

ABSTRACT

CAVAZO, RODNEY BO. Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet: Rap Nationalism, The Gangsta, and the Making of the Dirty South. (Under the direction of Blair LM Kelley.)

From the streets of New York, to the inner cities of Los Angeles, to the Gaza Strip, hip-hop music has touched a diverse range of people from all over the world. Hip-hop music and culture has grown in popularity all over the U.S. and the globe, crossing race, class, and gender lines like few other art forms have before. Hip-hop music exists on a continuum of historically black musical traditions and draws from various moments in the history of black resistance.

My project will focus on an examination of the several important mainstream hip-hop groups and also positioning hip-hop music within a long history of black cultural traditions. Additionally I seek to gain a better understanding of how these particular artists presented their version of black masculinity, and how they opposed what they perceived as oppressive power structures and white masculine constructions. Through three case studies that explore distinct moments in hip-hop history, the thesis will trace the shifts in hip-hop identity over time. The project begins with an exploration of the politically conscious rap of Public Enemy that examines the ways that the group drew both from historic forms of black cultural nationalism from the black arts movement and a savvy, self-crafted business model. The project then explores the roots of the gangsta chic that seems dominant in current mainstream hip-hop through an analysis of the group N.W.A. The project concludes with an exploration of the shifting of hip-hop culture southward, through a discussion of the Atlanta-based group

OutKast that examines the diverse representations of black masculinity presented by the group.

This project frames hip-hop as a form of performance; that is, artists not as everyday people, but as hyperbolic representations of black life. Hip-hop music has reflected some people's lives, but as an art form it primarily serves as cultural script that can never fully reflect the totality of lived experience. From this framework, the thesis will address a few key questions. What are the historical and social conditions that inspired young black artists to speak out? What are the progressive and regressive elements of masculinity constructed by mainstream hip-hop artists? How does hip-hop represent a unique cultural expression where black art becomes both a form of protest and a product?

I contend that hip-hop music emerged at a unique historical moment that allowed it to constitute a multi-faceted cultural form. Hip-hop was born as both protest and product, in an often conflicted conversation with the larger society. Hip-hop gave young black men the space to forge, present, and perform complex masculinities. It was a vehicle for the voiceless; through the power of art, these artists helped to craft their own history. But while hip hop resisted and recast negative stereotypes of black men, it often re-inscribed the oppression of black women and men who did not match up to hyper-masculine ideals. While hip-hop music has served as a form of subversion that gave voice to a subset of the African American underclass, it often has done so at the expense of others. The core of this study, besides all the complexities, seeks to understand historically how hip-hop has helped giving agency to young men who desired to represent themselves however they chose.

Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet: Rap Nationalism, The Gangsta, and the Making of the Dirty
South

by
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DEDICATION

To my family and friends who supported me in this endeavor,
and to those who made this document necessary.

BIOGRAPHY

Rodney B. Cavazo is a native of Cerritos, California. He attended Valley Christian High School, followed by Cerritos College then the University of California, Irvine, where he graduated with honors earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in history in 2007.

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INTRODUCTION

Music has been a world-renowned characteristic of the city of New Orleans for over a hundred years. Though Mardi Gras and Carnival were annual events plays, balls, concerts, and parades made music an intimate part of New Orleans life during the antebellum period. Eventually a new form of music called jazz would emanate from the vocal and musical expressions of blacks, creoles, and whites in nineteenth-century New Orleans.¹ Folk music, work, chants, and spirituals laid the foundation for the genre. Jazz bands in New Orleans in the late nineteenth century drew on brass band music, popular songs, hymns, ragtime, and the blues to create this unique sound.² Largely informed by the historical nuances of black vernacular culture, jazz emerged as the first major black art form in America. However, not everyone thought so highly of it.

Many critics scrutinized and then accused jazz of not being worthy of being considered “real” art. In the 1920s, some cities even went as far as enacting legislation to

¹ Blacks in New Orleans established their own brass bands whose members studied with the French opera houses or with orchestras in the city. The people who most often took advantage of such opportunities were creoles. Creoles, or a privileged caste usually a combination of white male paternity and black female maternity, set themselves apart from the black community, and pursued refinement in literature, music, and art. Segregationist legislation in 1897 resulted in the establishment of a district that eventually became known as Storyville, named after the resolution’s sponsor, Alderman Sidney Storey. This area drew both Creole and black musicians, and it was in this context that genres such as ragtime and jazz thrived. Eventually the best musicians found their way to Storyville, where the wages and work were steady, and the exchange of musical ideas flourished. Early jazz artists such as Jelly Roll Morton, began playing piano in the brothels of Storyville by 1904. By the beginning of the twentieth century, several jazz bands proliferated, and unique style of New Orleans music was born. See *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South* by Riche Richardson.

² Andrew P. Smallwood, “At the Vanguard: African American Life as Seen Through the Music of Selected Rap and Jazz Artists,” in *African American Jazz and Rap*, ed. James L. Conyers Jr. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 2000), 172.

restrict the places where jazz could be played and how it could be played. These laws were attached to “moral anxieties regarding black cultural effects and were in part intended to protect white patrons from jazz’s ‘immoral influences.’”³ Such laws, known as “cabaret laws” defined and contained types of jazz that could be played by restricting certain instruments and established elaborate licensing policies that favored more established jazz club owners. Additionally, the negative critiques came from all angles. A doctor, E. Elliot Rawlings, diagnosed jazz as causing “drunkenness...[by sending] a continuous swirl of impressionable stimulations to the brain producing thoughts and imaginations which overpower the will. Reason and reflection are lost and the actions of the persons are directed by the stronger animal passions.”⁴ Given this “medical” assessment, it becomes clear why 1920s legislation aimed to restrict the playing of jazz. Another author leveled an aesthetic criticism: “If Beethoven should return to earth and witness the doings of a jazz orchestra, he would thank heaven for his deafness...all this music has a droning, jerky, incoherence interrupted with spasmodic ‘blah blah’ that reminds me of the way live sheep are turned into mutton.”⁵

In spite of the criticism, over time, jazz music spread to other urban centers within the United States and, through the persistence of many artists, gained credibility as an art form. Ironically, it can now be considered one of the greatest American contributions to the world of art in the twentieth century. In the 1940s, the attitude of the true jazz artist shifted from

³ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 133.

⁴ Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and The Meaning of Jazz* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press: 1989), 156.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

novelty and dance to a more serious approach focusing on aesthetics.⁶ This shift in approach placed increasing emphasis on the inner concerns and musical expression of the artist rather than on public acceptance of the music. The jazz soloist in an attempt to create a thoughtful, emotional, and spontaneous composition relied on improvisation and syncopated rhythm, or the accenting of normally weak beats.⁷ The intention of the jazz soloist is to tell a story and display emotion while eliciting some type of response from the listener. The response from the audience can also change the direction of the music. The better a musician is at playing and improvising, the more unique the sound.⁸

In this sense, hip-hop music and jazz share many parallels. Just as the jazz soloist improvises, the rapper freestyles and leaves room for improvisation and a deviation from the originally intended lyrics. Much like jazz, hip-hop music also began its life as dance music. New Orleans jazz originally found a place in street parades, just as early hip-hop, and more specifically rap music, found a place in block parties of the South Bronx.

Hip-hop arose during the 1970s when block parties grew in popularity in certain areas of New York City, specifically in South Bronx. These block parties incorporated deejays that played popular genres of music, mainly funk and soul music. These deejays realized the new music's positive response from audiences, began isolating the percussion breaks of songs, creating a base for incorporating and mixing of "samples" from other music, and eventually for an emcee to rap over. The music also merged with other elements to create an entire culture encompassing rapping, graffiti art, break dancing, and urban street fashion. Generally

⁶ Jack Wheaton, *All That Jazz* (New York: Ardsley House, 1994), 6-9.

⁷ Reginald Thomas, "The Rhythm of Rhyme: A Look at Rap Music as an Art Form from a Jazz Perspective," in Conyers, ed., *African American Jazz and Rap*, 165.

⁸ Ibid.

speaking, when the performance of music became more of an art form, its focus becomes the inner reflections of the artist and thoughts on his surroundings.⁹ Like jazz, hip-hop music began as party or dance music, and it would later shift to include reflections of the world in which the rap artist lived.¹⁰ Unlike Jazz however, rap would later become a medium for expressing political views lyrically. Jazz musicians' occupied insecure positions over the means of production in the music industry, which stifled possible enunciation of political stances. This would later change with hip-hop.¹¹

When jazz grew in popularity, "cabaret laws" aimed to protect [white] society from "moral anxieties" and "immoral influences" associated with a black masculine art form and domains of black male expression. Modern-day law enforcement has also cracked down on rap performance in public spaces as well. It became increasingly difficult to put on concerts because of public paranoia regarding the eruption of violence where African American males congregate.¹² Additionally, in 1990, warning labels reading "Parental Advisory: Explicit Content" was added to rap albums to caution consumers. Modern day criminalization of hip-hop music and its audiences disguises racist efforts to deny black male expression.

⁹ Ibid., 166.

¹⁰ I use the term "hip-hop" throughout this paper. The term refers to the "sub-cultural" movement developed in the Bronx, New York circa 1973. This form of cultural expression, which is predominantly African-American, includes an array of human activities. These activities include break dancing, graffiti, rap, deejaying and emceeing. It is important to point out the different meanings of terms used throughout this essay. Hip-hop refers to the entire culture among black and brown youth, while RAP, as an element of the culture, is a musical method of delivering messages to the hip-hop community through lyrical rhymes similar to poetry. Gangsta Rap is one sub-genre of the rapping element of hip-hop culture, and usually involves resisting middle-class values and adheres to values that reflect street authenticity.

¹¹ Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970).

¹² Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 147.

Jazz vocalists of the 1940s and 1950s also incorporated talking and singing, thus drawing from an African American oratory tradition. This development clearly evolved “in the traditional oratorical modes such as ‘signifying’ and ‘playing the dozens’ as well as ‘rapping’ in both the sense of political discourse and romantic ‘programming,’ on a word, the sense of skilled word use to achieve given ends.”¹³ Early jazz vocalists laid the foundations for later artists to adapt and create manifestations of the oral tradition in African American music.

Academics and critics alike have levied harsh judgments on hip-hop, like jazz before it. There are some who claim it merely perpetuates negative stereotypes and moves beyond the limits of bad art and, in some cases, inspires youth to destructive behavior. Others protest, “When hip-hop is stripped of its politics, history, and racial conscience, hip-hop is little more than sonic pathology that blasts away all the achievements of the civil rights struggle.”¹⁴ One political commentator in particular, John McWhorter, suggests that “reinforcing stereotypes that long hindered blacks...and by teaching young blacks that a thuggish adversarial stance is the properly authentic response to a presumptively racist society, rap retards black success.”¹⁵ In a similar vein, writer and intellectual Marin Kilson believes that hip-hop is full of problematic expressions such as materialism, negative black male stereotypes, offensive language, misogyny, retrogressive views, and even hedonism.¹⁶

There is room for critique, however, of how many of hip-hop’s detractors fail to

¹³ Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1994), 412.

¹⁴ Murray Foreman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That’s The Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

account for the many complex ways that rap artists play with stereotypes to either subvert or reverse them. A tradition of black artists exists using rap music as a political voice, thus burning up negative stereotypes and raising African American consciousness in the process. Beginning in the 1970s, with the emergence of a group called The Last Poets, they ushered in a new type of spoken word music and poetry that was politically charged and dedicated to raising the consciousness of listeners. They can arguably be considered responsible for laying the foundation of hip-hop, but especially politically conscious rap since they also dealt with portraits of real social and economic suffering. Another spoken word poet who rapped about social issues and was the precursor to the gangsta rap's giving voice to the "brother on the corner" was Gil Scot Heron with his 1970 album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*. This eventually paved the way for Melle Mel in 1982 with his song "The Message" which described the horrid living conditions of the ghetto, and continued in the tradition of social critique and conscious rap that later groups would emulate. Then in the mid 1980s, Run D.M.C.'s song "Im Proud to be Black" included themes such as black history, enslavement, and manhood. More importantly however, was the way Run D.M.C. changed the entire aesthetic of hip-hop culture. Previous rappers such as Melle Mel tended to dress in the flashy attire generally attributed to rock and disco acts of the 1970s; tight leather pants, chest-baring shirts, rhinestones, etc. Run D.M.C. did away with early hip-hop's look and incorporated a style more closely linked to the "street."

KRS-ONE also laid the foundations for east coast gangsta rap in 1987 with a politically conscious underclass and first person crime narratives in the album *Criminal Minded*. Public Enemy would then join in this tradition of politically conscious and nation

conscious rap with their music, as highlighted in their critique of the American prison system in 1989 with “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos.” Ice Cube also used mimicry of black stereotypes to challenge the authority of negative images of blackness. In his song “Guerillas in tha Mist” (1992) he identifies himself and his crew as a violent and brutal militia, of which the world should beware.¹⁷ Ice Cube uses guerilla instead of gorilla in the title and subverts the stereotyping of black people as simian and animalistic. His crew acted as guerillas supporting the album’s theme of a violent revolution.¹⁸ These are just a few examples of how hip-hop artists burned up or subverted stereotypes with new presentations of black masculinity, and their politically conscious rap lyrics to transmit more substantive messages in their music.

Hip-hop artists frequently use hyperbole, mimicry, parody, and other artistic conventions to get their points across. Fundamentally hip-hop is an art form. Many of the criticisms levied against hip-hop make those evaluations based on very little engagement with the history of hip-hop culture. Most critics provide just a surface examination, observing the symptoms of the culture, without engaging intellectual rigor or textual analysis.

Hip-hop is an “iteration of black language, black music, black style, and black youth culture” that can be currently considered the most lucrative and oppositional musical force in the United States.¹⁹ Without question it has come under attack from conservative and racially-biased critics, and indeed, it is sometimes fraught with problematic expressions that raise the ire of opponents. Despite these perceived negatives, corporate interests have

¹⁷ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 111.

¹⁸ Da Lench Mob, “Guerillas in tha Mist,” *Guerillas in tha Mist* (Atlantic 1992).

¹⁹ Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 2.

adopted and appropriated aspects of hip-hop culture as marketing tools and have used it to sell a broad range of consumer goods from Tide to Pepsi. Despite intense commodification, and tensions that challenge the integrity of the art form, hip-hop has managed to grow and blossom, and has become a global phenomenon.²⁰ As one scholar puts it, “The great change is that hip-hop has gone from being a cumulative inter-American, Afro-Caribbean product of Reaganomic violence on U.S. inner cities, the booming crack trade, and massive deindustrialization campaigns...to being a confirmed U.S. national commodity that can bring in over 1.8 billion in sales during a single year.”²¹ Clearly the rise and growth of hip-hop music from its humble origins in the Bronx has gone global and become, for better or worse, a major American export.

The art form exists on a continuum of historically black musical traditions and draws from various moments in the history of both black music and black resistance. Hip-hop has grown in popularity and influence while crossing race, class, and gender lines like few other art forms have before. Hip-hop has become one of the most popular art forms in the world, where subaltern youth from all corners of the globe use it to express a range of emotions and observations of the world around them. When Arab youth living in the Gaza Strip are looking to gangsta rappers for inspiration to put their discontent with poverty, urban strife, and Israeli encroachment into rap lyrics, one can understand the far reach of hip-hop music, and academia has followed suit by critically analyzing the culture.²²

Hip-hop music inspires both a “differential social consciousness” and offers outlets

²⁰ Malcolm Bleith, “It’s a Hip-Hop World” *Newsweek*, 10 November 2003, pg. 45.

²¹ Josh Kun, “Two Turntables and a Social Movement: Writing Hip-Hop at Century’s End.” *American Literary History* vol. 14 (fall 2002): 581.

²² Madison Gray, “How Phat Conquered Palestine” *TIME*, 5 December 2007, pg. 62.

for psychological emancipation helping individuals who use it to imagine new social realities. At the same time hip-hop represents another African American cultural form, becoming commodified where construction and performance of race [blackness] is dictated by corporate interests.²³ It also presented a business opportunity for artists and producers alike. It thus contains notions of black dissent against negative representation in popular culture, alongside constructions of white definitions of blackness. With this in mind, hip-hop can be considered both a global youth movement and a marketing ploy, which makes it a unique cultural production in this historical moment. Unlike previous manifestations of groups politicizing art forms, hip-hop music functions both as a cultural commodity, and can simultaneously take an oppositional political edge. These complexities rendered it worthy of analyzing from academia.

The complexities of black life in America can be seen in the expressive ways hip-hop artists create their art. Additionally, currently all over the globe, academics are approaching hip-hop culture from a variety of multidisciplinary fields ranging from history, politics, sociology, and urban studies to musicology, American studies, transatlantic studies, black studies, and linguistics. As more scholars begin to examine the historical and cultural impact hip-hop culture has on the world, surely more balanced views and criticisms will continue to arise and give hip-hop a fair judgment, and add to the work that has been done.

My project will focus on an examination of the several important mainstream hip-hop groups and also positioning hip-hop music within a long history of black cultural traditions. Additionally I seek to gain a better understanding of how these particular artists

²³ Kun, "Two Turntables and a Social Movement," 582.

presented their version of black masculinity, and how they opposed what they perceived as oppressive power structures and white masculine constructions. Through three case studies that explore distinct moments in hip-hop history, the thesis will trace the shifts in hip-hop identity over time. The project begins with an exploration of the politically conscious rap of Public Enemy that examines the ways that the group drew both from historic forms of black cultural nationalism from the black arts movement and a savvy, self-crafted business model. The project then explores the roots of the gangsta chic that seems dominant in current mainstream hip-hop through an analysis of the group N.W.A. The project concludes with an exploration of the shifting of hip-hop culture southward, through a discussion of the Atlanta-based group OutKast that examines the diverse representations of black masculinity presented by the group.

This project frames hip-hop as a form of performance; that is, artists not as everyday people, but as hyperbolic representations of black life. Hip-hop music has reflected some people's lives, but as an art form it primarily serves as cultural script that can never fully reflect the totality of lived experience. From this framework, the thesis will address a few key questions. What are the historical and social conditions that inspired young black artists to speak out? What are the progressive and regressive elements of masculinity constructed by mainstream hip-hop artists? How does hip-hop represent a unique cultural expression where black art becomes both a form of protest and a product?

This thesis explores these questions using a variety of sources, ranging from the lyrics of rap songs, rap videos, hip-hop magazines, newspapers, oral histories, photographs, documentaries, to an analysis of socio-economic conditions, African American history, and a

range of secondary sources written on hip-hop culture. The thesis is also interdisciplinary in nature. My study draws on history, sociology, gender studies, cultural studies, and southern studies. The intersectionality of sources is a reflection of the complexity of exploring hip-hop and its connection to the broader arguments of African American history.

I contend that hip-hop music emerged at a unique historical moment that allowed it to constitute a multi-faceted cultural form. Hip-hop was born as both protest and product, in an often conflicted conversation with the larger society. Hip-hop gave young black men the space to forge, present, and perform complex masculinities. It was a vehicle for the voiceless; through the power of art, these artists helped to craft their own history. But while hip hop resisted and recast negative stereotypes of black men, it often re-inscribed the oppression of black women and men who did not match up to hyper-masculine ideals. While hip-hop music has served as a form of subversion that gave voice to a subset of the African American underclass, it often has done so at the expense of others. The core of this study, besides all the complexities, seeks to understand historically how hip-hop has helped giving agency to young men who desired to represent themselves however they chose.²⁴

This project relies on the body of scholarship already existing on the culture of hip-hop, black nationalism, and masculinity. One of the earliest attempts by Trisha Rose in *Black Noise* (1994) remains one of the most influential and important commentaries on the history of hip-hop culture. Her book was the first major academic work to provide an extended analysis of hip-hop culture. *Black Noise* provided a generation of scholars the permission and

²⁴ This study focuses on masculinity constructed, presented, and performed by mainstream rap artists while acknowledging that a diversity of black masculinities exists outside these models.

legitimacy to shape their scholarship based around the study of hip-hop. Rose writes eloquently of hip-hop artists as "prophets of rage."²⁵ She argues that hip-hop music was a marginalized African American cultural expression that had an oppositional relationship to racial and economic hegemony, institutionalized racism, social injustice, and the exclusionary "eurocentric" constraints of western music that were unable to appreciate the "noise" of black youth culture.²⁶ The most unique contribution Rose makes was that she began to recognize contradictions beginning to develop within hip-hop music, exploring the extent to which hip-hop's counterhegemonic possibilities were always at risk of reiterating the hegemony it worked against.²⁷ Rose maintains that the rise of gangsta rap diluted politically conscious rap in favor of marketable trends, thus changing the trajectory of the burgeoning youth culture. *Black Noise* insisted that scholarship on hip-hop culture had to consider these shifts and tensions within the hip-hop world. *Black Noise* is canonical and remains one of the most important in the historiography of hip-hop.

Five years after Rose's book; acclaimed music critic Nelson George published his overview in *Hip Hop America* (1998). He focused on virtually the same period, but with a different agenda mostly concerned with registering hip-hop as an "American" art form and an "American" industry. Hoping to deliver a survey of hip-hop's major historic events and topics, *Hip Hop America* is less cohesive with anecdotal chapters organized by a range of

²⁵ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 99.

²⁶ Josh Kun, "Two Turntables and a Social Movement: Writing Hip-Hop at Century's End." *American Literary History* vol. 14 (Fall 2002), 580.

²⁷ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 19.

topics.²⁸ His main argument is that hip-hop's values were corrupted by its rise to commercial prominence. However, he loosely connects a series of chapters arranged by topic, including valuable interviews, hoping to give brief snapshots of evidence to support his thesis. Major shortcomings are that he ignores hip-hop regions and sites outside of New York, and also refused to engage the complexities of gender representation and problems of misogyny in hip-hop music. Although his book can be considered a bold attempt at an overall history of hip-hop, it provides a good starting point for other scholars who wish to probe deeper into the topics George failed to cover.

Unlike George, who wrote his book from a journalism background, scholars who would produce more thoroughly researched histories and analysis of hip-hop wrote the next few books. Robin D.G. Kelley's *Race Rebels* (1994), a collection of eight essays, offers a balanced look at the spectrum of black resistance.²⁹ He hopes to find a "hidden transcript" of resistance in the everyday lives of working-class African Americans. This group, Kelley argues, was often at odds with the interests and agenda of the black middle class.³⁰ He includes gangsta rap in his analysis as a bi-product of a postindustrial urban landscape and outlet for lower-class black youth. Kelley writes his analysis of the black underclass in Los Angeles two years after the L.A. riots. The timing proved critical because the conditions of class conflict came to a breaking point in the most destructive civil insurrection in U.S.

