of the badman trope and so-

called low culture. It extends previous Black bourgeoisie critiques of folk culture (i.e.

blues, the jook, rock and roll, and bebop).

Hip hop iconography, iconology and aesthetics elucidate the inter-generational

fissure within the African American community between the hip hop and baby boomer

generations. Kanye West illustrates this point on "Can't Tell Me Nothing" featuring

Young Jeezy from his *Graduation* album:

> So I parallel double parked that motherfucker sideways
>
> Old folks talking bout back in my day
>
> But homey this is my day, class started 2 hours ago
>
> Oh am I late?
>
> You know I already graduated
>
> And you can live through anything if Magic made it

West reifies basketball icon Magic Johnson, while simultaneously critiquing older

African Americans. Hip hop icons, iconology and aesthetics encapsulate the hip hop

generation's pessimism of American reform and ambivalence toward elders

conceptualization of work and success.

Lastly, the 2008 Presidential campaign and its impact on hip hop iconography is

noteworthy. Barack Obama has already attained iconic status within in the hip hop

community. Barack Obama's national and international appeal, particularly in the African

American community, lies more in his reification as a popular culture figure. In other

words, Obama's image as a charismatic celebrity and popular culture icon has been as

important as his political agenda. African American presidential candidate His campaign

has appealed to the hip hop generation due, partially, to its utilization of technology and

his approach to marketing. If Barack Obama is indeed elected as the first African American president, he will alter the contours of African American, and as a result hip hop iconography. Overall, icons and archetypes are the building blocks of hip hop aesthetics. As role models, hip hop's icons and aesthetics reflect shifts in African American attitudes, values, and expectations. Because hip hop utilizes post modern pastiche, there are multiple layers of meaning embedded in hip narratives and icons.

Hip hop narratives iconography, iconology and aesthetics are currently in the process of an aesthetic and generational shift *within* hip hop culture. The theme and sociopolitical impetus of Nas' new album--which was originally entitled N.I.G.G.E.R (2008), the success of Jay-Z and 50 Cent in the entrepreneurial sphere, and the recent "beef" between Soulja Boy and Ice T are just three examples of recent developments that signal notable shifts in hip hop culture. Far from tangential, these shifts reflect and track societal trends, as well as African American attitudes, values and expectations. This is why the new cadre of African American Studies scholars must dialogue about these developments in hip hop culture. More importantly, hip hop culture is the primary form of cultural expression for today's African American youth. I view the African American community's reappropriation and subsequent harnessing of hip hop culture/aesthetics in the twenty-first century as a socio-cultural imperative. If African American Studies as a discipline fails to define, engage, and assess hip hop culture, other disciplines surely will.

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