²⁸ Nelson George, *Hip-Hop America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1998) Introduction; Kun, "Two Turntables and a Social Movement", 582-583.

²⁹ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 99.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

history.³¹ Kelley mentions in his introduction that “history from below” pushed him to explore the politics present in everyday life. Although, defending the artists blamed for promoting violence and negative values, Kelley also argues that the rappers were stepping into character for descriptive purposes rather than advocacy of community uplift.³²

Kelley examines gangsta rappers’ attempts to construct a variety of first-person narratives to illustrate how social and economic realities of “late capitalist L.A.” affected young black men.³³ In addition to his cultural analysis of gangsta rap the essay explores the pervasiveness of misogyny in gangsta rap. Kelley asserts that, “Misogyny narratives are essentially about the degradation and complete domination of women.” They are stories that “reinforce existing [cultural] forms of patriarchal power,” while they “construct male fantasy scenes of uncontested domination.”³⁴

Kelley argues that in the everyday lives of black men, sexuality acts as a process of negotiation, and the fulfillment of their male heterosexual desires are held in check by women’s capacity for rejection.³⁵ In contrast, hip-hop allows black men to imagine a world where they could reassert male dominance in response to shifting gender roles and family relations. This safe space within hip-hop music contributed to the prevalence of hypermasculine posturing and fantasy within rap music. Kelley remains one of the most influential on hip-hop and gangsta rap, while paying special attention to role of class dynamics in black cultural resistance.

³¹ Ibid., xi.

³² Ibid., 191.

³³ Ibid., 194.

³⁴ Ibid., 218.

³⁵ Ibid.

In *The New N.H.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (2002), Todd Boyd frames the history of hip-hop as part of a generational shift. In his analysis, Boyd compares the differences between the hip-hop generation, those born between 1965 and 1984, and the generation of African Americans involved with the Civil Rights Movement. He asserts that, “Hip-hop rejected and now replaces the pious, sanctimonious nature of the Civil Rights as the defining moment of blackness.”³⁶ He then outlines rap artists’ attempts to express their displeasure with contemporary black social conditions through the critique and analysis of lyrics from various rap songs. He argues that current black youth will get more out of listening to present-day rap artists than reading the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., thereby setting up the Civil Rights generation as a foil against the hip-hop generation. Various artists known for their politically conscious music have attempted to use their status as artists to bring about activism among the hip-hop community to address various social issues. Nevertheless, some scholars criticized Boyd’s analysis for not engaging the Civil Rights Movement in more detail and giving too much potency to the effectiveness of hip-hop activism.³⁷

Another criticism of Boyd is the assertion that arrival of hip-hop “reigns supreme” over the Civil Rights Movement, yet he fails to provide any substantial evidence to support this idea. The book, according to reviewer Derrick P. Aldridge, lacks any the evidence to support its thesis that hip-hop culture changed social, economic, or political conditions for

³⁶ Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), xxi.

³⁷ Derrick P. Aldridge, review of *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop*, by Todd Boyd, *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 88, No. 3, (summer 2003): 313-316.

the black community.³⁸ Another criticism is Boyd's division of the two groups as two separate and distinct movements. Yet, many of the same concepts and ideas from the Civil Rights movement resonate today, and, with hip-hop, are both part of a broad movement to "address larger social issues of the African-American community."³⁹ Overall, Boyd's analysis addresses the ongoing debate on the differences between the African Americans of the Civil Rights era and the current hip-hop generation's community of artists and followers. Undoubtedly, his work serves to inform those interested in exploring the generational differences in further detail.

Michael Eric Dyson has also written several important cultural studies essays on hip-hop. Although not entirely devoted to rap music, the strength of *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (2004) lies in the fact that he unpacks the complexities of the genre. Rather than simplifying or generalizing, Dyson wants to explore rap's complex interactions, both within the rap community and within the dominant culture. Instead of demonizing the negative aspects of rap, such as sexism and homophobia, he offers a balance and seeks to understand the deeper meaning of certain lyrics. He also examines the tension that exists within the hip-hop community itself, as well as hip-hop's tension with mainstream American culture. With this in mind, Dyson questions why some lyrics are so frightening to white listeners, while at the same time lyrics can be meaningful and positive within black communities. Additionally, he does not view rap as entirely promoting negative values, but rather as reflecting some of the dominant culture's values. In the end, Dyson hopes to reveal that class, gender, and

³⁸ Ibid., 315.

³⁹ Ibid., 316.

sexual identity differentiate black life, and rap music represents a cultural expression representing these diversities. He focuses on listening to rap for what it is now, and does not patronize rappers by suggesting they create more politically conscious music like many critics recommend. Dyson paves the way for future scholars by giving them a template through which to understand the complexities of rap music and advocating more balance in critiques of the hip-hop culture.

Dyson also highlights the “historical revivalism” of politically conscious rap by retrieving historic black movements and figures to “combat racial amnesia that threatens to relegate the achievements of the black past to the ash heap of dismemory.”⁴⁰ As education in schools may be biased, and higher education may be inaccessible to young people of color, their source of historical knowledge, at times, may come from music. Artists can create links between their own present circumstances and use the past as a “fertile source of social reflection, cultural creation, and political resistance.”⁴¹ For example, in a 1994 a rapper named Common produced a song titled “I Used to Love H.E.R.” which stands for “hip-hop in its essence is real.” Common calls for a reclaiming of hip-hop from the transformation from politically conscious to nihilistic and materialistic gangsta rap. Common desires to change the trajectory of hip-hop music back to its conscious and “native” roots. The song traced the history of hip-hop and how it was born and how it transformed from music at street parties to a mainstream cultural product, using the metaphor of a first love. He criticizes the direction that hip-hop music was taking during the mid-1990s, he raps “I met

⁴⁰ Michael Eric Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Civitas, 2004), 408-409.

⁴¹ Ibid.

this girl, when I was ten years old / And what I loved most she had so much soul / She was old school, when I was just a shorty / Never knew throughout my life she would be there for me.”⁴² He reminisces about the purity of their initial love and continues “And she was fun then, Id be geeked when she d come around / Slim was fresh yo, when she was underground / Original, pure untampered and down sister / Boy I tell ya, I miss her.”⁴³

However as they both aged, their relationship began to change. In the end of the song, Common revealed to the listener the identity of his long lost love, “Cause who Im talkin bout yall is hip-hop.” Common’s heartfelt plea to his childhood love traced the various moments in the evolution of hip-hop from the street parties in the Bronx to the mainstream gangsta rap, where in his view, had ruined her, but in the end he desired to take her back. He rapped that hip-hop “was on that tip about stoppin the violence / About my people she was teachin me / By not preachin to me but speakin to me” in reference to artists like Public Enemy and KRS-One creating politically conscious rap and “dropping knowledge” on those who listened. Then when hip-hop moved to the west coast, and gangsta rap emerged, it lost some originality and became diluted by becoming a gimmick. The overall point of the song is that the analogy comparing the degradation of a woman with the deterioration of hip-hop music after its commercial success led to a crossover into the mainstream pop music market. To this day, this song remains one of the most important hip-hop songs ever made and continues to be an example of how rap lyrics can be applied as a medium to spread a positive historical message.

⁴² Common, “I Used to Love H.E.R.,” *Resurrection* (Relativity Records 1994)

⁴³ Ibid.

Jeff Chang, a San Francisco journalist, is one of the first individuals to synthesize all the various arguments and issues into one all-encompassing book entitled *Can't Stop Won't Stop: The History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (2005). Chang explores the early days of hip-hop and its birth in the South Bronx of New York and continues his analysis to the present-day status and evolution of hip-hop culture and music. He clarifies early in the book that “the idea of the Hip-Hop Generation brings together time and race, place and polyculturalism, hot beats and hybridity. It describes the turn from politics to culture, the process of entropy and reconstruction.” He adds that it captured “the collective hopes and nightmares, ambitions and failures of those who would otherwise be described as ‘post-this’ and ‘post-that.’”⁴⁴ With this approach of tying in various forces and influences, Chang gives the reader an all-encompassing historical synthesis of hip-hop culture, albeit with a journalistic style similar to Nelson George before him.

Chang's book includes in-depth analysis of the profound shifts of hip-hop music from its early days as a sub-culture to its transformation to “street journalism” to the current packaged and commodified rebellion it has become. His use of a wide range of sources includes newspapers, historical monographs, oral histories, photographs, and scholarly journals. It has gained notoriety among academic circles, and is widely used a textbook in emerging African American Studies and hip-hop cultural studies courses across the U.S. From Chang, the study and analysis will only continue to grow, and historians, along with

⁴⁴ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's, 2005), 3.

other disciplines, will continue to produce scholarship that considers all the diverse influences and forces shaping and changing hip-hop culture.

In an attempt to understand and analyze the complexities of hip-hop culture, work by Rose, Dyson, Chang, Boyd, and Kelley forms a solid foundation. Although the historiography of hip-hop still remains relatively new, it continues to evolve as academics produce more scholarship. As scholars become more interested in examining the mediums that shape our cultural discourse in the twenty-first century, addressing popular forms of resistance and art, such as rap, is a necessity. Hip-hop evolves rapidly and continues to change and shift. With this in mind, it is necessary to draw from a variety various academic disciplines, outside of history, in order to understand the complexities and multi-faceted nature of hip-hop.

The historiography of black nationalism also needs to be addressed to gain a deeper understanding of hip-hop culture's connections to earlier historical moments in black resistance. For example, to comprehend the strategies and rhetoric used by certain politically conscious rap groups, such as Public Enemy, one must first examine a brief history of black nationalism. Politically conscious rap groups root their styles and political messages in their music and their public personas. Unlike previous black nationalist movements, hip-hop represents a complex tension for rap artists as they may want to have a resistant political edge while also existing as a cultural commodity. Though modeling themselves after groups like the Nation of Islam or the Black Panthers, rappers constitute something entirely different. To understand what influences and informs the political views of certain politically conscious

rap groups, and who they may model themselves after, one can turn to the past and briefly examine the historiography of black nationalism.

William L. Van Deburg in *New Day in Babylon* (1992) argues that Black Power helped to define a “group culture of resistance to oppression...to facilitate the development of positive self worth among” blacks during the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁵ Van Deburg also argues that Black Power was not *exclusively* cultural, but was *essentially* cultural, meaning that culture was the glue of the movement serving to connect all the differing ideological positions of the Black Power Movement’s supporters. He traces how the Black Power Movement used a variety of cultural expressions as weapons in their struggle for psychological and cultural liberation.⁴⁶ Although he cat the considers Black Panther Party, Ron Karenga’s US or Organization Us, and the New Republic of Africa, central to his study was Malcolm X. He views Malcom X as the archetype for Black Power, with these other groups sharing a rejection of integration and assimilation, in favor of strategies that promoted group solidarity and cultural preservation. Van Deburg sees in Malcolm “someone who urged introspection and autonomy in the search for solutions to problems that were cultural as well as political and economic in nature.”⁴⁷ Although none of these groups achieved great political success, they managed to “make black folk feel good about themselves and steered them away from ‘cultural homicide.’”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), x.

⁴⁶ Ibid.,9, 284.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey T. Sammons, review of *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* by Willieam L. Van Deburg. *Journal of Southern History* vol. 61 (Nov. 1995): 846-848.

⁴⁸ Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 304.

In a book *Modern Black Nationalism from Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan* (1992) William L. Van Deburg contributed again to the field and by editing a series of essays from various leaders of black nationalist groups. In an attempt to address the problem of defining black nationalism, Van Deburg complicates the ongoing debates, suggesting that “attempts to gain a clear understanding of twentieth century black nationalism is a bit like trying to eat Jell-O with chopsticks.”⁴⁹ The basic concept of nationalism, he argues, is easy to fathom. Throughout world history, nationalistic ideologies have competed for the hearts and minds of people. Nationalism is expressed in demands for territorial cession, political empowerment, or increased cultural autonomy by an undervalued or oppressed ethnic, religious, or linguistic group. A common denominator for these nationalistic expressions is a high value placed on self-definition and self-determination. However, the definition of black nationalism within America is unclear because African Americans make up a nation within a nation or what Van Deburg refers to as a gnarled, sprawling expanse of a nationalist family tree.⁵⁰ Essays in this work explore a range of nationalist approaches from Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to the Black Panther Party.

A working definition of black nationalism, along with its connection to rap music, found in Charise L. Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism* (2005). Her analysis of black nationalism falls in line with works of V.P. Franklin and Wahneema Lubiano, who recommend that definitions of black nationalism go

⁴⁹ William L. Van Deburg, ed., *Modern Black Nationalism from Marcus Garvey to Loius Farrakhan* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 1.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 2-4.

beyond nation-state configuration enough to include cultural manifestations.⁵¹ For example, it remains hard to deny the political standpoints of the black nationalists in Black Power and Hip-Hop Movements who defended the connection between cultural production and psychological liberation from white domination. They may not argue for construction of a separate nation state, but rap artists use the “politics of transvaluation,” reframing a negative into a positive, which instills race pride in African Americans, a common strategy in black-nationalist tradition.⁵² For example, in the liner notes of Ice Cube’s 1992 album *The Predator*, Ice Cube invokes W.E.B. DuBois’s notion of “Double Consciousness.” Ice Cube does this to express his political awakening and liberation from the “unreconciled strivings” that plagued the “souls of black folk.” Ice Cube’s evoking of DuBois is another example of “historical revivalism” that Michael Eric Dyson argued about the positive elements of hip-hop music.

Dubois explained the concepts of double consciousness in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Double consciousness revolves around the peculiar dualities and conflicts in African American self-perception. It also dealt with the “crux” of identity for black Americans, or the difficulty in merging both African and American identities. Dubois argued that a black man in America is born with a metaphorical “veil,” and exists in a world that yields him no true self-consciousness. He explained that the nation’s racist ideology forced

⁵¹ Cheney, “In Search of the Revolutionary Generation: (En)gendering the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism,” *Journal of African American Studies* vol 90 (summer 2005): 280-281. Cheney turned this article into her book *Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); V.P. Franklin, *Black Self Determination: A Cultural History of African American Resistance* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984); Wahneema Lubiano, ed., *The House That Race Built: Black Americans in the U.S. Terrain* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

⁵² Cheney, “In Search of the Revolutionary Generation,” 281.

black people to define themselves, at times, through the way they have been represented – “to see himself through the revelation of the other world.” Therefore the visibility of blackness constitutes a problem regarding not only how whites see African Americans but also how they see themselves. This phenomenon remains crucial because blacks often lack the ability to shape their own desired image in mass culture. Rather they suffer “a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” measuring “one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”⁵³

In this case Ice Cube is attempting to liberate himself from DuBois’s double consciousness. Ice Cube wrote, “You say Ice Cube is a problem - well you’re right, he’s two people in the same body, One African, One American...I see myself through the eyes of Africa as African and I will continue to speak as an African... I will become African American when America gives up oppression of my people.”⁵⁴ This newly discovered consciousness rising above the tension of double consciousness, he proclaims, allowed him to face up to inconsistencies between rhetoric and racial realities of the modern-day America he lived in. His music at this point in his career reflected his new politically enlightened views.

On the most basic level, black nationalism hoped to increase group self-consciousness and self-determination. Cheney argues that Black Nationalist theory is “founded upon the conviction that black people in the diaspora – by virtue of African ancestry, a common

⁵³ This double-consciousness model assists in an understanding of the long-standing tensions rap artists contend with as they construct alternative identities within the context of hip-hop music, as they seek to both use the medium as a forum for protest while at the same time utilizing its potential for earning capital.

⁵⁴ Ice Cube, liner notes, *The Predator* (Priority Records, 1992)

historical experience of slavery, as well as a legacy of racial oppression in the forms of political disenfranchisement, economic exploitation, social discrimination, and cultural degradation – share a cultural identity and therefore constitute a nationality, or nation, separate and distinct from the other Americans.”⁵⁵ She adds that Ron (Maulana) Karenga, the founder of the cultural nationalist US Organization in 1967, defined nationalism as “the belief that Black people in this country make up a cultural Nation...a cultural nation is a people with a common past, a common present, and hopefully, a common future.”⁵⁶ By virtue of their African ancestry, and a legacy of oppression in the form of slavery, political disenfranchisement, and economic exploitation, African Americans inherit a distinct cultural identity. The shared history of African Americans, combined with the politics of black nationalism, instilled a sense of collectivity making up a “nation” within a nation.

Although the idea of black nationalism should create collective identity and solidarity toward a common purpose, according to Cheney, it remains flawed. One flaw with black nationalist rappers is that they deliver their political standpoints lyrically, yet remain obsessed with the reclamation of black manhood at the expense of women. Therefore, although well-intentioned, rap nationalists ultimately participate in the politics of symbolism, rather than political movement. Cheney’s work informs my project by shedding some light onto the negative aspects of repackaging black nationalist politics in hip-hop music and showing why black nationalist rappers lost momentum after starting off with enormously popularity.

⁵⁵ Cheney, “In Search of the Revolutionary Generation,” 281

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Anyone interested in analyzing politically conscious or black nationalist rap groups, such as Public Enemy, would benefit from a firm understanding of modern black nationalism. These rap groups pioneered rap nationalism in the 1980s and purposefully invoked the rhetorical and political styling of the Black Panthers, and more broadly, the Black Power Movement. They hoped to emulate the tradition of black masculine protest through their music. Understanding the connections of how modern-day rappers used similar strategies and political platforms to start a consciousness movement using rap music is why I invoke the historiography of black nationalism.

In addition to the historiography of modern black nationalism, it is necessary to briefly examine the recent work done on both black and white masculinity. To understand on a basic level some theories on masculinity, James W. Messerschmidt, in *Nine Lives* defines hegemonic masculinity as an idealized form of masculinity dependent on a given historical and social setting. He adds that hegemonic masculinities stress “authority, control, independence, competitive individualism, aggressiveness and the capacity for violence.” Thus, according to Messerschmidt, hegemonic masculinity is a social construct, reflecting the dominant group.⁵⁷ However, the hegemonic “ideal” Messerschmidt describes, which is the national ideal or model, can change, and is constantly evolving. Additionally there can be different hegemonic masculine “ideals” for diverse social groups.

R.W. Connell argues “different masculinities are constituted in relation to other masculinities and to femininities – through a structure of gender relations and through other

⁵⁷ James W. Messerschmidt, *Nine Lives: Adolescent Masculinities, The Body, and Violence* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 10-12.

social structures.”⁵⁸ Therefore, considering both of these views, gender and masculinity are performed based on circumstances and people that surround us. This framework is useful in considering the forced environment of the urban ghettos in addition to the hip-hop industry that markets the aggressive behavior being portrayed in hip-hop music, especially rap. Using these theories, one can suggest that hypermasculinity evident in hip-hop culture is not a natural predisposition but a learned and constructed behavior. Masculinity is socially constructed, and men are socialized into gender roles, that are simultaneously “raced,” and then assigned what it means to be a man. However, despite Connell’s argument, it is important to note that not all gender constructions are the inevitable social role of an individual.

In the first wave of masculinity studies that emerged in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, several books, whose focus is on black masculinity, inform this study. Books like *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1992) explain the historical and contemporary spectrum of problems affecting black men in America.⁵⁹ *Cool Pose* also suggests that black males use certain masculine behaviors to protect themselves. Not all black males utilize these behaviors, but younger, lower-class, and urban black males are who the author described. Behavior such as physical posturing, expression management, and

⁵⁸ R.W. Connell, “A Very Straight Gay: Masculinity, Homosexual Experience, and the Dynamics of Gender,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 57 (Dec. 1992): 736.

⁵⁹ Richard Majors and Janet Manicini Billson, *Cool Pose: Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Lexington, 1992); Robert Staples, *Black Masculinity: the Black Male's Role in American Society* (San Francisco: Black Scholar Press, 1982).

crafted performances delivering messages of pride and strength are deployed as defense mechanisms.⁶⁰

Other works that examine black male representations in culture include Maurice Wallace's *Constructing the Black Masculine* and Thelma Golden's *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art*. Wallace describes modern manhood as "an endless rivalry for the power and privileges of patriarchy animated by the psychic discomfiture of men's mutual fears and desires for one another, often in sexually charged contexts." His study, like Golden's, outlines the modes that African American men have historically used to survive the "self alienating disjunction of race and manhood in American culture." Manhood, in the American context, consists of social, economic and political status ideally achievable by all men. Political enfranchisement and the ability to earn a living wage and provide for a family remain its central components.

Hegemonic masculinity, as Michael Kimmel argues in *Manhood in America* (2006), is the prescribed norm in America, or defined as straight, white, northern, protestant, middle-class, and native born, who used their economic and cultural power to imprint their values onto American society. Kimmel fails to acknowledge other variations within white hegemonic masculinity and briefly mentions how regional difference complicate white manhood. For example, how do Southern white, middle class, and protestant males perceive the hegemonic masculine ideal of the north? And do these men model themselves after the "ideal" model Kimmel describes? It is imperative to remember that white masculinity is more complex and diverse than the seemingly monolithic model that Kimmel offers. Also,

⁶⁰ Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose*, 5-6.

constructions of masculinity within marginalized groups of men coexist, compete with, and parallel Kimmel's idea of hegemonic construction. "Coolness," as described in *Cool Pose* (1992), would then be described as a competing masculinity for black males attempting to construct their own masculine definition based on their own point of view and experiences. Marginalized groups, such as black men, attempt to coexist within a society where they cannot achieve the hegemonic or "ideal" masculinity based on their differences of class and race.⁶¹ It is important to note however alongside Kimmel's assessment, that each subculture within society has its own set of hegemonic ideals and models that the men of that group can strive for.

Large numbers of black men in America, remain locked in a contentious relationship with their society, the mainstream culture, and each other in an attempt to construct their own identities. This is a relationship, where the dominant white culture, draws on historically developed stereotypes about black men to control and minimize their economic, political, or personal potential and achievement. Black men, generally speaking, live in an American society that offers a narrow range of identities for them to enact and expects them to succeed along the same definitions of hegemonic masculinity as white men. Many times however, black men reject those hegemonic ideals, and find ways to succeed outside these frameworks.⁶²

⁶¹ Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4-5.

⁶² bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15-16; Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety And The Problem of African American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

Additionally, African Americans have historically played negative roles in popular culture such as Toms, coons, mammies, bucks, comedic characters, and characters who are inherently angry, potentially violent, and sexually aggressive.⁶³ These negative constructions created, reproduced, and sustained racial ideologies. The historical stereotypes associated with black men perpetuated by popular culture have influenced the meanings and identities associated with black masculinity. It is important to keep in mind that a wide range of diverse and complex black masculinities exist ranging from the preachers, to businessmen, and even gangstas.⁶⁴

This project will not address all the issues within hip-hop culture, nor do I seek to find an either/or answer to many of the questions asked. I merely want to understand patterns of change and continuity occurring in the short history of hip-hop, while understanding hip-hop's connection to African-American history. I hope that this work will join the growing hip-hop historiography. Responding to the unique contributions of Jeff Chang, Michael Eric Dyson, and Robin Kelley, I also would like to add my unique contribution to this growing field. I intend to use primary sources in the same manner as Chang used them, to give the actual rap artists a voice, and to hear what their thoughts are on the various issues and controversies of hip-hop. Additionally, I want to examine the various complexities through a balanced lens much like Dyson and Kelley. They both examine hip-hop and consider

⁶³ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks – An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 1-10.

⁶⁴ Thelma Golden, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art* (New York: Whitney, 1994); Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7; Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 176-186.

questions of class and gender, along with institutional and societal forces and how those affected the direction of hip-hop, rather than knee-jerk negativity. Additionally, I want to explore divergent masculine constructions much in the same manner as Todd Boyd, but with the inclusion of particular threads of history that will aid my analysis. Making connections to other moments in history, like Kelley, I intend on providing a more balanced analysis on aspects of black culture that have connections with a shared past. This project will attempt to answer historical questions concerning hip-hop while trying to eliminate conjecture and give voice to the historical actors themselves. In the end, the goal is to give more credibility to the growing inquiries about hip-hop culture, which will allow for more balanced critiques of a global phenomenon.

For the purposes of this project, I will focus on hyperbolic representations of black masculinity as performed by rap artists. It is important to distinguish some important categories of self-representation and the gaze, or how viewers gaze upon people who are being represented, while examining rap artists. First, there is the way that white audiences, as well as black audiences, view the black rap artists. Then there is also the actual lived experience of everyday black Americans. Finally, as in the case of hip-hop, there are hyperbolic characters of blackness and what they say through their music. Hip-hop, as an art form and entertainment, is inherently a performance. Realizing this, rap artists cannot reflect the totality of actual lived experiences of black people. They may reflect some people's lives, and conceivably those audiences will more personally consume the message. I am interested in, and will focus on, how these hyperbolic characters present themselves and what they have to say through their music and public personas.

In chapter one and chapter two, through an analysis of rap groups Public Enemy and N.W.A., it becomes clear how the variations of black masculinity performed by these groups, within the most popular and profitable forms of hip-hop, shifted and changed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which ended the momentum of politically conscious rap. Public Enemy represented a nationalistic and politically assertive masculinity, while N.W.A. used a nihilistic, “dangerous,” and class-based construction of black masculinity. Groups like Public Enemy represented this continuation of masculine protest and cultural nationalism within music. Similar to cultural nationalists like Maulana Karenga of the US Organization, the motivations involved destruction of a slave mentality and psychological liberation by establishing pride in African American cultural and history.⁶⁵

With the concurrent rise of N.W.A., came the production of less nationalistic music. This new form of rap emphasized hypermasculine posturing as a mode of underclass empowerment. Ironically, this new gangsta genre became a profitable venture for music producers. This, in turn, offered a form of entrepreneurship for black artists to “perform” masculinity in hip-hop connected to the “bad nigga” stereotype in order to earn a living. With this turn from politically conscious rap, whatever political consciousness being raised lyrically gave way to sexism, hyper-materialism, violence, and a celebration of nihilism. Black masculinity as represented by these popular rap artists, though not representative of all

⁶⁵ Scot Brown, *Fighting For US: Maulana Karenga, The US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 17-28.

black masculinities, both reinforced and subverted conservative mainstream masculine ideals.⁶⁶

Critics argued that these rappers as similar to minstrels distorting the real black life while white executives profited. The rap artists were not just simply caving into the pressure of economic rewards by allowing themselves to be appropriated by record companies. They also helped to create the genre's artistic rules while financially exploiting a sensational interest in "ghetto life."⁶⁷ While on stage, they focused on the visual presenting themselves as gangstas, behind the scenes; they behaved like intelligent businessmen able to make a living from their music. At the same time they offered audiences portraits of real social and economic suffering in the ghetto. With this heightened visibility and popularity, they popularized the "bad nigga" hip-hop masculinity and completely changed the direction of the rap genre.

Overall, I want to trace how political rap failed and gangsta rap's non-political expressive forms that focused on countering middle-class sensibilities emerged. One reason was an inability to link a progressive political agenda to diversifying rap audiences. Also, as political organizing with groups like SNCC and The Black Panther Party decreased in the post-Civil Rights era, a belief in consumption and accumulation of wealth became the "most viable means of social transcendence."⁶⁸ This shift also reflected mass American culture, with its increased emphasis on individualism, wealth, and consumption. Additionally,

⁶⁶ V.P. Franklin, "Jacknapes: Reflections on the Legacy of The Black Panther Party for The Hip-Hop Generation," *Journal of African American History* vol. 92 (winter 2007): 558.

⁶⁷ Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, 178-179.

⁶⁸ Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 136.

inability to successfully sustain any real political movement connected to political events or communal exchange, contributed to its demise. At the most basic level, the sounds and beats of political rap did not appeal to a wide range of listeners. I also want to explore how the hip-hop masculinity of the gangsta rappers had both progressive and regressive qualities. On the one hand, gangsta rappers resisted authority and described real social conditions, but on the other hand they asserted dominance over women. These are all issues I will explore.

My focus in chapter three will be an examination of how the South became the hip-hop industry leader in today's mainstream pop music market. The South, as a region, has frequently conjured up images of backwardness and a problem area to America. Racial problems and the lack of any industrialized or modern economy in the post World War II era made the South lag behind the progress of the nation. For African Americans, the South has also contained a strange tension between love and hate for what the region represents. It can be thought of as a symbolic home to African Americans, but at the same time a very painful reminder of the infamous legacy of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Out of this context, young black men from impoverished neighborhoods of southern cities changed the direction of hip-hop culture. I seek to uncover why Atlanta became the site for an emergence of creativity and ingenuity of young black rap artists.

The producers who came out of Atlanta changed the landscape of the music industry with incredible business savvy. In addition to becoming wealthy, artists from the South have displaced the bi-polar East Coast – West Coast divide. Now, as a result of their penetrating the mainstream market, the genre as a whole is more inclusive to new artists and styles. Positioning my study in the South will add to a broader understanding of the racial history in

region as well as how a few young, poor, urban black youth from the South rose to the top of the hip-hop world today.

History can be very complex, and rarely can the answers to our historical questions be pinned to an either/or proposition. I believe hip-hop is the same way. As a complex and emergent hybrid culture, it retains both positive and negative qualities, yet has captivated the world, dominates the mainstream music industry, and gives voice to the voiceless. Within that culture, black rap artists have independently fashioned a masculine identity for themselves, which function at the nexus of the oppressed and the oppressors. Additionally, many in the so-called “hip-hop generation,” or those born from 1965 to 1984, have embraced hip-hop culture as a part of expressing their cultural identity and class-consciousness.⁶⁹ A cultural movement with the kind of impact hip-hop has had globally deserves a closer look, and it is my intention to examine the complexities and historical significance of hip-hop culture, while focusing on mainstream rappers and black masculinity within hip-hop. Class, region, and gender differentiate black life, and similarly black culture is “positive, negative, uplifting, depressing, edifying, and stifling.”⁷⁰ It is only natural that all these features should be represented in black art and the diversity of black cultural expressions.

⁶⁹ Natalie Hopkinson and Natalie Y. Moore, *Deconstructing Tyrone: A New Look at Black Masculinity in the Hip-Hop Generation* (San Francisco: Cleiss Press, 2006), xii.

⁷⁰ Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, 179.

Chapter One: Public Enemy and Rap Nationalism

In the aftermath of World War I and during a period of anti-black violence known historically as the “Red Summer” of 1919, Marcus Garvey thrilled an audience in Newport News, Virginia, by exposing the hypocrisy of white Americans who declared the wartime effort a victory for democracy abroad, while blacks could not enjoy full citizenship rights at home. Garvey was a master of oratory, and remembered by some as a “demagogue” who could exploit the emotional needs of the masses.¹ He also tapped into the political awareness of the working class of the black communities by exposing the contradictions between American democratic principles and America’s undemocratic practices. Therefore, when he demanded the extension of constitutional rights to all black Americans that year, his words were met with cheers. “We the Negroes of America declare that we desire liberty or we will take death,” invoked the American Revolution to exhibit his diehard stance on achieving equality for blacks, not only in America, but for blacks of the diaspora as well. He also championed a war not only for liberation and equality, but to determine the status of black

¹ Marcus Garvey, whose name evokes the “Back To Africa” slogan, was a controversial figure in the black nationalist movement in Harlem during the 1920s. Many people admired Garvey for his energy and vision, who shaped the attitudes and molded the opinions concerning the rights and destiny of black people in America. Originally from Jamaica, he founded the UNIA (United Negro Improvement Association) whose main objective was to the general “uplift of the Negro peoples of the world.” The UNIA reached its high point in 1920 when it hosted an international convention in Harlem that attracted twenty-five thousand delegates. The growth of the UNIA was also attributed to Garvey’s distribution of the weekly newspaper *Negro World* in 1918. Garvey had a particular appeal to working class black Americans. He founded a shipping line called the Black Star Line whose objectives were to make profit, employ blacks in important positions denied in the traditionally white shipping industry, and serve as an economic means of transportation for blacks hoping to return to Africa, particularly Liberia, to escape white oppression. Although the shipping line proved to be a failure, because he was sentenced to jail for mail fraud then deported, and his inability to achieve many of his long term goals, he is still considered a gospel of race pride and solidarity resonated with many black cultures across the globe. (See “Marcus Garvey” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, 1997.)

manhood. He continued, “The war must go on...the war will go on...to decide once and for all in the very near future whether black men are to be serfs and slaves or black men are to be free men.”²

For black nationalist leaders, the mission was well worth the sacrifice, because, as Garvey proclaimed, dying with dignity in a battle for equality is better than living a second class, emasculated status. Garvey’s words illustrated the militant imagery that has been a popular tool in black nationalist discourse. The metaphor of war, and in this case the reality of war, provided black nationalists with the vocabulary and symbolism with which to translate a politics of liberation into a politics of violent resistance. Although it is important to bear in mind that despite this rhetoric, Garvey never took up the gun, but deployed an economic strategy for group uplift. Many black nationalist theorists used violence, or invoked language using the threat of violence to purge an emasculated sense of self. In the 1960s, the Black Arts Movement used literary renderings of violent resistance. For example Amiri Baraka utilized this language of violence within the realm of poetry, using poetry as a revolutionary weapon. “We Want ‘poems that kill’/Assasin Poems / Poems that shoot Guns / Poems that wrestle cops into alleys and take their weapons leaving them dead.”³ Poems like these, along with other artistic metaphors for violent resistance would be the template for

² “Marcus Garvey” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 970; Charise Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 43; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Classic Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 246.

³ Amiri Baraka and William Harris, eds., *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2000), 37.

later generations of black nationalists to follow. What emerged in the mid-1980s owes a debt to Marcus Garvey and those like him.

In 1988, Public Enemy, a New York - based rap group, resurrected black nationalism and realized rap's potential to express black rage while representing a legacy of militant and masculine black politics. The new frontlines of a generation of young black people would be popular culture. Harry Allen, of the *Village Voice*, coined the term "hip-hop activism" to turn their culture into a weapon of resistance. Public Enemy's lead rapper, Carlton Ridenhour aka Chuck D, wanted to create connections to a previous era of activism. He proclaimed in a May 1998 *Toronto Sun* article that "we wanted to be known as the Black Panthers of Rap, we wanted our music to be dissonant." Although the use of rap music as a form of cultural expression was not a revolutionary idea, its use as a site for political expression followed in the footsteps of conscious rap pioneers like Melle Mel and Gil Scott Heron of the 1970s and early 1980s.⁴

With the release of the 1988 *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, Public Enemy transformed hip-hop culture into a medium for transmitting black nationalist thought. Bill Adler, the group's manager proclaimed their mission: "They're not out to be stars, they're out to save Black America."⁵ Aside from Adler's declaration, the examination of Public Enemy as a rap group is an interesting story that highlights rap music as both cultural politics and commercial culture. Its creation was a conscious exercise in using cultural production as both politics and commodity, and the complexities of using rap to transmit

⁴ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 249; Charise Cheney, "In Search of the 'Revolutionary Generation'", 278-280.

⁵ Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out*, 73.

political thought. By tracing their influences and the manner in which they presented themselves as both enlightened young black men and revolutionaries, one can gain insight into the changing landscape and crossroads of hip-hop culture. It was also in this era, following the rise of Public Enemy, hip-hop music arguably became the uncompromising voice for many black male youth.

The concept of Public Enemy came at a time when, for better or worse, rap music was becoming a forum for black nationalist thought. The music embraced a political consciousness that developed in response to the declining social, political, economic, and cultural conditions black youths confronted in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The spread of rap music advanced by communications technology made hip-hop music a legitimate tool for transmitting political thought to a generation of young consumers whose attention span gradually declined with so much media stimuli. Historian Manning Marable has stated, “The basic assumptions and tactics that guided the African-American middle class for several generations could no longer reflect the actual economic, social, and political conditions challenging the Black community.”⁶ It was time for young working-class black people to redefine their political agendas, as middle-class values and tactics were not the answer. Public Enemy attempted to contribute and respond to the social, political, and economic concerns of young working class black populations. Not within the context of a social movement, but rather, acting as educators and dispatchers of information. They disseminated

⁶ Manning Marable, “Race, Identity, and Political Culture,” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 292.

information lyrically to help urban and working-class youths understand the world around them.⁷

Public Enemy grew out of the political and educational experiences of its founding members. These were mostly college-educated young men who were born during the 1960s earlier than other rap contemporaries and grew up in black suburbia. This exposed them to the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power during their developmental years. As teenagers, Carlton Ridenour (Chuck D) and Richard Griffin (Professor Griff) attended a summer educational program at Adelphi University coordinated by students and activists from the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party. The program supplemented the education that black students typically received with an Afro-centric curriculum. Additionally, Chuck D remembered seeing a Black Panther's free breakfast program when visiting family in Harlem as a child, "My parents were young in the 1960s, and had radical ideas...My mother wore an afro and I remember wearing an afro myself, as well as singing the 'Free Huey Newton song.'"⁸ He also recalled, "I was actually considered 'too old' when I cut my first recording at twenty-six...but while my age may have appeared a disadvantage to some, it was actually an advantage based on what I knew."⁹ Such experiences were the breeding ground for what

⁷ Russell Myrie, *Don't Rhyhme for the Sake of Riddlin: The Authorized Story of Public Enemy* (New York: Canongate, 2008), 6-7.

⁸ Ibid., 27-28.

⁹ Robert Patton Spruill, "Welcome To The Terrordome: Public Enemy – Documentary" (Film Shack, 2007); Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work it Out*, 80

was to become Public Enemy's race and class-consciousness in post-civil rights era America.¹⁰

Public Enemy originated with a crew of Long Island DJ's called Spectrum City, founded by Hank Shocklee in the mid-1970s. Shocklee recruited Carlton Ridenour, then a student at Adelphi University. With Bill Stephney, a program director of Adelphi University's WBAU radio station, they created Public Enemy. The group's members included Chuck D or the "Messenger of Prophecy," Flavor Flav (William Drayton) or "The Cold Lamper," Terminator X (Norman Rogers) or "the assault technician," and Professor Griff the "Minister of Information." Professor Griff, according to Chuck D, "is a spinoff of Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panther Party."¹¹

When assigned the task of creating a distinct identity for the group, Bill Stephney who was also a co-founder, fashioned an authentic mixture of two previously successful music groups at the time: Run DMC and The Clash. Stephney outlined his vision for the new group, "The Clash was very political. They had done *Sandinista!* (released in 1980) which was a very successful sociopolitical record that sold a gazillion copies, and Run DMC, they were a cool rap-rock group, that had the coolness of a white rock group, but they were rappers. So if you could somehow combine the two, we thought we'd do something interesting. So [I] presented that concept to Chuck and Hank, and out of that Public Enemy was born."¹² Thus Public Enemy, one of the most successful political rap groups of the

¹⁰ Chuck D with Yusuf Jah, *Fight The Power: Rap, Race, and Reality* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1997), 81-83; Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 29-30; Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out*, 74.

¹¹ Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out*, 74-75; Chuck D with Yusuf Jah, *Fight The Power*, 85.

¹² Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out*, 75.

1980s, had been conceived as a combination of countercultural black working-class youth from New York and countercultural white-working class youth from Great Britain.

Public Enemy, as Chuck D recalled, worked because he felt it reflected white America's perception of black men. He stated that, "rap music back then was looked upon just like black men were looked upon: the scum of the earth."¹³ Hoping to tap into the political consciousness of their audiences, the group discovered a way to take advantage of the commodification of black popular culture at that time. Chuck D admitted, "Our initial direction was to market nationalism...I knew that people in music like trends. Our concept was to wear African leather medallions or something other than gold because people were getting their heads taken off for wearing gold back then."¹⁴ The members of Public Enemy recognized the potential business opportunity turning black nationalism into a commodity.¹⁵

With this in mind, they seized the opportunity to invert popular culture in meaningful and deliberate ways. Public Enemy was formed in the mid-1980s, with their first album later released in 1988, at a time when an artist's image was the most important element of marketability. A group's success in stylistically differentiating themselves from their peers proved of utmost importance. "That's how groups were judged... you had to carve your own niche and that's what we were doing carving our on niche" explained Chuck D.¹⁶ They hoped to create a distinct theatrical approach. However, not all aspects of their theatrics were well received.

¹³ Ibid.; Robert Patton Spruill, "Welcome To The Terrordome: Public Enemy – Documentary" (Film Shack, 2007).

¹⁴ Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out*, 75.

¹⁵ Ibid., 75-76.

¹⁶ Ibid.; Chuck D with Yusuf Jah, *Fight the Power*, 258.

According to critics, the inclusion of Flavor Flav (William Drayton) jeopardized the group's political dynamic. Flavor Flav's persona appeared reminiscent of a minstrel, constantly fashioning a giant clock around his neck while yelling his trademark, "yeaaaa booooooyy." Flavor's facade and demeanor collided with the serious and militant appearance of Chuck D and Professor Griff. Chuck D defended Flavor's role and insisted that Public Enemy needed to be a carefully balanced set of dualities. In 1988, Chuck D described Flavor's role in the group, "I'm like the mediator in all of this. Flavor is what America would like to see in a black man- sad to say- but true." He continued, Flavor "is very much what America would not like to see. And there's no acting here – sometimes I can't put Flavor and Griff in the same room. I'm in the middle." He explained that when "Griff says something too much, I come to the rescue of white people; when Flavor does something, I come to defense of black people. I do constrain them, but not much, because Public Enemy are the only black group making noises outside their records."¹⁷ Bill Stephney, another founding member of the group, also added "Flavor turned out to be the right sort of foil to balance the seriousness of Chuck."¹⁸

Despite these criticisms, Public Enemy became a public sensation. Richard Harrington of the *Washington Post* wrote, "the thin line between the Prophets of Rage and the profits of rage, after all, what's a rebel without applause, and what better way to court controversy than to revive an explosive issue like black nationalism?"¹⁹ Harrington

¹⁷ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 281.

¹⁸ Myrie, *Don't Rhyme for the Sake of Riddlin*, 56; Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out*, 78.

¹⁹ Richard Harrington, "Public Enemy's Assault on the Airwaves," *Washington Post*, July 31, 1988.

recognized that marketing played a role in the creation of Public Enemy, yet that did not undermine the group's desire to situate their black nationalist politics within hip-hop. Although skeptics condemned Public Enemy as being manufactured, thereby compromising their subversive edge as they entered the mainstream, group members had different views. Stephney argued, "We're capitalists... I don't think there was any time when we said we are Marxist revolutionaries who want to change the means of production and make sure that people control shit, we wanted to rock the crowd. We always thought those people were crazy."²⁰ Chuck D added, "We knew that if our people were going to be trendy we could at least make it trendy to have them learn about themselves and their history...that's what we tried to sell: intelligence."²¹ Despite risks with engaging the mainstream popular culture using rap nationalism, Public Enemy stood as an example of how a rap group could consciously manipulate culture as a commodity. They managed to use the tools of a postmodern world - consumer goods, technologies, imagery - to spread politicized messages through conscious rap.

Stephney also shared thoughts on the group's development at a crucial moment in history, "The reason we were confident about Public Enemy is that we knew we weren't part of an elite, that we represented a whole, rather numerous, generation of black folks, particularly young black men, who had gone to college or had been educated by the last vestiges of the 60s and 70s...as part of that generation of kids who sung 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' every morning in a school with nothing but teachers, to do Public Enemy is a no-

²⁰ Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out*, 78.

²¹ Ibid.; Chuck D with Yusuf Jah, *Fight the Power*, 27.

brainer.”²² As young witnesses to Civil Rights and Black Power, they were uniquely poised to teach a new generation of their history. Chuck D also wrote, “For many young people who are part of the Hip-Hop Nation today, the Vietnam War and the turbulent 1960s is a period that they read only in history books – not for me... I actually lived through that and was personally affected and shaped by pervasive antiwar, civil rights, and Black Power sentiments as a child.”²³

Public Enemy’s political rhetoric fused the nationalism of The Nation of Islam, the imagery of the Black Panther Party, and the tactics and principles of the Black Arts Movement. Chuck D’s ideological inspiration and patchwork neo-nationalism first drew from the Black Arts Movement. The Black Arts Movement was an extension of Black Power during the 1960s, and asserted that Afro-American artists could provide their generation thematic roadmaps for personal and group empowerment through cultural expression. The effort to create a distinctive culture resisted both cultural and psychological white domination. Art forms such as poetry, which required far less time to compose, allowed greater participation for anyone to create art. Through the use of the African American vernacular language, popular music, and even resonances of sermons, the Black Arts Movement gave birth to a rousing new forms of poetry, theater, and literature. These new artistic creations resisted cultural erasure and “decolonized” the black mind. Rather than black art imitating the “masterpieces” of the West, artists looked to Africa as a source of cultural pride, and made Africa the focus of the new cultural aesthetic.

²²Ibid.

²³Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work it Out*, 80-82.

Part of the Black Arts Movement's mission was the re-education of black America. Artists sought to create a sense of nationalism and cultural pride in black heritage, and to challenge mainstream cultural portrayals of African Americans. Cultural production became "the means to an end that involved the transformation of black political consciousness."²⁴ Hip-hop today remains the main cultural contribution of black artists, yet much of the music has become diluted politically and the debate continues as to what the purpose of hip-hop should be beyond just entertainment.

Amiri Baraka, an artist and pivotal figure in the creation of the cultural nationalism movement, reinforced this notion of liberating the mind in "There is No Revolution Without the People." He expressed ideas of Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism, but stressed the separation and liberation of the mind of black people as the first step before any physical movement could begin. Political movements and organizations, according to Baraka, must bring consciousness to black people in whatever context necessary, including art, as a tool for expressing self-determination, identity, and their unique culture free of subjugation from white cultural standards. With these thoughts in mind, Baraka's work became part of the larger movement to create a "black aesthetic" with a cultural revolution in art and ideas. By creating a "black aesthetic," black individuals could break free from imitating white standards of aesthetic beauty and be proud of black heritage and black definitions of beauty.²⁵

²⁴ William L. Van Deburg *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 290.

²⁵ Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, "Amiri Baraka" and "Larry Neal" in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997); 1877, 1959.

In a similar vein, Public Enemy committed to the belief that art should be functional, a mechanism to inspire and sustain black empowerment. Much like the artist activists of both Black Power and Black Arts Movements, cultural production used to promote psychological and spiritual revolution was of paramount importance to the black struggle. Without a psychological liberation from the influences of white hegemony in mass media, black struggle against the “slave mentality” would never be realized. Cultural Nationalists like Maulana Karenga of the US Organization believed that a fundamental revolutionary struggle began with the liberation of the black mind. Chuck D and Public Enemy embraced this idea and utilized music as a mechanism for inspiring change in the minds of listeners in a positive way. Chuck D expressed a need for “a bloodless coup, a mind revolution...Everybody first of all has to win the war within themselves.”²⁶

In addition to the Black Arts Movement, Public Enemy also drew from the assertive masculinity of the Black Panther Party. In 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, influenced by the writing and rhetoric of both Robert Williams and Malcolm X formed the Black Panther Party in Oakland. The Panthers began a movement for black men to resist racial oppression with a form of black nationalist masculine protest. The Black Panther Party’s agenda revolved around community liberation through direct confrontation against the state with members usually brandishing firearms in public at demonstrations. Much of their efforts were geared to drawing local media attention to their cause. As media scholar John Fiske has

²⁶ Richard Harrington, “Public Enemy’s Assault on the Airwaves,” *Washington Post*, July 31, 1988.

noted, “the black male figure out of control is a cultural nightmare when speaking about the Panthers.”²⁷

The Black Panthers used the press to their advantage by relying on a strategy to attract media coverage to reach the oppressed and disenfranchised beyond Oakland. They exploited their visual appeal using a display of guns, paramilitary clothing, symbols of black pride, like the afro, and inflammatory rhetoric. While these images of Black Panthers may have reinforced stereotypes of black males’ propensity toward violence, they also helped make the group an object of intense curiosity. The media also represented Black Panthers as agitators who operated outside conventional forms of protest like picketing, and favored more confrontational methods like marching in military-like formation. The Panthers also used rhetoric, such as describing police officers as racist “pigs,” which many viewed as radical since the perception was that they had no respect and regard for structures of authority. The use of the term “pig” proved significant in the minds of those in the black community by taking away police power over the community and viewing them as a joke. In the May 1967 edition of the *Black Panther*, a community publication, the group declared that “A Pig is an ill natured beast who has no respect for law and order, a foul traducer who’s usually found masquerading as a victim of an unprovoked attack.”²⁸ This began the enduring symbolic device of the pig being used to portray authority, but mostly the police. The terminology acted as a tool in changing the mindset of the black community and how it

²⁷ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 15; Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 248.

²⁸ Philip S. Foner ed., *The Black Panthers Speak* (New York: De Capo Press, 1995), 14.

viewed oppressive and brutal police practices. The pig symbolism allowed the community to view the police as sort of a joke, thus weakening their hold on the community.

Black Panthers also represented a new kind of radicalism not merely asking for their rights, but bearing arms as angry black men and women determined to take back their humanity in a racist society. The anger and rage stemmed from the mistreatment of black men and women by police who were sworn to protect, not brutalize and contain. Eldridge Cleaver, the “minister of information,” issued a statement in regard to the righteous anger and justified violent self defense of the Black Panther Party. “We do not claim the right to indiscriminate violence. We do not seek a bloodbath. We are not out to kill up white people. On the contrary, it is the cops who claim the right to indiscriminate violence and practice it everyday.”²⁹ Cleaver continued at a later date adding, “The only response to the violence of the ruling class is the revolutionary violence of the people. The Black Panther Party recognizes this truth...as the basic premise for relating to the colonial oppression of Black people in the heartland of imperialism where the white ruling class, through its occupation police forces, agents, dope-peddlers, institutionally terrorizes the Black community.”³⁰ Cleaver defended the righteous anger that many in the black community felt. The notion of reclaiming manhood and humanity by picking up arms to defend themselves and their family, especially in the urban context, became justified. The inner cities, where black males felt contained and “terrorized” by police brutality, created a context and framework for rage emanating from those who were oppressed. Especially when sources of authority exercise

²⁹ Ibid., 19.

³⁰ Ibid.

power in a way that has a dehumanizing effect on the community, people will become enraged and tired of the status quo. He concluded by adding, “Black people picking up the gun for self-defense is the only basis in America for a revolutionary offensive against Imperialist state power.”³¹ Using the gun for self defense and using the threat of violent resistance became a mainstay with Black Panther imagery and ideology, which Public Enemy would also duplicate.

The legacy of the Black Panthers lies in how they fashioned themselves and the culture of their organization. They wanted to create a “revolutionary culture” in an effort to influence Black Americans’ consciousness about race and self, to create autonomous institutions, and to defy the site of oppressive political and social power in the United States.³² As founding party member Huey Newton said in an interview, “There are two kinds of nationalism, revolutionary nationalism and reactionary nationalism. Revolutionary nationalism is first dependent upon a people’s revolution with the end goal being the people in power. Therefore to be a revolutionary nationalist you would by necessity have to be socialist.”³³ Clearly, the Black Panther’s were promoting socialist values and black empowerment, revolving around redistributing wealth back to the poor. They saw a “contradiction between capitalism in this country” and the group’s interests, and worked to destroy both “racism and capitalism.”³⁴ Overall, the group’s platform included self-determination for the black community, decent housing, critical education, full employment

³¹ Ibid., 20.

³² Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 92.

³³ Huey Newton, “Huey Newton Talks to the Movement About Black Panther Party, Cultural Nationalism, SNCC, Liberals, and White Revolutionaries,” in *The Black Panthers Speak* ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: De Capo Press, 1995), 50.

³⁴ Ibid.

for black people, self-defense, the end of police brutality, and the freedom of black prisoners.³⁵ They sought a collective, community uplift through becoming more economically independent from the imbalanced capitalist systems, which is why they favored the redistribution of power and wealth to the people. This constituted a very radical political ideology, but was a part of a movement and a well-conceived political organization.

Communicating these shared beliefs and rituals to a larger audience made up a large portion of the group's efforts. Although many viewed them as media subjects and the national press considered them revolutionaries or urban guerillas, the Black Panthers actually proved more reformist than revolutionary. Activities and community programs known as "survival programs" included free breakfast for children, free health clinics, and liberation youth schools, the founders knew that the community had to possess a fundamental and supportive groundwork to maintain their existence. They hoped to create an independent, unique, and separate black communal identity that withdrew from the oppression, racialized, and dehumanizing systems already in place.³⁶ They also published newspapers, pamphlets, orchestrated rallies, and even held political education classes.

The Black Panther Party synthesized the rhetoric and images of Malcolm X, Robert Williams, The Nation of Islam, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) among others, and combined them with the social practices of the lower-class residents of the inner city. These social practices included masculine behaviors like swaggering and hyper-masculine aggressiveness that masked the uncertainties and dangers

³⁵ Floyd W. Hayes III, and Francis A. Keine III, "All Power to the People: The Political Thought of Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party," in *Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)* ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 161.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

of everyday life in the inner cities. The group's political ideology focused on the black Americans inhabiting the decaying urban ghettos, and they sought to reproduce the language of the streets and use it as a organizing tool for black lower classes. They hoped to develop a discourse through which the "brother on the street" could find a source of empowerment. As Bobby Seale explained, "Huey P. Newton knew that once you organize the brothers that you ran with, he fought with, he fought against, who he fought harder than they fought him, once you organize those brothers, you get niggers, you get black men, you get revolutionaries who are too much."³⁷

In "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos," a prison escape fantasy, Public Enemy gave an accurate portrayal of the inner-personal conflict of an imprisoned man, and revived the Black Panther position on self-defense, and the symbol of the gun. This song encapsulated the manner in which Public Enemy rapped about subjects that related specifically to lower-class black males, since they were the group most likely to be caught up in the justice system, or the first drafted into the army. This song displayed the group's concern with the message of the song, while the dissonant and chaotic sound reflected anger and discontent. They expressed anger at the racial realities of post-civil rights America and in particular the prison system. Contrary to how gangsta rappers would later romanticize prison, and use a stay in prison as a badge of honor and tool for gaining street credibility, Public Enemy stood to give an accurate portrayal of prison life, similar in style as George Jackson's analysis of racism in

³⁷ Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970), 64.

America and his appraisal of the prison system in the 1970 compilation of letters *Soledad Brother*.

The lyrics of “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos” deal with a fictional story of an escape from an American prison. The song begins with Chuck D getting drafted into the army, “I got a letter from the government, the other day / I opened and read it, it said they were suckers / they wanted me for their army or whatever.” In response to the letter, he refused to join the army, “Picture me giving a damn / I said 'never!’” The main idea in this first section revolves around the idea of American society not granting full citizenship rights to all people, especially its black citizens. Therefore, why would Chuck D want to defend a country where he is not truly free or equal, “here's a land that never gave a damn about a brother like me.”³⁸

Chuck D is then taken to prison, from which he attempted to escape because of the terrible conditions in which he outlined the damaging effects of imprisonment in the lyrics, “Four of us packed in like slaves – oh well... A cell is hell – I’m a rebel so I rebel / Between bars, got me thinkin like an animal.” Chuck D also connected the modern prison system to a new form of slavery; “The same motherfucker got us livin in his hell / You have to realize - what its a form of slavery / Organized under a swarm of devils / Straight up – word em up on the level / The reasons are several, most of them federal.” Chuck D critiqued the manner which the justice system, rather than rehabilitating, is locking young black men and throwing away the key. The constant mention of “black steel” makes reference to a gun. For Chuck

³⁸ Public Enemy, “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1989)

and his fellow prisoners, all other options are exhausted, so he goes for the steel since he is engaged in battle against the racist power structures of government, and most immediately with the guards. By the end of the second verse, Chuck D has taken a gun from a corrections officer who had fallen asleep.

With gun in hand, Chuck D and the other prisoners attempted an escape “to the ghetto - no sell out” rather than waste away behind bars. The final verse ends with Chuck D and other prisoners continuing with their final escape. They are confronted with shots then a state of chaos follows. Finally, security forces, in favor of the prisoners, come to the rescue. The song ends with the line “53 brothers on the run, and we are gone” indicating a successful prison escape.³⁹

This song, with its critique of the prison industrial complex—a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need. The prison-industrial complex is not a conspiracy, guiding the nation's criminal-justice policy behind closed doors. It is a “confluence of special interests that has given prison construction in the United States a seemingly unstoppable momentum” with the “raw material of the prison-industrial complex is its inmates: the poor, the homeless, and the mentally ill; drug dealers, drug addicts, alcoholics, and a wide assortment of violent sociopaths.”⁴⁰ Alongside this critique, it also illustrated the inner struggle occurring within prisoners to the point of an escape, was very different from the danceable beats and sounds of the mid 1980s. This music had a more serious message. Public Enemy resurrected the hard

³⁹ Public Enemy, “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1989); In the video for the song, this line accompanied the image of Chuck D being hung by the triumphant warden of the prison who prevented the successful escape of the group.

⁴⁰ Eric Schlosser, “The Prison Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic* December 1998.

and masculine edge of black nationalism and applied it to hip-hop music. They combined political consciousness with hard, sometimes chaotic beats and made it acceptable to rap conscious lyrics, establishing a blueprint for other acts to follow.⁴¹

In another Public Enemy music video from 1991, for the song “By The Time I Get to Arizona,” the scenario stood as homage to the imagery of the Black Panther Party. The video is filled with black male figures wearing uniforms, red berets, and dark sunglasses as fire and explosions. In this example, the wrath of the Panthers is evoked for a song that protested the refusal of Arizona officials to establish a public holiday in honor of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday. Chuck D rapped, “What's a smilin' fact /When the whole state's racist/ Why want a holiday Fuck it 'cause I wanna / So what if I celebrate it standin' on a corner / I ain't drinkin' no 40 / I B thinkin' time wit' a nine / Until we get some land / Call me the trigger man.”⁴² This video symbolized the kind of visual imagery that harkened back to what the Black Panthers attempted to achieve with aggressive posturing and anger toward unjust authority figures.

In another song, “Party for Your Right to Fight,” the “party” in the title references the Black Panthers. “This party started right in '66 / With a pro-Black radical mix / Then at the hour of twelve / Some force cut the power / And emerged from hell /It was your so called government / That made this occur / Like the grafted devils they were / J. Edgar Hoover, and he coulda proved to you /He had King and X set up / Also the party with Newton, Cleaver

⁴¹ Jon Pareles, “Public Enemy: Rap with a Fist in the Air,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1988; Peter Watrous “Rap and Politics from Public Enemy,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1990.

⁴² Public Enemy, “By the Time I Get to Arizona,” *The Apocalypse 91: The Enemy Strikes Black* (Def Jam, 1991).

and Seale / He ended, so get up / Time to get em back.”⁴³ In this verse, Chuck D makes an allusion toward the FBI’s counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) which played a major role in bringing down the Black Panthers. FBI head J. Edgar Hoover in 1969 declared the Black Panthers as the most dangerous threat to internal national security. In the song, Chuck D called for a new cultural revolution to occur, for a new nation to rise up, since authorities had shut down their predecessors.

Although at times, the Black Panther connection remained loose, the links were largely a matter of style and rhetoric. The Black Panther Party supported economic sustainability, community self-determination, and an abandonment of the capitalist system in hopes of making life better for a large group of lower class blacks. Public Enemy did not have similar goals in mind. Public Enemy merely wanted to influence and educate the way listeners viewed the world around them, but did not engage in a larger social movement like the Black Panthers, or other black nationalists. The group’s political leanings never intended to change the systemic problems, but rather aimed at just changing individuals and how those individuals interpreted the world around them. To some this may seem like a bastardization of black nationalist efforts, using language and imagery of previous social movements and selling them as a commodity. To others, it can be considered a more conservative approach to change in the today’s world, merely changing individuals rather than changing entire systems on which American society operates.

The Black Panthers influenced Public Enemy and their ideas became manifest in the

⁴³ Public Enemy, “Party for Your Right to Fight,” *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1987).

lyrics as well as their defiant posturing and expressions of rage as they rapped for black resistance among young hip-hop audiences. They also helped bring the history of 1960s and 1970s black resistance into the consciousness of the 1990s, and informed a generation of listeners not familiar with the recent history of black social movements.

Another group that Public Enemy modeled its political ideology is the Nation of Islam. Until the establishment of the Moorish-American Science Temple in 1913 and the formation of the Temple of Islam in the 1930s, black nationalist theology traditionally had been rooted in Christianity. Temple of Islam would later become the Nation of Islam, and following the disappearance of founder W.D. Fard in 1934, its leadership responsibilities were taken over by Elijah Muhammed. The Nation of Islam was rooted in the interpretations of the Islamic faith by Elijah Muhammed, which required members to adhere to strict codes of conduct, as it pertains to personal behavior.⁴⁴

According to the foundation myth, “original man” is none other than the black man. The “Black Man is the first and last: creator of the universe and primogenitor of all races – including the white race.”⁴⁵ The black man in America descended from the Asian Black nation and the tribe of Shabazz. This tribe, according to the myth, were the first to discover and settle the choicest spots on earth to live, and everywhere the white race has gone, signs existed of the Original [black] man having been there previously.⁴⁶ Another tenet of the myth is that a scientist named Yakub had created the white race. Yakub created a breakthrough in human hybridization and created a white race, out of the weaker “molecular portions” of the

⁴⁴ Cheney, *Brother's Gonna Work It Out*, 120.

⁴⁵ C. Eric Lincoln, “Black Muslims in America,” (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994), 71.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

black man. The one drawback turned out to be the white race's low physical and moral stamina; they have a propensity to lie and murder, and are "the enemies of truth and righteousness."⁴⁷ They are considered "blue eyed devils," using Christianity as justification for the enslavement of the black race. Therefore Christianity is not the religion of an enlightened black man. These basic tenets make up part of the foundation myth for the Nation of Islam's belief in black supremacy, and white degradation, and refute, what many consider to be white supremacist biblical references.⁴⁸

The Nation of Islam, under the leadership of Elijah Muhammed, and followed by the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, in combination with the memory of Malcolm X, reawakened the consciousness of black youth in the 1980s. Farrakhan experienced an extraordinary rise to popularity in the mid to late 1980s, despite his lack of any significant political platform. His style and race politicking and articulation of black rage were enough to capture the attention of frustrated black youth living decaying urban landscapes.⁴⁹ He also inspired Public Enemy. "Minister Farrakhan is the link and the reason that we all understand what we do have this one thing in common, and this mission to be self-sufficient in America or in the rest of the world," argued Chuck D.⁵⁰ Flavor Flav, who claimed to be a former member of the Nation of Islam added, "All praise is due to the Minister Farrakhan for teaching us the way of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁸ In the book of Genesis, Cain committed the first homicide against his brother Abel, and according to Christian belief, God gave Cain a mark as punishment for his sin of murder and to signify to others who he is and that they are not to kill him. God also assured Cain that he would be a restless wanderer of the earth. Many believe this mark to be black skin, and forms the foundation for white supremacist belief that the white race is superior.

⁴⁹ Cheney, *Brother's Gonna Work It Out*, 121.

⁵⁰ Joseph Euse and James G. Spady, eds. *Nation Conscious Rap* (Brooklyn: PC International Press, 1991), 359.

perfection which is the direction, cause there was a big mistake but he made the correction.”⁵¹ The influences of the Nation of Islam, which shaped Malcolm X, and later the Black Panthers, also informed the political ideologies of the members of Public Enemy. These nationalist perspectives would manifest themselves in the lyrics of the group’s music. In the song previously mentioned, “Party for Your Right to Fight,” Chuck D included in the final verse his lyrical reverence to the Nation of Islam.

Word from the honorable Elijah Muhammed

Know who you are to be Black

To those that disagree it causes static

For the original Black Asiatic man

Cream of the earth

And was here first

And some devils prevent

this from being known

But you check out the books they own

Even masons they know it

But refuse to show it, yo

But it's proven and fact

And it takes a nation of

⁵¹ Ibid., 311.

millions to hold us back ⁵²

In this final verse, Chuck D reiterates some of the basic tenets of the teachings of Elijah Muhammed to instill race pride into listeners. His inclusion of the “Black Asiatic Man” rising again to prominence connected with the Five-Percent Nation philosophy, which functioned as a less religious street version of the Nation of Islam. Additionally, Chuck D hoped to remind listeners of the pride in their race, and to not be ashamed to be black, but proud. He rapped that black people are the “cream of the earth” and “was here first” and that the true history of black people in America can be hidden by the historical exclusions in the American educational system; “But you check out the books they own / even masons know it / but refuse to show it yo / but it’s proven and fact.”⁵³ In another song “Bring Tha Noize,” from the same album, *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, Chuck D referenced the current leader of the Nation of Islam in an attempt to inform listeners of the influence of Louis Farrakhan. He rapped, “Farrakhan’s a prophet and I think you ought to listen to / What he can say to you, what you ought to do/ Follow for now, power of the people, say/ Make a miracle, D, pump the lyrical.”⁵⁴ In this case, Public Enemy, and in particular Chuck D, made it a point to include streams of ideas revolving around the Nation of Islam. The lyrics and the music succeeded in exposing a new generation of [black] listeners to realize their unique history, potential, and pride despite what destructive mainstream media portrayals of black males had crept into their consciousness.

⁵² Public Enemy, “Party for Your Right to Fight,” *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1987).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Public Enemy, “Bring Tha Noize,” *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1987).

Public Enemy's hit "Fight the Power" stood up in opposition to appropriation of black culture by whites and offered an alternative views for black listeners. Chuck D rapped, "Elvis was a hero to most, but he never meant shit to me/ Straight-up racist, the sucker was simple and plain/ Motherfuck him and John Wayne." To many young black men, these traditional examples of an ideal white masculinity did not apply to men of color. Chuck D realized and proclaimed that black males needed to create their own ideals of black masculinity, in opposition to the dominant white masculinity. Public Enemy attached themselves to historical figures like Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and Louis Farrakhan. Chuck D confronted constructions of white masculinity head on in these lyrics and provided alternative models for young black males to emulate.⁵⁵

When judging Public Enemy's measurable effect on their audiences, although claiming the rhetorical strategy of earlier artistic and political movements, without an actual political movement to support their political standpoint, the group appeared to be all talk and no action. In the absence of community activism, without the support of leadership and organization structure, the role of the rap nationalists like Public Enemy remains unclear. Additionally the erosion of communal exchange, or people looking out for the best interests of a group over individual needs, that marked the post Civil Rights period, also denied political rappers the ability to form a sustainable and progressive movement. Political hip-

⁵⁵ Public Enemy, "Fight the Power," *Fear of a Black Planet*, (Def Jam, 1990); Dyson, *Know What I Mean*, 67.

hop “seems to have functioned as a genre whose popularity had passed, instead of a sustained movement which connected both cultural artifacts with real political events.”⁵⁶

Scholar Jeffrey Louis Decker criticized Chuck D’s militant persona as a crafting of historical memory that represented “at best, an, uneasy cultural-political alliance – one which is contradictory as it is creative, as prone to historical amnesia as it is to constructive historical revision.”⁵⁷ Even Amiri Baraka, who himself had used poetry as a political tool, addressed a panel at Howard University alongside Bill Stephney, a founding member of Public Enemy, and insisted that rappers take their place in the community as leaders. Stephney, taking the position that rappers are primarily performers and entertainers, responded angrily, “Woe be it unto a community that has to rely on rappers for political leadership. Because that doesn’t signify progress, that signifies default. Now that our community leaders cannot take up their responsibility, you’re gonna leave it up to an eighteen year-old-kid who has mad flow?... If our leadership is determined by an eighteen-year-old kid without a plan, then we’re in trouble. We’re fucked.”⁵⁸ This disagreement on the responsibility illustrated the tension and complexity of the responsibility rap nationalists have to the black community beyond just “rocking a crowd.”

However, Chuck D insisted, “I’m not a politician, I’m a dispatcher of information...People are always looking to catch me in fucking double talk and loopholes. They’re looking to say, ‘Damn, in this interview he said that, and in this interview he said

⁵⁶ Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 145.

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Louis Decker, “The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism.” *Social Texts* vol 60 (Spring 1993); 65.

⁵⁸ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 275.

that.’ They treat me like I’m Jesse Jackson.”⁵⁹ Since the beginning, the group hoped to turn rap into “Black America’s CNN” or an alternative, youth controlled media network exposing the realities of life on the streets. They did not seek to become political leaders nor set political agendas, but desired conscious rap lyrics to be political and give hip-hop a hard sounding, masculine edge. Despite objections and criticisms to their peculiar position as entertainers using their platforms to disseminate political messages, in the end they changed the trajectory of hip-hop and created a unique niche all their own.

Rap nationalists considered it their duty to both inspire and cultivate racial consciousness among black youth, especially of lower classes, to promote a sense of race pride constantly jeopardized by white cultural hegemony in popular culture and mass media. Despite their limitations and shortcomings in both political sustainability and their inability to produce political lyrics combined with danceable beats, groups like Public Enemy provided a counter-ideology to white supremacy. They produced a system of knowledge that was both race and class conscious, and because of this, these rapper’s efforts were both meaningful and transformative for those who listened. It is also important to note that Public Enemy did not use women as visual and rhetorical props in their music to get their message across. In the beginning, the group never set out to start a political movement, they merely wanted to fashion themselves in a way to make politically conscious rap hard edged that could sell “intelligence” to mainstream audiences. They set out to educate their listeners and instill a sense of race pride in the minds of young black audiences. In regards to these goals, they succeeded.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 276.

Rap music, and more broadly, hip-hop was at a crossroads in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The record companies began to take notice, and saw the potential in packaging the rebellion to sell to a wider audience. Although at this point, rap music like Public Enemy's existed as a cultural production of both politics and commodity, what emerged on the west coast at this time would take rap worldwide. A new, less symbolically political, but more "real" genre of rap would form about the same time as Public Enemy was still popular in the mainstream. This new form of rap would focus on representing inner city life with even more realism. Although Public Enemy remained popular into the 1990s, a shift away from Public Enemy's Afro-centric and black nationalist rap toward what Robin D.G. Kelley referred to as "gansterism" or "ghettocentricity" started to gain momentum in the late 1980s. Bill Stephney believed that gangsta rap would not have been possible without Public Enemy. He argued that Public Enemy's theatrical representations of militant political activism and promoting violence as self-defense, actually paved the way for gangsta rappers' figurative representations of violence. He, as well as Chuck D, believed they were the link, "We provided a bridge, from a symbolic standpoint, to gansta rap. There is no N.W.A. without Public Enemy... That angry, violent culture that comes up in the early 1990s... became very interesting to white kids, even more interesting than Public Enemy was. Because it's even more exotic and more dangerous than Chuck's position."⁶⁰

Gangsta rap reignited white America's traditional fears of black masculinity and unleashed menacing caricatures of the worst of the dispossessed. Highly masculinist and violently resistant imagery drawing on existing stereotypes of the black male would be the

⁶⁰ Cheney, *Brother's Gonna Work It Out*, 79.

norm in gangsta rap.⁶¹ For better or worse, Public Enemy did change the face of hip-hop enough to give these new gangsta rappers a space to be popular and marketable in the mainstream, and have secured an important place in hip-hop history. In the end, after all their success and failures, they can be considered among the best examples of the intricacies and hazards of using political ideology through a vehicle of commercial culture as an insurrectionary tool.

⁶¹ Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 212-213.

Chapter Two: Gangsta Rap and the City of Los Angeles

In the spring of 1988, Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) Chief Daryl Gates received blessing from city hall to launch his new military style operation against gangs. Gates's program known as "Operation Hammer" became touted as the national model of how to deal with inner city gangs. Gates stated, "This is war...we're exceedingly angry...We want to get the message out to the cowards out there, and that's what they are, rotten little cowards – we want the message to go out that we're coming to come and get them."¹ The chief of the District Attorney's hardcore drug unit added, "This is Vietnam here." The 'them' Gates referred to in his statement were the members of local black and latino gangs. On the evening of August 1, 1988, Gates brought his 'war' on gangs to south central Los Angeles. A force of eighty-eight police officers supported by helicopters zeroed in on two apartment buildings suspected of heavy gang and drug activity. The cops stormed through the two buildings taking axes and sledgehammers to walls and furniture, smashing appliances, and rounding up and beating dozens of residents. One officer stated, "We weren't just searching for drugs. We were delivering a message that there is a price to pay for selling drugs and being a gang member." Another officer said, "I looked at it as something of a Normandy Beach, a D-Day."²

The raid yielded very small amounts of marijuana and almost no crack cocaine. The entire raid was a failure, along with the entire campaign to crack down on gang activity in

¹ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating The Future of Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books) 268.

² John L. Mitchell, "The Raid That Still Haunts L.A.," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2001.

Los Angeles. Overall, Operation Hammer netted twenty-five thousand arrests, mostly black and brown youth who fit gang profiles, 90 percent of whom were released without charge, while the real hard-core gang members managed to escape the LAPD's gang sweeps.³ By 1992, the city of Los Angeles had paid eleven million dollars in lawsuits for police brutality and only two million in gang intervention programs, and almost half of all black males living in south central were now in a gang database.⁴ Despite these obvious shortcomings, Chief Gates stood by this approach, "I think people believe that the only strategy we have is to put a lot police officers on the street and harass people and make arrests for inconsequential kind of things. Well, that's part of the strategy, no question about it."⁵

This environment of police brutality, criminalization, and containment, most notably in south central Los Angeles, where communities such as Watts and Compton were situated, would become the site for a major cultural insurrection. These communities were also destabilized from a variety of other problems that included the drug trade, gang rivalries, proliferation of firearms, deindustrialization, joblessness, and an overall disinvestment by local, state, and federal governments. A combination of all these forces alienated massive numbers of youths who had little hope for a future. Individuals in these forced urban environments would find a way to fight back, by ushering in a countercultural youth movement that birthed a new radical chic.⁶

³ John A. Oswald, "Residents Still Coping With Raid's Effects. Police Gang Sweep Left Families Homeless," *Los Angeles Times* January 6, 1989.

⁴ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 274-277.

⁵ Joe Dominick, "Police Power: Why No One Can Control the LAPD," *L.A. Weekly*, February 16, 1990.

⁶ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 276.

On August 8, 1988, N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) released a rap album *Straight Outta Compton* that included the divisive and controversial song, “Fuck Tha Police.” “Fuck Tha Police,” whose lyrics bragged about and glorified violence against oppressive authorities, represented a new sub genre of hip-hop known as gangsta rap. With its social critique of the criminalization of black youth, especially in light of the LAPD’s war on gangs, gangsta rap acted as a voice for inner city Los Angeles, and echoed across America. By embracing street authenticity, teen rebellion, and the individual “get mine” credo, gangsta rap “fit hand in glove with a multicultural youth demographic weaned on racism and Reaganism, the first generation in a half century to face downward mobility.”⁷

Reaganism was an ideological movement that went beyond just Reagan as president. In terms of how it affected inner city black youth, it meant “the idea of rollback: not only in international affairs, but also in domestic matters, where it aimed to repeal the progressive developments of a century’s worth of liberal action.”⁸ Also, “civil rights and civil liberties were subject to circumscription by a Supreme Court whose members were vetted by religious leaders and ideological overseers.”⁹ The old middle-class vanished and a Reaganist class of service managers and franchise owners who sat on a huge underclass of a low wage work force that wrapped burgers.¹⁰

Many groups felt like they lost out, in the Vietnam era and after. It is among those who saw their power weakened, their mobility reduced, and their security endangered that

⁷ N.W.A., “Fuck Tha Police,” *Straight Outta Compton* (Priority/Ruthless, 1988); Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 320.

⁸ Andrew Kopkind, “The Age of Reaganism: A Man and a Movement,” *The Nation* Nov. 3, 1984

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Reaganism found its social base.¹¹ Included are whites and men in general, the military and defense community, conservative political figures, and most European ethnics. They all had different reasons to resent the old liberal order and did not mind resisting and rolling back the gains of blacks and women.¹²

With this in mind it came as no surprise that the backlash against N.W.A. began to take shape. Right wing conservative groups, older middle class blacks, and even the F.B.I. issued stern warnings to the group regarding their promotion of violence against law enforcement.¹³ They became targets of police harassment while on tour stemming from the backlash against “Fuck Tha Police.” N.W.A. would eventually go on to achieve enormous mainstream success mostly as a result of this pivotal album. They transformed rebellion, racial stereotyping, non-conformity, and marginalized identities into a commodity. This idea of packaged rebellion had been done in the past, with the rise of punk rock in late 1970s England, but N.W.A. achieved more American mainstream success than their punk rock predecessors. They also drew from the example set forth by early artists such as Gil Scott Heron and Melle Mel. In the 1982 song “The Message” which told the story of urban decay in Melle Mel’s community in the Bronx, Melle Mel’s immortalized rapping as the central expression in hip-hop culture.¹⁴ N.W.A.’s album came packed with gunshots, obscenities,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gregory Sadow, “What’s NWA All About? Anger, Yes. Violence, No,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, July 16, 1989.

¹⁴ Trisha Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 55-56.

and some ferocious rhythms, and sold over a million copies and spent seventy nine weeks atop “Billboard’s Top 200” album chart.¹⁵

Operation Hammer and N.W.A.’s rise can be representative of a larger historical struggle between young, lower class black males and their relationship to American society, their culture, and to each other in attempt to construct their own identity. This contentious relationship depends on the dominant culture drawing on historically developed stereotypes about black men that control and minimize their potential. Over time these populations have resisted and attempted to create new and different identities. Generations of young black men have also tried to resist white appropriation by crafting a new identity based on hip-hop culture. This identity embodies progressive elements of reasserting masculinity, racial pride, and resistance, while also drawing from regressive elements of American culture and creating a global market for shrunken and restrictive notions of “real” blackness. This contentious relationship revolving around black masculinity in hip-hop becomes visible when one traces the history of gangsta rap and the rise and development of hip-hop culture as a whole.¹⁶

¹⁵ David Mills, “Recordings: Rap’s Hostile Fringe from N.W.A. and Others, ‘Reality’ Based Violence,” *Washington Post*, September 2, 1990.

¹⁶ I use the term “hip-hop” throughout this paper. The term refers to the “sub-cultural” movement developed in the Bronx, New York circa 1973. This form of cultural expression, which is predominantly African-American, includes an array of human activities. These activities include break dancing, graffiti, rap, deejaying and emceeing. It is important to point out the different meanings of terms used throughout this essay. Hip-hop refers to the entire culture among black and brown youth, while RAP, as an element of the culture, is a musical method of delivering messages to the hip-hop community through lyrical rhymes similar to poetry. Gangsta Rap is one sub-genre of the rapping element of hip-hop culture, and usually involves resisting middle-class values and adheres to values which reflect street authenticity.

Inflammatory lyrics are central to N.W.A, a rap group who came out of the streets of south central Los Angeles. Although politically conscious rap still remained popular, the west coast maintained a unique style. Young inner city males were frustrated with dehumanizing police tactics poor educational systems, and squalid social settings. Gangsta rappers represented and voiced the collective displeasure with society of these forgotten youth. They rapped about the unattractive nuances of everyday life as they lived and saw it in the ghetto.¹⁷ Gangsta rappers also presented themselves in hyper masculine ways, portraying themselves as physically worthy of respect, as individuals to be feared.

To understand the Los Angeles climate that groups like N.W.A. lived in, a brief analysis of one particular policy is essential. Proposition 13 was the first of several state ballot initiatives to reduce property taxes for current homeowners, and was passed in California in 1978. Since inflation and resentment of government spending affected a range of Americans, the anti-government rhetoric became nationalized once Ronald Reagan embraced the strategy in the 1980 presidential campaign. Decreased education spending became the most obvious victim of lower property taxes. There was also a limit on “special taxes” which paid for libraries, police protection, and transit. Proposition 13 ended the flow of tax revenue normally gained through property taxes. It also led to “cash box zoning” and “fiscalization of land use,” causing inner city leadership to approve more service economy businesses because they generated local revenue through the sales tax.¹⁸

¹⁷ Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You? Popular Culture from the Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 62.

¹⁸ Peter Schrag, *Paradise Lost: California's Experience, America's Future* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 130-132; Paul Boyer, *Reagan As President- Contemporary Views of the Man, His Politics, and His Policies* (Chicago: Ivan R. Press, 1990), 5-6; Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, 165.

Proposition 13 affected non-property-owning minorities in Los Angeles. Renters did not receive a share of the benefits of Prop 13, but "cash box zoning" made sure these individuals paid into the system via a sales tax. This meant that Proposition 13 shifted some of the tax burden down the income ladder, especially since working-class Americans tend to spend more of their earnings in these sales taxes. Consequently, the cut in property taxes only benefited property owners, and poverty levels and unemployment rose in the inner cities, especially in south central Los Angeles.¹⁹

This policy was representative of larger trends occurring nationwide affecting lower and working class populations. Profound changes in the global economy, deindustrialization, and Reagan's disinvestment in the inner city community had devastating impacts. For millions in the young urban demographic, particularly black males, this meant "a degradation of their productive capacity via damaging prejudices and impaired skill development and results in a diminished earning power." Additionally, lack of access to affordable health care, dependence on social welfare programs, and a rise in homicide and black on black crime, signaled a rapidly growing problem for black men in America's inner cities.²⁰

When lower class black youths have diminished earning power to sustain themselves financially, illegal and underground economies have emerged. They also had few positive and constructive outlets, while simultaneously being targeted by police crackdowns not interested in rehabilitating young blacks, but rather criminalizing and containing them. In the case of Los Angeles, as in other cities, the crack cocaine epidemic became the basis for an

¹⁹ Schrag, *Paradise Lost*, 129-160.

²⁰ Booker, *I Will Wear No Chains*, 209-211.

alternative economy. Trapped in low wage employment, amid a myriad of oppressive social conditions, young black and brown males looked for “magical paths to self-empowerment” in what Mike Davis once referred to as the “political economy of crack.”²¹ Many young inner city inhabitants attempted to rise from squalor and poverty by entering this underground drug economy; however, it also created a volatile social context. The “internalized devaluation of their worth” coupled with the high frequency and intensity of stressful situations, “manifested itself in soaring murder rates, riots, gang violence, fratricide, and interpersonal conflict.”²²

The crisis amongst inner city black males also led to a displacement of anger towards onto fellow black people in the community rather than the power structures responsible for creating these forced environments. In this context, violence became a means of demonstrating that one was not weak but rather had the means to control his destiny. The proliferation of an illegal drug economy pointed to a larger issue of the capitalist system, not operating in ways to give access to for inner city youth to get a decent education, job opportunities, to eventually become a worker and provider.²³ In a patriarchal culture that makes earning power a measure of manhood, lower class black males had limited access and therefore engaged in criminal activity to subsist.²⁴

In this environment of tremendous volatility, Eric Wright, better known as Eazy- E, started his own production company that would produce the first gangsta album. Eazy- E

²¹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 315- 317.

²² Booker, *I Will Wear No Chains*, 211-213.

²³ Noel A. Cazenave, “Black Men in America: The Quest for ‘Manhood,’” in *Black Families* H.P. McAdoo, ed., (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981), 176-179.

²⁴ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 306

confessed, “I used to steal cars, break into houses, sell drugs, and rob people.” However after his cousin’s untimely death, he decided to go straight.²⁵ Wright became the sole owner of his new record company called Ruthless Records in 1986. In 1987, he would form the group that would become known as N.W.A. or “Niggaz with Attitude.” The next year, 1988, they released N.W.A.’s first album *Straight Outta Compton*.

The group members of N.W.A., Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, MC Ren, DJ Yella, and Ice Cube, delivered hard hitting songs that shared their experiences living in inner city Los Angeles. The opening words to the album are, “You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge.”²⁶ What followed were songs with lyrics laced with profanity, anger, mayhem, sex, and drugs. The beats on this album matched the intensity of the lyrics as well, and shocked the music world. The album can be viewed as setting the blueprint for gangsta rap, which would dominate the hip-hop world for years to come. It also helped to legitimize hip-hop as a mainstream musical force hard to ignore.

Eazy-E spoke out about the focus of the group being their local communities, “Fuck that black power shit: we don’t give a fuck...I bet there ain’t nobody in South Africa wearing a button saying ‘Free Compton’ or ‘Free California.’”²⁷ He continued by adding, “We wanted to tell it like it is,” and added that N.W.A. raps about “what people want to hear. It’s like a good x-rated comedian.”²⁸ Although both N.W.A. and Public Enemy made music around the same time, and many consider 1988 the most important year in hip-hop history,

²⁵ David Mills, “Guns and Poses; Rap Music Violence: Gloryfying Gangsterism or Reflecting Reality?” *The Washington Times*, August 17, 1989.

²⁶ N.W.A., *Straight Outta Compton* (Priority/Ruthless, 1988).

²⁷ Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 212.

²⁸ James T. Jones IV, “N.W.A.’s Career Gets jolt from Lyric’s Shock Value,” *USA TODAY*, June 21, 1991.

Public Enemy was more overtly political. N.W.A.'s rise and takeover of the rap world would mark the end to political and nationalistic rap aimed at educating a new generation and Black Nationalism, and began a new era, one focused less on community empowerment and collective gains and more on the individual and a "get mine" credo. N.W.A.'s music would unapologetically rap about violence, sexually conquest and, similar to their predecessors, "fighting" back against unjust law enforcement. Their lyrics were intended to convey a sense of social realism in an inflammatory way that had never been done before. The proof of the success of *Straight Outta Compton* could be seen in their sales: two million copies, with virtually no airplay.²⁹

In an interview by Dennis Hunt of the *L.A. Times*, M.C. Ren, a member of N.W.A. commented on the content of the music by clarifying, "What Jazzy Jeff and rappers like him talk about is phony stuff...they're not into street raps, into telling what's really happening out there. They're talking about what the white kids can identify with. If you're black kid from the streets and somebody is rapping about parents not understanding, you'd laugh at that, you might not have parent."³⁰ MC Ren also noted, "We wanted to show that you don't have to go commercial to get up there [on the charts]," which proved true for their first album that got limited exposure early on.³¹

O'Shea Jackson, another group member known as Ice Cube, explained, "We call ourselves underground street reporters, we just tell it how we see it, nothing more, nothing

²⁹ Jonathan Gold, "Compton's Most Wanted a Hard Act to Follow; Two Decades Later, N.W.A.'s Masterpiece Is As Vital – And Brutal – As Ever," *L.A. Weekly*, December 6, 2007.

³⁰ Dennis Hunt, "The Rap Reality: Truth and Money Compton's N.W.A. Catches Fire with Stark Portraits of the Ghetto Life," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1989.

³¹ Ibid.

less.”³² He also believed, “We’re not on the good side or bad side of anything. We’re in the middle, like a reporter would do. We tell [listeners] what’s going on. If you want to go bad, you have to deal with the consequences. If you don’t like it, if you don’t understand it, don’t buy the records. Don’t come to the concert.”³³ He continued, “If everybody did records and all we talked about was the joys of life, and on TV all they showed was rainbows and pastel colors, a kid could go out and get his head blown off and not know why...It’s a hard life out there, I’m sorry to say. I ain’t the one who made it hard, but I’m the one that lived it...I’m the one who saw and heard about half the stuff I’m talking about.”³⁴ Ice Cube also defended N.W.A.’s lack of positive messages and thought kids had enough people telling them what to do, “Their momma tells ‘em what to do; teachers tell ‘em what to do; people in the community tell ‘em what to do; the police tell ‘em what to do. So when they go to a party, they don’t want somebody saying what they already done heard a million times.”³⁵ He declared later that, “Peace is a fictional word to me...violence is reality... you’re supposed to picture life as a bowl of cherries but it’s not. So we don’t do nothing fake.”³⁶

N.W.A. represented the voice of the “brother on the corner” who loudly, defiantly and unapologetically rapped about “The Real.”³⁷ From now on rappers had to “represent” or speak for their less visible or vocal peers. The lyrics began to convey a sense of social realism critiquing and analyzing, in the first person, racist institutions and social practices.

³² Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 190.

³³ Mark Holmberg, “LA Group’s Rude Rap Reaping Riches,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, June 30, 1989.

³⁴ David Mills, “Guns and Poses,” 2.

³⁵ David Mills, “Guns and Poses,” 5.

³⁶ Steve Hochman, “N.W.A. Cops an Attitude,” *Rolling Stone*, June 29, 1989

³⁷ This realism is part of a tradition that dates back to Gil Scott Heron’s and the Last Poets first album “Small Talk at 125th and Lenox” from 1970.

Life on the margins of society needed to be described in all its complexities, and gangsta rappers would now carry the mantle of recounting the social realities of the “hood” as street reporters. The majority of America began to take notice.

One notable song from the debut album, “Gangsta Gansta” encapsulated the hard-hitting nature of N.W.A.’s lyrics. The song conveyed the dangers of life on the streets of Compton, California, but also spoke to the appealing side of the gangsta lifestyle, which included the pursuit of women. Ice Cube rapped, “Since I was a youth, I smoked weed out / Now Im the mutha fucka that ya read about / Takin a life or two / Thats what the hell I do, you dont like how Im livin /Well fuck you!”³⁸ He continued, “So we started lookin for the bitches with the big butts / Like her, but she keep cryin ‘I got a boyfriend’/ Bitch stop lyin /Dumb-ass hooker / ain't nuttin but a dyke.”³⁹ With that line, Ice Cube revealed N.W.A.’s attitude toward women, which depended on proving their manhood unapologetically through the domination of women. The chorus followed, “Gangsta, Gangsta! That's what they're yellin/ ‘It's not about a salary, it's all about reality’ / Gangsta, Gangsta! / That's what they're yellin / ‘Hopin you sophisticated motherfuckers hear what I have to say!”⁴⁰

In the chorus the lyrics clarified the purpose of the group’s hard natured lyrics as merely rapping about the reality of inner city life, rather than being in it for the money. Ice Cube confirmed that although the group rapped about being in a gang, and talked about the gang member lifestyle, none of them actually belonged to a gang. ‘We know a lot of gang

³⁸ N.W.A., “Gangsta Gangsta,” *Straight Outta Compton* (Priority/Ruthless, 1988).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

members who have been our friends through the years, and just went to wrong way.”⁴¹ Ice Cube also wanted to make clear that although they may have acted as street reporters telling it how they saw it, and exposing the realities of the ghetto, which included male – female relations, he did not want to be seen as a hero. “Do I look like a mutha fuckin role model?”⁴²

Rap in this new form was about giving a voice to the black community, more specifically, young lower class black men, who were otherwise underrepresented in the mass media. For N.W.A., music represented the reality in which they lived. Their lyrics would express the social crisis engulfing black working and lower classes in America. Their songs detailed the unemployment, miseducation, discrimination, homicides, gang life, drugs, class oppression, and police brutality that dominated the lives of inner city black youths.⁴³ But it also revealed the pathology of its creators as well as their skill. It became the music of angry young black men obsessed with proving their manhood through sex and conflict with other men. The music’s sexism turned their general frustration on women within their own community. Unfortunately, gangsta rappers who wanted to be hard often used woman-hating as a way to be hard, which became commonplace in the new genre.

Jelani Cobb described the hypermasculine posturing in gangsta rap, and for young black males in general, as a “physic armor” that allowed one to face the world, while “denying your own frailty.”⁴⁴ Cobb’s description of this “armor” as a defense mechanism to face daily life so that others will not perceive you as weak, was evident in the case of

⁴¹ David Mills, “Guns and Poses,” 2.

⁴² N.W.A., “Gangsta Gangsta.”

⁴³ Clarence Lusane, “Rap, Race, and Politics” *That’s the Joint- Hip Hop Studies Reader* (New York, Routledge, 2004), 357.

⁴⁴ Jelani Cobb, interview by filmmaker. Byron Hurt, *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* DVD-ROM (Media Education Foundation, 2006).

N.W.A.'s gangsta rap. In songs like "Gangsta Gangsta" and "Fuck tha Police," these artists are taking a stand and asserting their perceived strength against society casting others as their effeminate prey or oppressive authorities. Others scholars have described this idea of overt toughness as a performance for defense purposes known as a "tough guise" or a "cool pose."⁴⁵ Tricia Rose describes it as "the hypervalorization of the hard, young black male who has no chinks in his armor, who is always ready for battle, grandly refusing any forms of emotional liability, is an asset in today's urban zones."⁴⁶ In some cases, these representations in media of the gangsta truly represent the reality on the streets. In others, representations in media distort and exaggerate the gangsta and urban identity. The difference lies in the reception and how performances of hyper masculinity are perceived by peers, or by a mass audience. This imagery and representation of "tough guise" in gangsta rap began to raise the attention of a national audience and corporate interests. Gangsta rap embraced capital, sexism, violence, and a nihilistic mentality formed on the streets. Gangsta rap, particularly in Los Angeles, proved to be more than just a passing fad, but had profitability. It proved to be profitable because of mainstream American audience's fascination with violence, and consumption of sensationalized depictions of ghetto life.

However, not everyone was enamored by this new musical genre pulling back the curtains on hard-core realities of the inner cities and ghetto fantasies. Across the United States many radio stations decided to ban the overly violent lyrics. Steve Wall, who ran Z90-

⁴⁵ Sut Jhally, *Tough Guise: Media, Violence, and the Crisis in Masculinity* DVD-ROM (Media Education Foundation, 1999); Janet Mancini Billson and Richard Majors, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Lexington, 1992), 28-35.

⁴⁶ Trisha Rose, "Rap Music and the Demonization of Young Black Males" in Thelma Golden, ed., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art* (New York: Whitney, 1994), 149-156.

FM in San Diego stated, “Lately, we’ve seen rap take a different direction; the gangsta stuff is being glorified and it’s gotten out of control.” Wall continued, “I’m glad other stations around the country are pulling away from gangsta...there are many people in our industry who say you can’t be successful unless you play gangsta... we’re proving them wrong.” Stations in Los Angeles, New York, and Dallas joined in the ban of any records with the words bitch, ho, and nigga, as well as any other violent or profane lyrics. Another programming director, Tracy Johnson, also in San Diego at Q106-FM, applauded the backlash against gangsta rap. “It was all just so negative; we didn’t want to be a part of it and neither did our advertisers...It’s a great movement [against gangsta rap] something that should’ve been done a long time ago,” she commented.⁴⁷

Some questioned whether the lyrical messages were in fact “real.” David Mills of the *Washington Post* wrote, “The hard-street rappers try to defend their violent lyrics as a reflection of ‘reality.’ But for all the gunshots they mix into their music, rappers rarely try to dramatize that reality—a young man flat on the ground, a knot of led in his chest, pleading as death slowly takes him in. It’s easier for the them to imagine themselves pulling the trigger.”⁴⁸

The controversy did not just involve the violent messages either; many became angry at the degradation of women in N.W.A.’s music. In a song entitled “To Kill A Hooker,” on their third album *Efil4zaggin*, the group narrated a short scene where the members are

⁴⁷ John Freeman, “‘Gangsta Rap’ Comes Under Fire; Many Radio Stations Banning It, Bu Sales Still Soar,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 17, 1993.

⁴⁸ David Mills, *Washington Post*, September 2, 1990.

driving around looking for women.⁴⁹ However, they stumble across a prostitute, and what follows is an uncomfortable sequence of the group inviting and forcing the prostitute into the car after a heated verbal exchange. Then the short narrative concludes with one of the group's members killing the woman. This disturbing piece is probably considered one of the most extreme and shocking examples of mistreatment of women; the rappers still felt outsiders were taking it too seriously. MC Ren defended their treatment of women on the album by suggesting, "We don't dis women...my mother is a woman. We dis bitches. They know who they are."⁵⁰ In response to "To Kill A Hooker," MC Ren countered, "That's been going on from the beginning of time, girls getting killed...people take it too seriously. It's all in fun." He added, "The people hollering about this stuff is mainly the people not listening to the record...they can't stop the record sales."⁵¹

Yet, many women did not see the humor in all of it. Jamie Brown, an editor at and R&B/rap magazine, *Sister to Sister*, issued warnings about the gangsta rapper's lyrics. She claimed that the music industry encouraged this by "making them heroes to our children. The lyrics are about cursing, robbing and killing, and the kids think that's the way... I've heard my kids talking to the girls they see rappers do on TV."⁵² Despite these criticisms and strong opposition, N.W.A.'s popularity continued to grow despite the misogynistic lyrics that brought about nationwide radio bans and backlash. Their popularity among audiences revealed consumer's tolerance and demand for voyeuristic depictions of the ghetto, violence,

⁴⁹ N.W.A., "To Kill A Hooker," *Efil4zaggin* (Ruthless/Priority, 1991).

⁵⁰ James T. Jones IV, "N.W.A.'s Career Gets jolt from Lyric's Shock Value," 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

and the overall shock value of the lyrics.

Perhaps the most controversial song is still “Fuck tha Police.” “Fuck Tha Police” is a mock court scene, in which the police department is put on trial, with Ice Cube, MC Ren, and Eazy-E playing the role of the prosecution. “Judge Dre” presides and the trial is described as being “N.W.A versus the police department.” Rapped testimonies expressing anger at racism and police brutality in abrasive, violent language are delivered by Ice Cube, MC Ren, and Eazy-E; the following are examples of some of the most extreme lyrics in the song:

Ice Cube

Fuckin with me cuz I'm a teenager
With a little bit of gold and a pager
Searchin my car, lookin for the product
Thinkin every nigga is sellin narcotics

Eazy E

Without a gun and a badge, what do ya got?
A sucka in a uniform waitin to get shot,
By me, or another nigga.
and with a gat it don't matter if he's smarter or bigger

MC Ren

To the police I'm sayin fuck you punk
Readin my rights and shit, it's all junk
Pullin out a silly club, so you stand
With a fake assed badge and a gun in your hand
But take off the gun so you can see what's up

And we'll go at it punk, I'ma fuck you up
Takin out a police would make my day
But a nigga like Ren don't give a fuck to say

Fuck the police

At the conclusion of the song, “Judge Dre” delivered the verdict: “The jury has found you guilty of being a redneck, white bread, chickenshit motherfucker” with “you” referring to a police officer who represents the Los Angeles Police Department. The police officer's reacted, “But wait, that's a lie! That's a goddamn lie! I want justice! I want justice! Fuck you, you black motherfucker!” as he is apparently being dragged out of the courtroom.⁵³

Following the release of this controversial song, FBI assistant director for the Office of Public Affairs Milt Ahlerich issued a letter bluntly warning Priority Records. It read, “Advocating violence and assault is wrong, and we in the law enforcement community take exception to such action. Violent crime, a major problem in our country, reached an unprecedented high in 1988...And recordings such as the one from N.W.A. are both discouraging and degrading to these brave dedicated officers...Music plays a significant role in society and I wanted you to be aware of the FBI's position relative to this song and its message. I believe my views reflect the opinion of the entire law enforcement community.”⁵⁴ In response to this letter Priority Records issued the following statement, “No Comment.”⁵⁵

Barry Lynn, legislative counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union called the letter intimidation. He noted, “I must say that this one's even more intimidating because of

⁵³ N.W.A., “Fuck Tha Police,” *Straight Outta Compton*, (Priority Records, 1989).

⁵⁴ Dave Marsh and Phylliss Pollack, “Wanted For Attitude,” *Village Voice* 10 October 1989, 33; Richard Harrington, “The FBI Music Critic; Letter on Rap Record Seen as Intimidation,” *The Washington Post*, October 4, 1989.

⁵⁵ Richard Harrington, “The FBI Music Critic” 1.

the FBI's position line. He's clearly trying to characterize this as an official position of the FBI, and that's what takes this beyond the scope of just the opinion of an elected official. It's designed to get Priority to change its practices, policies, and distribution for this record, that's the kind of censorship by intimidation that the First Amendment doesn't permit."⁵⁶ Ahlerich responded, "The idea that this is being interpreted as a threat or some sort of chilling of the First Amendment is certainly not correct at all...This was strictly a means of communication about violence associate with or directed at police officers and violence in general, and our concern about that." He concluded with. "The FBI are not music critics, but we do feel that those responsible for the distribution of this music should be aware."⁵⁷

Many came to the defense of gangsta rap's criticism, including Harry Allen, a self proclaimed "hip-hop activist." He wrote a response in *Essence* magazine arguing, "To say that hip-hop is surrounded by violence...sounds like a captive African blaming work songs and field hollers for the perpetuation of slavery...the fact is that drugs and crime live in our communities. Their habitation there predates the music called hip-hop."⁵⁸ Barry Korbin of New York based Relativity Records, responded to the criticism, "Gangsa [rap] does depict violence; no doubt about it...But I don't think gangstas invented violence, and I don't think it has caused any violence...The attitude was there way before the music, so now people are blaming violence in America on rap music? I find that ridiculous."⁵⁹ Ice Cube also jumped to the defense of the song explaining how it functions as a revenge fantasy, rather than actual cop killing. "It's like getting steam off your chest, basically. We're just talking about how we

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ David Mills, "Guns and Poses," 4.

⁵⁹ John Freeman, "'Gangsta Rap' Comes Under Fire," 2.

feel sometimes when we get treated a certain way. Like we get slammed to the ground – this still happens – slammed on the ground by a police half your size, and the only thing he got is a gun and a badge. That’s the only thing keeping you from whipping this [man’s tail].” He continued, “There are some police that just don’t care...they figure they can treat you any kind of way.”⁶⁰

In light of the LAPD policies on gangs and inner city containment such as “Operation Hammer,” it appears as though N.W.A.’s songs functioned as a response to the years, possibly generations, of police brutality faced in the black community. It came to such a point that this group of young men had enough, but instead of resisting with actual physical violence, they expressed their displeasure musically, forcing outsiders to take notice. Thus they placed into the consciousness of America what young inner city youths had to face on a daily basis amid oppressive police practices in forgotten communities.⁶¹

The “bad nigga” masculinity as repackaged in the gangsta became a commodity in popular culture, something to be both feared and exploited.⁶² Hip-Hop became urban lifestyle marketable to middle America, and the gangsta rap, and hip-hop culture in general, became co-opted by record companies. Todd Boyd outlined the framework for the “bad nigga” represented by gangsta rappers. This nigga identity is countercultural and resists conforming to many of the dominant culture’s principles.⁶³ The modern day nigga, whether a successful hip-hop star or a professional athlete, defies aspects of mainstream white culture as well as

⁶⁰ David Mills, “Guns and Poses,” 3.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 328, 420; Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You*, 63-67.

⁶³ Timothy J. Brown, “Welcome to the Terrordome: Exploring the Contradictions of Hip-Hop Masculinity,” in *Progressive Black Masculinities* ed. Athena Mutua (New York: Routledge, 2006), 194.

restrictive elements of the black upper-class sensibilities.⁶⁴ The icons of hip-hop have earned enough capital to allow them to uncompromisingly construct a black self-identity that connects them to the “hood.” Even so, wealth also allows them to live in middle-class comfort while still presenting images that retain lower class signifiers and the street authenticity of the “hood.” Therefore, when they step into the character of a gang banger, or hustler, trying to remain attached to the hood, they use abrasive and violent lyrics for descriptive purposes and to profit financially, rather than advocacy.

Ultimately, the masculine message can be argued as being two fold. On the one hand, the lyrics and imagery portrayed acted as a critique of the forced environments inner city populations lived in. It also became a hyper valorization of violence, misogyny, and varying degrees of nihilism. However, the other half of the masculine message was dealt with the possibility of using rap, and the music industry to better one’s life through intelligent business decisions.

The genre was not without inherent contradictions. Gangsta rap initially intended to give a social critique regarding white power structures and oppressive conditions. When the rap and culture became a commodity, it became partially subservient to the very power structures it supposedly critiqued. Jeff Chang, a hip-hop journalist, refers to this as “gentrified gangsta – no peace treaties, rebuilding demands, or calls for reparations, just the party and the bullshit.”⁶⁵ On one side, gangster culture, co-opted by white corporate executives, became a caricature of black masculinity flaunting material excesses and partying

⁶⁴ Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You?*, 35-37.

⁶⁵ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 328, 420

in order to sell records, as well as a wide range of consumer goods. At the same time, rap provided a way out for young black entrepreneurs to make a living by performing and creating gangsta personas, something rappers like Eazy-E tapped into. He realized the potential for using gangster rap as a vehicle for upward mobility, as a business opportunity.

Critics argued, that the gangsta imagery merely revealed these rappers behaving like modern minstrels and caricaturing black masculinity by distorting real black life while white executives profited. Yet, these rap artists were not just simply caving into the pressure of economic rewards by allowing themselves to be appropriated by record companies. They also helped to create the genre's artistic rules, while financially exploiting the public's sensational interest in "ghetto life."⁶⁶ While on stage, rappers performed and reconstructed negative stereotypes, and focused on the visual; behind the scenes, they behaved like intelligent businessmen able to make a living from their music. At the same time, they offered audiences portraits of real social and economic suffering in the ghetto. This ushered in controversial time for hip-hop, because black culture was being "colonized" and appropriated again in the early 1990s by white corporate power structures looking to exploit young men of color. In a strange turn of events, the new and marketable gangsta lifestyle and ideals of young urban black males agreed with ideals conservative mainstream ideals of conspicuous consumption, materialism, excess, and capitalist pursuits.⁶⁷

Twenty-one years after the release of the seminal gangsta rap album *Straight Outta Compton* shocked the music industry, the album's influence is still noticeable. Gangsta rap

⁶⁶ Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press), 178-179.

⁶⁷ Jackson Katz, *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*.

would become a commercially dominant force in its wake. The album provoked everyone from law enforcement to programming directors, to women's rights groups with the profanity laced lyrics. Despite being criticized and censored, the album went double platinum without radio airplay or a significant nationwide tour, and can be considered one of the most important albums of all time. The album's magnitude lies in the way which it changed the trajectory of hip-hop music following its release. N.W.A., sometimes billed as the "World's Most Dangerous Group," for better or worse, changed the landscape of hip-hop forever with its glorifying of gang violence and its unapologetic view of living in poverty. N.W.A. overlapped and intertwined both fantasy and truth that struck a chord because it blurred the two. It operated as both a vent and a shocking news flash to the multitudes of people who were clueless to the everyday realities of inner city black and brown youth.

In an interview in August 2008, Ice Cube, now forty years old and a successful crossover mainstream actor and music industry veteran, offered some reflections on the early days of N.W.A. In regard to the group's influence he said, "It's incredible. I still think it's influencing people. What's funny is how many people just bit our style. That was a no-no back in the day. But it's what (the music industry) does. They give you a duplicate, but it's never good as the original." Of the genre itself, he continued, "It was what we saw all around us in Los Angeles. Gangsta to us didn't have anything to do with Al Capone and stuff like that. It's just about living your life the way you want to live it. And you're not going to let nothing stop you." He also reflected on "Fuck Tha Police" and added, "We were just tired of them [police]. They take advantage of the communities they patrol, especially poor ones. So it was like, 'enough is enough. We have to say something.' Before we did that song, the

police could do no wrong. But after that song, came out and the Rodney King situation reinforced what we were saying, their conduct started being scrutinized.”⁶⁸ Ice Cube offered this interesting insight into the impact of N.W.A.’s music, as well as the motivation the group had in being a voice for the marginalized in Los Angeles. Despite their controversies, and perpetuation of negative black male stereotypes, they managed to indeed portray the reality of life in the lower class minority neighborhoods. Whether mainstream America was ready for what they rapped is unclear, but they could not ignore it.

In the period following groups like N.W.A., the manipulations of capital, media, and record company distribution, the ruthless promotion of some acts to the disadvantage of often musically superior ones, the objectification of black female bodies, the marketing of racist and destructive images of black male violence threatened to completely overwhelm the public face of hip-hop. It became possible following the emergence of gangsta rap to “become rich and acclaimed with very little skill or participation within the community discourse of hip-hop, feeding from it, and contributing and being sustained by it.”⁶⁹ Gangsta rap and N.W.A.’s greatest, yet most unfortunate legacy may be that it folded neatly into a lot of people’s longstanding stereotypes and fetishes for dysfunctional African Americans. It may have helped open up the door for social dialogue and set the template for aspiring young rap artists. However, it also helped dwarf other avenues of black expression, while creating a global market for narrow and restricting notions of black manhood. Hip-hop in present day must fight against forces of categorization and manipulation within the recording industry

⁶⁸ Steve Jones, “Making History Straight Outta Compton; Ice Cube Looks Back 20 Years,” *USA TODAY*, August 25, 2008.

⁶⁹ Imani Perry, *Prophets of Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 8.

and consumer culture to maintain a dedication to the urban, poor, and working class communities of color, who make up the core of the hip-hop community. This continues to remain its greatest challenge.

Chapter Three: The Making of the Dirty South

A January 2004 article in *Ebony* magazine entitled “Southern Fried Hip-Hop: Down Home Lyrics and Strong Dance Grooves are Ingredients of a Tasty Menu,” highlighted the shift of Southern hip-hop moving from the margins to become the veritable new epicenter of rap production in the United States. The article stated, “Once the butt of jokes in the New York/Los Angeles dominated world of rap music, it’s now cool to hail from below the Mason Dixon line... The ‘dirty South’ has joined the rap party and rolling through the hood will never be the same.”¹ In recent years, a profusion of artists have marketed themselves as Southern or identified with the “Dirty South.” Such artists have gained increasing popularity in the hip-hop world, both nationally and globally. This seems odd because when rap emerged in the mid 1970s, the east coast was its undisputed center of production. From the late 1980s into the 1990s, the west coast, which became primarily known for gangsta rap, also became a force to be reckoned with. The idea of the South as a legitimate base and space for artists to produce rap, which has often been viewed as an inherently urban verbal art, had been unthinkable until recent years.

Southern rap has become an established subgenre in rap; while moving into its second decade of production, it has elevated several artists and producers to mainstream popularity.²

¹ “Southern Fried Hip-Hop: Down Home Lyrics and Strong Dance Grooves are Ingredients of a Tasty Menu,” *Ebony*, Jan. 2004, 74; Darren E. Grem, “The South Got Something to Say: Atlanta’s Dirty South and Southernization of Hip Hop America,” *Southern Cultures* (Winter 2006), 56-57.

² It is important to note that southern rap as a genre is diverse and evolving, made up of a large body of artists from various locations in the South, both urban and rural. Generally, southern rap songs reflect themes found in the general body of rap music such as materialism, sexual conquest, and gangster posturing.

Southern based rappers such as Nelly, Lil' Wayne, Ludacris, Juvenile, T.I., David Banner, along with groups like OutKast and Nappy Roots, have all achieved relatively high levels of mainstream success. These artists emphasized the specificity of life in the South, including the rural South, and construct the South as viable in the visual iconography and lyrical content of their rap albums.³

The Southern rap craze has created a context in which many entertainers and singers, even beyond rap, are highlighting Southern roots, and slang terms associated with the Southern scene. When Chicago based rapper Kanye West uses a Southern drawl to rap lines in songs, one can assess the extent of the Southern influence.⁴ These individuals are putting aside industry exclusion and negative regional stereotypes to revive a hip-hop scene that lost momentum following the deaths of Tupac and Notorious B.I.G. in the late 1990s. With diverse and creative new styles and imagery beyond the narrow gangsta paradigm, along with savvy business tactics, Southern artists have moved to the forefront of hip-hop music, both in the United States and abroad. These recent developments are not new, but part of a rich history of creativity and ingenuity that developed in the Southern United States.

By the summer of 1995, the Atlanta based group OutKast had watched their first album, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, achieve platinum sales of over one million. This earned them an award for "Best New Group" from *The Source* magazine and an invitation to attend the publication's second annual awards show in New York City.⁵ Another Atlanta based group, Goodie Mob, joined them to the awards show. As Big Gipp, a member of the

³ Riche Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to the Gangsta* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 199.

⁴ Kanye West, "All Falls Down," *College Dropout* (Universal, 2004).

⁵ Grem, "The South Got Something to Say," 56.

Goodie Mob recalled, their reception from the crowd was quite hostile. He recollected, “When Big Boi and Dre got out there at those *Source* awards, everybody was like, ‘boooo, boooo, boooo.’ I remember it was just OutKast and the four Goodie Mob members and I was like, man...Don’t nobody even give a fuck about us folk.” Leaving the awards show that night, OutKast and Goodie Mob swore to each other to “show all them motherfuckers” that “one day they’re gonna have to fuck with us.”⁶

Over the next decade, Southern artists followed through on OutKast’s prediction, moving to the head of America’s hip-hop industry. In 2004, OutKast won six Grammy’s, including Album of the Year for their multi-platinum fifth album *Speakerboxx/The Love Below*. On that night, no one in the Los Angeles audience doubted that, as OutKast had yelled back at the booing crowd nine years before, “the South got something to say!”⁷

What Southern rap artists shared to a national audience said a great deal about the production and marketing of Southern racial identity in both hip-hop and America. Similar to the rappers in New Orleans, the rise of Atlanta’s “Dirty South” rap industry displayed the readiness of some African Americans to embrace their Southernness, and to market and sell it as well.⁸ During the 1990s, Southern rappers and industry leaders promoted this new Southern style rap music as a blending of older rap styles, with Southern accents, themes, and cultural signifiers. Many artists felt excluded from competing in a rap music market dominated by the L.A. and New York bias because of the Southern origins. By the 1990s

⁶ James Smith, *The Dirty States of America: The Untold Story of Southern Hip-Hop* (Image Entertainment, 2004), DVD; Grem, “The South Got Something to Say,” 56.

⁷ Tamara Palmer, *Country Fried Soul: Adventures in Dirty South Hip-Hop* (Milwaukee: BackBeat Books, 2005), 16; Grem, “The South Got Something to Say,” 56.

⁸ Grem, “The South Got Something to Say,” 56.

though, the artists from the South earned increased attention as innovators of a new sound and style in hip hop culture. After the turn of the century, the “Dirty South” rappers began to promote their style as a loosely defined and inclusive genre of hip-hop, which by then became a very lucrative and dominant force in a once exclusive industry.

The professional discrimination of the “Dirty South” artists revealed how outsiders felt about disseminating southern black identity into the mass market. Despite the South being a cradle of African American music – jazz, gospel, blues – until the 1990s, rappers from the region had been viewed as a liability to the hip-hop world. The “Dirty South” was viewed as country and backward, a label in black culture roughly equivalent to white culture’s “redneck.”⁹ Critics would compare the Southern rap to East and West coast styles, and gave it minimum credibility. Although the vast majority of Southern artists grew up in urban areas, like Atlanta, to outsiders it was all “country” and backward, and therefore not considered “real” rap.¹⁰

Atlanta’s “Dirty South” music industry can be better understood by placing it in the larger context of rap music in America. During the 1970s and 1980s, the “everyday problems of life in urban black ghettos contributed much of the subject matter and complex politics of American rap.”¹¹ Although “critics, political conservatives, family groups, and older African Americans reacted strongly against rap’s portrayal of racial identity filled with violence, sexism, and greed, the cultural message registered with young blacks and whites across the

⁹ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A Southern History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 261-293; Larry Griffin and Don H. Doyle eds., *The South as an American Problem* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 211; Grem, “The South Got Something to Say,” 62.

¹⁰ Grem, “The South Got Something to Say,” 62.

¹¹ Ibid.

country.”¹² Most notably, the majority of the profitable music being created came from New York and Los Angeles.¹³ Despite critics and opposition, by the 1990s rap music’s unsettling presentation of black identity and masculinity had secured a place in the public imagination and within mainstream media markets.

In the South, in cities like Atlanta, New Orleans, Houston, and Miami, the rappers attempted to find a unique space of their own. Southern rappers often assumed East Coast and West Coast gangsta identities as their own, as in the case of Master P’s West Coast style gangsta style. They sold tens of thousands of their albums and achieved legendary status.¹⁴

In Atlanta, a unique style would slowly begin to emerge that would become a major contributor in the rap game. As in south central Los Angeles or in the Bronx, similar postindustrial urban themes seemed to relate well to the city of Atlanta. The rewards of the post civil rights era were just as short-lived in Atlanta as in New York or Los Angeles.¹⁵ In a study conducted in 1993, the median income for blacks in Atlanta averaged \$22, 372, while white incomes averaged \$61,691. Between 1970 and 1975, the city’s white populace also declined more quickly than that of Detroit.¹⁶ Middle and upper class black citizens moved to the suburbs, and left poorer blacks to fend for themselves in their fading neighborhoods. By

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 1-5; Murray Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 10-17.

¹⁴ Grem, “The South Got Something to Say,” 57.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the late 1990s, the inner city still suffered from high levels of crime, spatial segregation, and poverty that ranked among the highest in the United States.¹⁷

Within this context of a forgotten urban environment, Atlanta's rap scene would emerge onto a national stage. Early on, a few artists gained brief success outside the Southern region. Artists such as Arrested Development, and Kris Kross, attained moderate amounts of commercial success in the early 1990s, but not enough to make the South considered a rap mecca. Antonio "L.A." Reid and Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds founded the LaFace record label in 1989. Their most talented prospects for transforming Atlanta into a serious center for mainstream rap was a group of teenagers from East Point, Georgia.¹⁸ These rappers called their collaboration the "Dungeon Family," and it consisted of OutKast (Andre 3000 and Big Boi), and Goodie Mob (Cee-Lo, T-Mo, Big Gipp, Khujo) and they embodied many of the influences that defined East and West coast rap scenes, yet stood out as distinctive and original by emphasizing the nuances of Southern black life.¹⁹

By emphasizing the distinctive cultural markers and history relative to the South, Goodie Mob and OutKast delivered a message about urban life, but the difference between them and other East Coast/West Coast artists was how they delivered it in their own unique way. Andre "Dre" Benjamin of OutKast, aka Andre 3000, observed, "We got the feel of the blues, togetherness of funk music, the conviction of gospel, the energy of rock and the improvisation of jazz...I don't want to put us out away from everything, but our music sounds different." Andre continued, "You listen to East Coast music, it's got a kind of

¹⁷ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Grem, "The South Got Something to Say," 57.

¹⁸ Grem, "The South Got Something to Say," 58.

¹⁹ Ibid.

rhythm. You listen to West Coast, it's got its own kind of rhythm. You listen to Southern music, it's got kind of like a bouncy feel to it. It's soul. That's what it is. It's soulful music with more instrumentation." Andre concluded by discussing a main cultural signifier of the south, the accent. He says, "you really have to work your mouth. We never say the whole word, so it's hard to understand, sometimes when you're really feeling it, that's when you play it up. You just get a real draaaaaawwwwl." L.A. Reid of LaFace agreed, and claimed his artists had "tapped into the soul of soul music I remember... their music has spirit. Southern Spirit."²⁰ Clearly the South, and in particular Atlanta, witnessed an emergence of a unique style all its own, with a blend of urban and rural, new and old, tapping into the deep historical roots of African Americans living in the region.

In 1994 LaFace Records introduced a national audience to the unique southern style of OutKast with their first album, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*. To a certain extent, the album continued rap music's pattern of "glorifying violence, partying, aggressive male sexuality, and describing real 'playas' as hypermasculine men" accustomed to "breaking knees and elbows like I used to break my curfew" and "pimpin way mo' hoes than there's peoples out in China."²¹ Despite these "industry standard" themes OutKast adjusted their approach and placed it in the context of Southern living and the culture of Atlanta. In the song "Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik" aptly named after the album, Big Boi rapped, "Deep, the slang is in effect because its Georgia / Kickin they khakis and ... packin yo pieces.../Catfish and grits is how my flow flow.../ See Juice and gin used to be my friend,

²⁰ Grem, "The South Got Something to Say," 60.

²¹ OutKast, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* (LaFace, 1994); Grem, "The South Got Something to Say," 60.

from the begin / And now i'm just a player sippin sauce, every now and then.” Andre also lauded the superiority of Southern culture by arguing, “Like collard greens and whole eggs / I got soul / That’s something you ain’t got / That’s why yo style is rotten.”²² Big Boi referenced the drink made popular by Snoop Dogg on the west coast, gin and juice, while Andre injected how their Southern style had soul.²³

In addition to the stylistic posturing regarding regional differences was OutKast’s emphasis on why they considered themselves outcasts. For Andre and Big Boi, economic and social exclusion defined the Atlanta they portrayed on the album. As Andre rapped and invited listeners to “step into my Cadillac, let’s ride through the hood / Eh, why don’t you roll that window down so you can see it real good / And take a look at all the pimps and pushers and all the players / That’s livin’ on a whim, thin ice and a prayer.”²⁴

Additionally, both rapped about OutKast’s frustration and anger at whitewashed versions of Southern history and hatred for Atlanta’s white elite. They called these groups “pussy motherfuckas” who wanted to “put that flag up,” referencing the confederate flag, but should “work a little bit faster / Because of the shit that I done been through / I shall never call you master / You D-E-V-I-L.”²⁵ They highlighted local problems and bragged about how their experience as marginalized black Southerners actually reinforced their superior status over the status quo, opened up the possibilities for other artists to explore nuanced definitions of regional blackness.

²² OutKast, “Southernplayalisticadilacmuzik,” *Southernplayalisticadilacmuzik* (LaFace, 1994).

²³ Grem, “The South Got Something to Say,” 59-60.

²⁴ OutKast, “D.E.E.P,” *Southernplayalisticadilacmuzik* (LaFace Records, 1994).

²⁵ Ibid.

The term “Dirty South” which Goodie Mob coined with their album *Soul Food* (1995), also highlighted the term “dirty” as a way of describing Atlanta’s, or the larger South’s, troubling racial history, as well as a continuing record of black-on-black violence and a corrupt judicial system.²⁶ Both this album and OutKast’s first album focused on portrayals of Southern black life. In the song titled “Dirty South,” the Goodie Mob also wrestled with historical ramifications of slavery and power relations, especially in the South, and the effect that history had on identity. The song stated, “See life’s a bitch then you figure out / Why you really got dropped in the Dirty South / See in the third grade this is what you told / You was brought, you was sold.”²⁷ This verse addressed the psychological impact upon African American identity in the wake of a history of slavery and discrimination, specific to the nineteenth century South. The rappers from LaFace were at the forefront of considering the troubling history of slavery and how that impacted black identities in the present, and using their music as a potential to raise consciousness of these truths.

The divergent styles of OutKast can be akin to the aesthetic that Bebop created, that had become commodified in the mid twentieth century. Bebop constituted a new form of harder sounding and fast tempo jazz informed by the sensibilities of a marginalized, male dominated, urban constituency.²⁸ Bebop music and style attempted to reclaim the critical edge of black communal expression from mass consumer culture, since jazz had been co-

²⁶ Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 140-147.

²⁷ Goodie Mob, “Dirty South”, *Soul Food* (LaFace, 1995).

²⁸ Mark Anthony Neal, *What The Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 26.

opted and gone mainstream. Bebop emerged to articulate a distinctly mid-twentieth century urban male blackness.²⁹

Many Bebop artists worked in self-conscious ways to dispel stereotypical images of shuffling and minstrel-like, smiling entertainers, who were there to provide danceable beats for segregated audiences. Instead, Bebop performers wanted to usher in a new order. They were unwilling to accept the limits placed on black jazz musicians by a white dominated music business. They transformed their music into something sharp, and an often uncomfortable sound. Bebop artists had dual life; on the one hand they may have been entertaining you with their new style of music, but at the same time they were saying “fuck you” to high brow concert audiences. Bebop, as a new style, did not serve as dance music nor was it intended for mass consumption. For many, in particular urban black males, it functioned as a political tool because of its incomprehensibility and stylistic complexity. It gave urban male blacks a form of expression that stayed true to the streets and that stayed authentic to that specific segment of the black community.

Similar to Bebop before them, OutKast did not merely adhere and fall in line with what the music industry considered popular and marketable. They attempted to take back hip-hop music and create a style and music that fell outside narrow, yet profitable music industry molds such as the gangsta. By melding their different personalities and creating dueling characters as their performance, they symbolized a new order, much like Bebop had before.³⁰ Even the critics picked up on the dynamism of OutKast’s blending of the two

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 109.

competing characters in the group. *Rolling Stone* praised them for “representing Atlanta to the fullest” and proving that “you don’t have to sell out to sell records.”³¹ Reviewers from the *New York Times* also deemed OutKast a “new power within hip-hop” and praised the group’s skillful blending of the “cerebralness of New York Rappers and the George Clinton – drenched funk favored out West with a particularly Southern musicality, soulfulness, twang-drench rhymes and Baptist churchlike euphoric joy.”³²

When considering the similarities between OutKast and Bebop, many scholars have commented on Bebop’s importance. Cornel West writes it was “a creative musical response to the major shifts in sensibilities and moods in Afro-America after World War II... it expressed the heightened tensions, frustrated aspirations, and repressed emotions of an aggressive yet apprehensive Afro-America.”³³ Eric Lott has argued that, “bebop was intimately if indirectly related to the militancy of the moment. Militancy and music were undergirded by the same social facts; that the music attempted to resolve at the level of style what the militancy fought out in the streets.” Lott continued, “If bebop did not offer a call to arms...it at least acknowledged that the call had been made.”³⁴ This Bebop aesthetic can help frame the unique character of OutKast and what they attempted to achieve with their music and style.

³¹ S.H. Fernando, “Review: *Aquemini*,” *Rolling Stone*, October 1, 1998.

³² Neil Strauss, “The Hip Hop Nation: Whose Is It?” *New York Times*, August 22, 1999; Keith Bradsher, “Rosa Parks is Rejected,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1999.

³³ Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 108.

³⁴ Eric Lott, “Double V, Double-Time: Bebop’s Politics of Style,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 459.

Clearly, OutKast brought a new, almost revolutionary, dynamic to the hip-hop world. Although previously disrespected, Atlanta groups like OutKast benefited at this time from the fluctuations in the market following the deaths of Tupac Shakur in 1996 and the Notorious B.I.G. in 1997. This left fans and hip-hop followers looking for new icons. Unfortunately, the rap market became saturated with the artists from both New York and L.A. who had the tendency to copy the popular gangsta cast rather than create something new.³⁵ With this shift in the direction of hip-hop, the music from the “Dirty South” began to reach an increasingly widespread audience. A growing number of major labels began to take seriously the potential for Southern rap to compete in the mainstream pop music market.

Early on in their careers, along with fusing various styles of music to create a new sound, OutKast also began to critique the hyper materialism within hip-hop culture. They used the music as a critique of both themselves and of the culture as a whole. Up until this time in 1996, rarely did rap groups use the medium to act as an analysis of self, coupled with a critical look at materialism. For OutKast to do this in their music constituted a major step toward where other rap groups had not gone before.

In the song “Elevators” from their second album *ATLiens*, Andre described a scene at a local mall:

Heard a call from the other way
that I just came from, some nigga was sayin somethin
talkin bout "Hey man, you remember me from school?" smoke some

³⁵ Darren E. Grem, “The South Got Something to Say,” 63.

And he kept askin me, “what kind of car you drive, I know you paid
I know y'all got beaucoup of hoes from all them songs that y'all done made”

And I replied that I had been goin through tha same thing that he had
True I got more fans than the average man but not enough loot to last me
to the end of the week, I live by the beat like you live check to check³⁶

The man at the mall assumes that Andre has a lot of money and lives a life of luxury.

However, Andre responds to the man that although he may have a few fans, at the end of the day Andre is going through the “same thing he had.” Andre admitted in the context of this song to the man, that the two of them are similar in the sense that they both had to work for a check. The difference was that Andre’s occupation as a performer had him living “beat to beat” but it still meant he lived paycheck to paycheck.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Big Boi added, “The focus of lyrics in hip-hop lately has been braggadocio,” Big Boi said, “‘I got this,’ ‘I got that,’ ‘I’m the best’... That’s cool, whatever. Battle raps go back to the early predawn of hip-hop and are still going on, whatever. But there’s been an overabundance of ‘Look at my watch! Look at my car!’... ‘Look at my diamonds,’ Look at my teeth! Look it! Look it! Look at the goddamned TV! Look at the DVD!’ If you’re doing that, what’s your focus? What are you doing? Are you doing advertising for car upgrades? One big automobile commercial for the whole world?” Big Boi said. “People got to realize that eighty percent of the brothers out there ain’t got half

³⁶ OutKast, Elevators (Me & You) *ATLiens* (La Face, 1996).

what they got, and they puttin' it in they face, It's like dangling raw meat in front of dogs.”³⁷

OutKast, with their outlook and perspective on materialism focused on other aspects and themes in their music, and used the lyrics in profound way to critique the shortcomings of hip-hop culture. Big Boi acknowledged the shortcomings of the culture, but responded to criticisms by defending hip-hop as just like any other music or culture, with inherent flaws. Though there are many people who dismiss hip-hop, a large majority of the opponents do not actually listen to it, or pay attention to the message. These shallow perceptions inform the negative publicity surrounding the genre.

OutKast released *Stankonia* in the year 2000 ready to take hip-hop in new directions. However, not everyone was convinced that hip-hop from the South could be a dynamic and new. In addition, outsiders began to question the sexuality of Andre 3000 as his styles began to get more eclectic and unusual. Because of Andre's failure to dress like a “rapper” and his increasing flamboyancy, many in the hip-hop world thought he was gay.

Generally speaking, in the black community, especially within the black church, individuals are expected to live a life adhering to strong family values, morals, and a devotion to God. Sexuality, especially homosexuality, is a topic least discussed, especially concerning black men.³⁸ Hip-hop has adopted this mentality, yet what determines manhood continues to transform with the time and place in which we live. Hip-hop artists assumed straight roles in their music. Groups like Public Enemy proved popular when being

³⁷ Anthony Bozza, “OutKast Let Their Freak Funk Fly,” *Rolling Stone* 2 November, 2000.

³⁸ Aisha Ali, “Exploring Homophobia in the Hip-Hop World and Men Who Live Secretly As Gay Men.” *Charlotte Examiner*, <http://www.examiner.com/x-1207-DC-Youth-Issues-Examiner~y2009m6d2-Exploring-homophobia-in-the-hiphop-world-and-men-who-live-secretly-as-gay-men> (accessed October 1, 2009).

“political” and “conscious” was hard and very masculine. With rap now glorifying hyper-materialism and acquisition of women and consumer goods as determinants for black manhood, rap acts like 50 Cent become more relevant. Thus “thug appeal” is critical to many a male hip-hop artist’s image and personas, and there can be no space for a homosexual in hip-hop culture. Being a homosexual male can be considered the epitome of being considered “soft.”³⁹

In 2006, Byron Hurt made a hip-hop documentary film, *Hip-hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, which addressed the misogynistic, homophobic, and violent nature of hip-hop music. When Hurt asked rapper Busta Rhymes about homophobia in hip-hop, a sudden awkward silence filled the room, as Busta eventually answered, “I can’t partake in that conversation,” and awkwardly continued, “With all due respect, I ain’t trying to offend nobody....What I represent culturally doesn’t condone [homosexuality] whatsoever.” Hurt also asked Rhymes if the day would ever come that a gay rapper would be accepted in hip-hop; Rhymes finally became so agitated, he walked out of the room on camera.⁴⁰

Hurt concluded that homophobia is often based on a sense of insecurity about one’s own masculinity—an insecurity heightened by the limited ways in which men can express themselves through traditional notions of masculinity. As Jelani Cobb, a contributor to the documentary, explained, “It’s calling your manhood into question... it’s calling your sexuality into question ... it’s saying that if you are not this you must therefore be gay, you

³⁹ Ibid.; Patrick Taliaferro, “Is Hip-Hop Homophobic?” *Vibe*, http://www.vibe.com/news/online_exclusives/2005/07/homophobic_beef_keith_boykin/ (accessed October 1, 2009).

⁴⁰ Byron Hurt, *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* DVD-ROM (Media Education Foundation, 2006).

must be a gay, you must be a faggot.” Hurt continued exploring the topic of homophobia, and added that homoeroticism and hypermasculinity often are linked in hip-hop culture. For instance, images of thugged out, hypermasculine men of color—posing shirtless, greased up, muscular—decorate magazine and album covers. While these images might not have been created as explicitly homoerotic, hypermasculinity in hip-hop serves to bond men together, often at the expense of women, homosexuals, and men who do not meet strict gender-based roles and expectations.⁴¹

Perhaps OutKast proved most successful in their attempt to fuse two competing forms of hip-hop masculinity in their group. The two members embodied the two different, and sometimes dueling, forms of masculinity with their fusion of the pimp and the artist. Andre and Big Boi represented both sides of the equation as it relates to conscious hip-hop and the pimp aesthetic respectively. Big Boi is a Southern “playa” or pimp and projects an image of being cool while showcasing an array of pimped out furs, gator skinned shoes, and vintage sports gear. Andre, on the other hand, dressed in an eclectic style that can range from wearing football shoulder pads and hula skirts to elaborate headdresses, is very much an artist in the truest sense. Andre’s lyrics showcased a flair for abstract and very clever lyrics, yet remained highly conscious. The most alarming development from these two dueling masculinities proved to be effeminate style and odd behavior of Andre, and many in the hip-hop world, and audiences, believing and perceiving Andre as gay, but he actually is straight.

What proved unique about OutKast was not the fact that Andre 3000 had many

⁴¹ Ibid.

people in the hip-hop thinking he lived an alternative lifestyle, but the fact that Big Boi accepted him. Despite Andre's flamboyance, and pushing toward a feminine aesthetic with his color and unique fashion tastes, he still had sex appeal. His sex appeal and masculinity reminded many observers of the version of sexiness introduced by Prince in the 1980s. Andre modeled himself as Prince as a kid - so he could attract girlfriends better. "When I was maybe twelve a cousin of mine had style and all the girls in high school, and he adopted Prince for his soundtrack, so I really adopted that."⁴² It is important to bear in mind that being considered "gay" does not necessarily mean one is effeminate, and not masculine. In this case, many thought Andre was gay because his effeminate nature, but does not mean that being a gay man means being effeminate. Andre remained very masculine in appearance and the way he carried himself.

Part of the reason for the success of OutKast and albums like *Stankonia* (2000) proved the continued blending and blurring of the masculinities, but also the incorporation of many musical genres to create a unique-sounding whole. By Big Boi, who represented the pimp of the pair, accepting Andre's perceived abnormality, and effeminate style, the group displayed the elasticity of black male identity within hip-hop. Until OutKast, the idea of having an effeminate primary member of a rap group was unheard of. The group embodied two versions of masculinity comfortably, and Andre pushed the boundaries of what identities were available for men in hip-hop. Big Boi accepts Dre for who he is, minus any reactionary awkwardness, and thereby enhanced the communal aspect of the group. As articulated in the

⁴² "OutKast – Andre 3000 Dressed as Prince." Contactmusic.com, <http://www.contactmusic.com/new/xmlfeed.nsf/story/andre-300-dressed-as-prince> (accessed October 3, 2009).

song “Return of the Gangsta,” Big Boi rapped that the two artists were “kinda like Mel Gibson and Danny Glover,” to highlight the unique combination.⁴³ The irony about OutKast and Andre’s perceived homosexuality lies in the fact that as the group’s popularity soared: Andre pushed the boundaries of costumes, style, musical fusions, appearance, and sexuality.

In 2003, OutKast released an album *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*, continuing to play off of the contrasting masculinities of the group. The song “Hey Ya” song took influences from both funk and rock music. A music video featured André 3000 as eight different versions of himself, playing on comparisons to The Beatles by mimicking their 1964 performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Andre explained the video, “I had that song about a year ago and one day I was sitting in the car with Dre and I said, ‘Wouldn't it be great if we did a video with a spin on the Beatles' first appearance on 'Ed Sullivan?’” Video Director Bryan Barber added, “With the way the song is arranged, with all these different levels and characters, it is something we could pull off and it would be totally different from what anyone would expect OutKast to do.”⁴⁴ The song received praise from contemporary music critics, and attention for the colorful and gaudy characters Andre portrayed. He played the keyboardist Benjamin Andre, bassist Possum Jenkins, vocalist Ice Cold 3000, drummer Dookie Blasingame, three backing vocalists “The Love Haters,” and guitarist Johnny Vulture.

⁴³ OutKast, “Return of The Gangsta,” *Aquemini*, (LaFace, 1998).

⁴⁴ Gil Kaufman, “OutKast’s ‘Hey Ya’ Clip Ran Andre 3000 Into the Ground: VMA Lens Recap.” *MTV News*, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1479158/20030919/outkast.jhtml> (date accessed October 5, 2009).

Andre also reflected on the meaning of the “Love Below” portion of the album as he tried to expand and challenge the traditional masculine hip-hop identities. He explained, “In hip-hop, people don't talk about their vulnerable or sensitive side a lot because they're trying to keep it real or be tough—they think it makes them look weak. That's what the Love Below means, that bubbling-under feeling that people don't like to talk about, that dudes try to cover up with machismo.”⁴⁵ Despite Andre pushing the limits of what could be done with the limited masculine identities available to him in mainstream hip-hop, his popularity continued to grow. Now outsiders were accepting him for his creativity and versatility. Andre's ability to create and fuse musical genres, and do it with great skill, earned the respect of doubters. OutKast gained respect from audiences for their flow and the lyrical skill that they put on display. They back artistry and intelligence to the music they created, which had been steadily declining with the popularization of gangsta rap. As one reviewer put it, “Andre 3000 seems to have given up on the possibilities of hip-hop, at least for the time being; instead, he croons and makes beats and goofs off... In any case, the discs succeed because of the duo's shared sensibility, at once playful and thoughtful; they deflate their own pretensions by insisting that they are just having fun.”

Clearly the group pushed the boundaries of what could be done in hip-hop, both in terms of the music and the masculine identities presented visually by the two group members.⁴⁶ Their versatility and creativity continued to push hip-hop in new directions, especially in

⁴⁵Alexis Petridis, “The Friday Interview.” *Guardian*, Nov 7, 2003, 8.

⁴⁶Kelefa Sannah, “When Weird Works: OutKast and Erykah Badu.” *New York Times*, October 5,, 2003.

terms of breaking down the stigma of homophobia. Since Andre is a straight man, yet fashioned himself in strange ways, he expanded the limited and narrow identities available to hip-hop artists at that time.

OutKast, by virtue of their lyrical content and the concept of their group embodying masculine opposites, argued for a deeper understanding of the music. They have reconciled two competing factions in hip-hop and hoped their example could inform outsiders that hip-hop does not have to be an either or scenario.⁴⁷ OutKast embraced the idea of differences and used it as a strength, not a weakness, and skillfully redefined - and in some ways legitimized - notions of previously dismissed Southern identity. The two sides to OutKast represent both dominant gangsta stereotypes [Big Boi] and at the same time embodying an alternative cerebral and funky identity [Andre]. Even so, while creating symbols of new progressive black identities, OutKast still has some of the cultural “baggage” of hip-hop.⁴⁸ While you have Andre creating a funky, unrestricted, fluid form of black masculine identity, Big Boi continued to glamorize the gangsta lifestyle of objectifying women, and to a certain extent, violence. However, this blending and embracing of differences is what made OutKast such a groundbreaking group, and the expansion of masculine and musical boundaries by Andre far outweighed any glamorization of the gangsta lifestyle.

In the end however, OutKast has secured its place of importance in the development and diversification of hip-hop culture with their versatility and skill. Cornel West referred to Big Boi during a recent awards presentation as one of the “geniuses to come out of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁸ Timothy J. Brown, “Welcome to the Terrordome: Exploring the Contradictions of a Hip-Hop Masculinity,” in *Progressive Black Masculinities* ed. Athena D. Mutua. (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 200.

Georgia....who came out of the tradition of the blues which is an autobiographical chronicle of a catastrophe expressed lyrically, which means you gotta sing your way through the storm!” West added that when historians write the history of black music and hip-hop, “they’ll have to come back to that duo [OutKast], they have to say something about what came out of A-T-L.”⁴⁹ West concluded by suggesting that like many other traditions in black music, OutKast improvised and created a cross-cultural fertilization that cannot be ignored. The dynamism and multifaceted identity of OutKast, can be considered representative of the new directions that Southern artists took hip-hop in as they progressed and redefined musical boundaries in the South.

Southern rap artists from cities like New Orleans and Atlanta, in recent years have helped expand the centers of rap production, diversified its audiences, and encouraged a revision of the type of music produced, and even responded to natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Southern rap has in effect begun to alter conventional presumptions about what black popular culture is, where it can be produced and who can become involved in its production. The genre has also begun to unsettle definitions of black masculinity within rap as essentially urban. The genre has also tackled questions of what it means to be Southern, and for a brief historical moment, united for a common cause in the aftermath of a devastating natural, and human disaster.

The debate continues as to whether Southern themes have been reduced to a marketing gimmick, or whether it still encourages creativity. Whatever the answer may be,

⁴⁹ “Dr. Cornel West presents Big Boi with 2008 Renaissance Award,” <http://www.youtube.com> (accessed January 25, 2009).

it's clear the Southern Hip-Hop remains a force in the mainstream music market as well as a force to move and market consumer goods. Atlanta has influenced the Southernization of hip-hop in America, establishing itself as a commercial center for a lucrative music industry. What was once considered backward and "country" has now garnered the attention of the entire nation. The hip-hop community is greatly enriched by the inclusion of Southern artists, and their redefinition and diversifying of black masculine representations. Despite this growth in popularity, one must not forget the very real socio-economic problems that still plague the Southern region of America, both within the cities and outside the urban centers. As long as the South continues to spur creative new approaches to hip-hop, the music will continue to say a great deal about racial identity, regional identity and will continue to attempt to integrate a "problematic" region back into the consciousness of modern America.

CONCLUSION

The reaction of the hip-hop community in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, offered a reminder of the power and potential of hip-hop as a source of commentary, unity, and empowerment. In the two weeks following the storm, hip-hop artist Mos Def had already recorded and performed a critique of the entire situation in the song “Katrina Klap.” The song lamented the “water water everywhere and babies dead in the street,” and condemned President Bush’s “policy for handlin the niggaz and the trash.” The song ended with a call to action, as Mos Def urged individuals to not only “talk about it,” but “be about it.”¹ The most immediate effects of the hurricane were severe. More than eight hundred thousand Gulf Coast residents had been displaced, approximately fifteen hundred people died, and tens of thousands were left behind in the flooded city with no food, water, or means of escape.² Many hip-hop artists, from New Orleans and across the United States, appalled by the suffering, recorded tracks expressing outrage over those power structures viewed responsible. Lil Wayne, who is from New Orleans, also wrote a scathing critique of the Bush administration in his song “Georgia Bush.” He rapped, This song is dedicated to the one wit the suit / Thick white skin and his eyes bright blue / So called beef wit you know who / Fuck it he just let him kill all of our troops / Look at the bullshit we been through / Had the niggas

¹ Mos Def, “Dollar Day,” *True Magic* (Geffen Records, 2006).

² Zenia Kish, “My FEMA People: Hip-Hop as Disaster Recovery in the Katrina Diaspora,” *American Quarterly* vol. 61 (Sept. 2009), 671-672.

sitting on top they roofs / Hurricane Katrina, we shoulda called it Hurricane (Geeoorrggiaa) Bush.³

In this case, Lil Wayne, a local artist who has achieved worldwide fame, rapped consciously with lyrics aimed at denouncing the President's neglect, and gave a voice to the destruction and despair of New Orleans.

Lil Wayne, to Jay-Z, and Chuck D, along with several underground artists from New Orleans, created a wave of hip-hop in the wake of the storm and intended to lash back at the unnecessary suffering and institutional failure that transformed a manageable natural disaster into a catastrophe.⁴ The fight was not just waged through artistry, as hip-hop artists came together to raise money and attention for the victims of the hurricane. Local artists from New Orleans, such as David Banner and Master P organized and participated in fundraisers and telethons.⁵ Along with recording songs in response to the disaster, others such as Kanye West, felt moved by the victims of the failure of the hierarchies of power. While appearing on a NBC telethon in the first days of September 2005, Kanye went off script and said, "I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, 'they're looting.' You see a white family, it says, 'They're looking for food.'"⁶

From West's perspective, the residents of New Orleans were not the only victims, but rather the larger African American community, and specifically poor black populations. The

³ Lil Wayne, "Tie My Hands," *Tha Carter III* (Cash Money Records, 2008).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David Leonard, "George Bush Does Not Care about Black People: Hip-Hop and the Struggle for Katrina Justice," in *Through The Eye of Katrina: Social Justice in the United States* eds. Kristin A. Bates and Richelle S. Swan (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2007), 276.

⁶ Lisa De Moraes, "Kanye West's Torrent of Criticism, Live on NBC," *Washington Post*, 3 September 2005.

critiques following the storm were aimed at the Bush government for devaluing the lives of the poor African American victims. One of the most troubling aspects of the post Katrina media coverage came when news outlets began referring to the displaced victims as refugees. Refugee is a term often associated with displaced victims who are without a country, or homeland due to war or other circumstances. However, in this case, the “refugees” were all American citizens, albeit the poor and often times forgotten segment of the population. The very use of the term refugee pointed to the disenfranchisement and abandonment of the country’s most needy citizens. Across the country, and immediately following the storm, evacuees were depicted as “anonymous black masses, poor and dangerous, and their apparent vulnerability became framed as a long-term drain on American resources and government spending.”⁷

While much of the post Katrina hip-hop music was critical of the failure of politicians, local authorities, and the condemned the gaze of the media, artists also recognized their own complicity in the injustices they critiqued. Along with the critiques came a heightened self-awareness of their own position in the structures of power that contributed to the catastrophe. Artists like Jay-Z, Kanye, and Mos Def, grappled in their music and public statements with the fact that they profit off of the commercial music industry, yet have forgotten their own people. Kanye West admitted, “even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite, because I’ve tried to turn away from the TV because it’s too hard to watch. I’ve even been shopping before I giving a donation...and just

⁷ Zenia Kish, “My FEMA People,” 672.

to imagine if I was down there, and those are my people down there.”⁸ Jay-Z agreed with this position in his song “Minority Report.” “Sure I ponied up a mill, but I didn't give my time / So in reality I didn't give a dime, or a damn / I just put my monies in the hands of the same people that left my people stranded / Nothin' but a bandi / Left them folks abandoned / Damn, that money that we gave / Was just a band-aid.”⁹

These references from Kanye and Jay-Z, although neither from New Orleans, pointed to the self-consciousness that rappers felt about benefiting from the very structures of “capitalist accumulation, exploitation, and consumerism that helped perpetuate the polarization of privilege that divided those who could escape the storm from those who couldn’t.”¹⁰ The hip-hop that arose post Katrina became vital in disrupting such discourse by offering a voice against misrepresentation in which black and poor are seen, but rarely heard. The music shed light onto the fact that although the storm hit in 2005, pre-existing racial conditions and a neglectful government heightened and contributed to the tragic aftermath of the storm. Additionally, the post Katrina hip-hop subgenre voiced concern for those whose representation as refugees in their own country silenced them and devalued their lives. As Lil Wayne pointed out, “born right here in the USA / But due to tragedy, looked on by the whole world as a refugee.”¹¹

In addition to commercial mainstream hip-hop artists taking action in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, ordinary people used hip-hop music to address their own lives. The

⁸ Lisa De Moraes, “Kanye West’s Torrent of Criticism, Live on NBC.”

⁹ Jay-Z, “Minority Report,” *Kingdom Come* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2006).

¹⁰ Zenia Kish, “My FEMA People,” 685.

¹¹ Lil Wayne, “Tie My Hands,” *Tha Carter III* (Cash Money Records, 2008); Zenia Kish, “My FEMA People,” 689.

crossing of the storm and hip-hop created a space for people to think about their own lives and how music created an outlet for frustration of abandoned citizens. In a recent documentary *Trouble the Water*, which focused on Hurricane Katrina, the filmmakers used amateur footage of two Lower Ninth Ward residents to tell the story of Katrina from the perspective of those left behind. Aspiring rapper Kimberley Rivers Roberts, aka Black Kold Madina, is the main character behind the camera who along with her husband Scott did not have the transportation nor the money to evacuate the city. She filmed conversations with neighbors and family members with the camcorder she bought off the streets the day before. She also filmed the progression of the storm while she and her family hid in the attic for the next few days without any hope of a rescue. The film proceeds to follow her path as she eventually evacuated. It was her footage that the documentary filmmakers wove together to tell a story the story of how the indifference all levels of government affected every aspect of the inadequate response to the storm, which, in turn, translated into avoidable tragedy for so many of the city's poorest citizens.

The documentary also revealed how Kim, or Black Kold Madina, wrote music to express frustration with the entire situation her family faced because of the storm. At a point in the movie, she discovered that she managed to salvage a tape of a song she had recorded a few years earlier while staying at a relative's house. She and her husband were homeless, and she just started rapping, in a pouring out of emotion that proved to be the pinnacle of the documentary. Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* described the discovery as "The moment in the aftermath when she finds it and raps about her feelings will knock you off your feet... that moment gets audiences standing and cheering. Never mind Katrina, Kimberly Roberts is the

real force of nature.”¹² She later wrote a song “Look Up” to encourage and uplift residents of her neighborhood, and the city as a whole. The manner which rap gave Kimberly an outlet for putting her feelings and telling the “truth,” is where hip-hop’s real power lies. Power also lies in the fact that the music is connected into her concrete lived experience and it’s not about profit.

A decade ago, Mos Def described the dynamic of hip-hop functioning as a tool for the average person to use hip-hop to analyze yourself and your world. The culture is carried not by mainstream commercial artists, but people like Kimberly Roberts. He rapped,

“Yo Mos, what's gettin ready to happen with Hip-Hop?”
(Where do you think Hip-Hop is goin?)I tell em,
"You know what's gonna happen with Hip-Hop?
Whatever's happening with us"

If we smoked out, Hip-Hop is gonna be smoked out
If we doin alright, Hip-Hop is gonna be doin alright
People talk about Hip-Hop like it's some giant livin in the hillside
comin down to visit the townspeople

We (are) Hip-Hop
Me, you, everybody, we are Hip-Hop
So Hip-Hop is goin where we goin¹³

As Mos Def expressed, the culture will go where the people take it, not necessarily the

¹² Peter Travers, “Sundance: A Star is Born,” *Rolling Stone* January 25, 2008.
<http://www.rollingstone.com/blogs/traverstake/2008/01/sundance-a-star-is-born.php> (date accessed October 9, 2009).

¹³ Mos Def, “Fear Not of Man,” *Black on Both Sides* (Priority Records, 1999).

mainstream artists. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, hip-hop was applied and used as a constructive force by both mainstream rappers and individuals like Kim Rivers to accomplish a wide range of purposes. Mos Def would agree that the “philosophical democracy, at the participatory heart of hip-hop will continue in the underground, in live venues, people rhyming on the street, in parties, in clubs, and dances...what hip-hop needs is an appreciation of the local and the popular combined.”¹⁴ For hip-hop to continue and be taken in new directions, it must stay true to its organic roots in urban communities, and must reinvent itself based on where the people want to take it.

Considering the developments and response to Hurricane Katrina by local and mainstream artists, proves that hip-hop in a sense has come full circle. Twenty years ago, Public Enemy and politically conscious rappers were popular rapping about issues in the 1980s, but that gave way to increasingly nihilistic styles and performances. Now, with the storm being the critical moment where artists have realized their potential to be a political voice in the mishandling of a natural disaster. In the aftermath of Katrina, hip-hop acted as a political forum, utilizing rap as a tool with which to discuss the political mishandling of the disaster and the mistreatment of the black poor. It not only functioned as a political forum. As discussed earlier, many artists got involved in political organizing, and tried to ensure that the America would not easily forget the incident.

Hip-hop communities have also taken it upon themselves to try and reorganize toward causes revolving around social justice. Since the early origins of hip-hop, as an

¹⁴ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 203.

outgrowth of black youth's socioeconomic and cultural marginalization, the music has grown and evolved in many positive ways. Post Katrina hip-hop was just one example of the culture's positive aspects. Several other positive elements have arisen from hip-hop since its creation. It continues to serve as a vehicle for self-expression, and most importantly, self-reflection and a forum for individuals to articulate and critique their personal experiences. Hip-hop also offers up alternative solutions to crisis in local communities. The aid of community-based organizations created by hip-hop artists can allow youth creative ways to rechannel and refocus their energies in positive way amid difficult social conditions.

Hip-hop culture also aids in young black and brown youth creating and fashioning identities for themselves outside the realm of what they may see in mainstream media. In the 1940s, particularly in Harlem, a group of urban young black men wore zoot suits, in defiance of wartime fabric rationing mandates, and created their own style, language, and street culture. Much like the zoot suiters before, the relation between the streets and art, in the form of hip-hop, holds true and urban fashion continues to resist white hegemonic and black aristocratic culture. Hip-hop artists today shape the world's perception of black street culture. These artists play a critical in circulating the meanings and messages of hip-hop style within their music and personas they create. Black youth explore and define aspects of their masculine [or feminine] identity through their clothes. When black urban youth style their bodies, they do so within the limited social choices they face. Fashion is one of the truly democratic options of self-expressions left to urban black youth. Therefore, fashion becomes the default mechanism of self-expression and resistance to social control. The more daring their fashion and style, the less cooperative they are with mainstream and upper class ideals.

Their style and the clothes they wear become a tool for undermining conformity and expressing anti-establishment attitudes.¹⁵ These are just a few positive aspects that have come as a result of hip-hop's ability to reinvent itself and not die out to the dismay of many who view it as intolerable.

Through the research and analysis of this project, some aspects of the historical development have been covered, along with many of the issues and flaws of the culture. With the rise of rap nationalism, and then the takeover of the gangsta, to the rise of the south in the hip-hop world, one can get a sense of the trajectory of hip-hop's history in the last 20 years. Where hip-hop is headed is still undecided, but it will not be fading away anytime soon. There are still many questions and issues to be explored by scholars.

History can be very complex, and many times the answers to our historical questions cannot be pinned to an either/or proposition. Hip-Hop functions in much the same way as a hybrid culture with both positive and negative aspects, which can function as both product and protest. However, within that culture, black rap artists have independently fashioned new masculine identities for themselves. Additionally, many in the so-called "hip-hop generation," or those born from 1965 to 1984, have embraced hip-hop culture as a part of expressing their cultural identity and class-consciousness.¹⁶ A cultural movement with the kind of impact hip-hop has had globally deserves a closer look, and this project aimed to examine the complexities and historical significance of hip-hop culture, while focusing on mainstream rappers and black masculinity within hip-hop. Class, region, gender, and

¹⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* (New York, N.Y.: Civitas, 2005), 105-107.

¹⁶ Natalie Hopkinson and Natalie Y. Moore, *Deconstructing Tyrone: A New Look at Black Masculinity in the Hip-Hop Generation* (San Francisco: Cleiss Press, 2006), xii.

nationality differentiate black life, and likewise black culture is “positive, negative, uplifting, depressing, edifying, and stifling.”¹⁷ It is only natural that all these features should be represented in black art, and the diversity of black cultural expressions, and hopefully the study of hip-hop will continue to give it credibility among other musical traditions.

¹⁷ Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press), 179.

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