RICE UNIVERSITY

From the Ride’n’Tie to Ryde-or-Die:
A Pedagogy of Survival in Black Youth Popular Cultural Forms

by

Michon Anita Benson

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Krista Comer, Associate Professor, Director
English

Caroline Levander, Professor,
English

Alexander Byrd, Assistant Professor,
History

HOUSTON, TEXAS
SEPTEMBER 2007
INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI

UMI Microform 3309831
Copyright 2008 by ProQuest LLC.
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest LLC
789 E. Eisenhower Parkway
PO Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346
ABSTRACT

From the Ride’n’Tie to Ryde-or-Die:
A Pedagogy of Survival in Hip-Hop Culture

by

Michon Benson

This dissertation investigates key similarities between 19th-century slave accounts and what I call “hip-hop captivity narratives.” As a corrective to the negative attention accorded hip-hop, in general, my project identifies particular aspects of slave authors’ literary strategies that urban hip-hop artists reinvent in their own music and filmmaking works. My primary goal is to position hip-hop texts as the most recent arrivals in a long-standing African American tradition of instructional, survivalist literature. Such a goal closes two gulfs: one, between “the literary academy” and “the street,” and two, between hip-hop generationers’ and their Black Civil Rights forbearers’ perceptions of social and/or communal progress.

The Introduction situates my work within African American Studies and argues a New Historicist approach for the study of hip-hop culture. Chapter One, “The Education of Hip-Hop,” argues that more than a form of entertainment, hip-hop is an educational project. I delineate elements that contemporary rap music and film borrow from the slave narrative tradition. Chapter Two, “Sounds from the Underground: The Pedagogy of Survival in Rap Texts,” argues that the music of underground and mainstream rappers
publicly and privately demonstrates Black youth’s cultural ties to one another and to their history, reinforcing the bonds of shared political objectives, such as unity and liberation. Examining Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) through the lens of DuBoisian double consciousness, Chapter Three, “Be a Man!, Get a Job! Stay Black: Dangerous Ghetto Manifestoes in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing,*” provides a novel reading of some challenges young men experience as they attempt to simultaneously actualize manhood, Blackness, and socio-economic mobility in a post-modern, post-Civil Rights era still fraught with vestiges of the period of slavery. Finally, Chapter Four, “We Ride Together; We Die Together: Thug Misses, Gangsta Bytches, and ‘Ryde-or-Die Chicks’,” discusses the lyrics and images of female rappers and reads Black female characters in the hip-hop filmic text, *Set it Off* (1996). Such an exercise highlights key ways young urban women publicly support the actuation of Black manhood within the boundaries of male-dominated popular cultural forms.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my dissertation director, Dr. Krista Comer, for her persistence, meticulousness, intelligence, and patience. I am likewise grateful for the efforts of my esteemed dissertation committee. This project would not have been possible were it not for the strength, commitment, and unconditional love of my family – immediate and extended. Most importantly, I give thanks for the spirit of my grandfather, August Swain, a true freedom fighter, to whom this work is dedicated.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................ ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................. iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS ..................................................................................... v

LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................. vi

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................. 1

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION .............................................................................. 18

CHAPTER ONE – THE EDUCATION OF HIP-HOP ............................................ 22

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE .................................................................................. 52

CHAPTER TWO – SOUNDS FROM THE UNDERGROUND:
A PEDAGOGY OF SURVIVAL IN RAP TEXTS .............................................. 57

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO .................................................................................. 100

CHAPTER THREE – BE A MAN! GET A JOB! STAY BLACK!:
DANGEROUS Ghetto MANIFESTOES IN
SPIKE LEE’S DO THE RIGHT THING .............................................................. 104

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE .............................................................................. 134

CHAPTER FOUR – ‘WE RIDE TOGETHER AND WE DIE TOGETHER:
RIDE-N-TIE FEMINISM FOR RYDE-OR-DIE CHICKS ...........137

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR .................................................................................. 178

EPILOGUE ............................................................................................................ 183

NOTES TO EPILOGUE ......................................................................................... 186
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1.</td>
<td>Image of Ja-Rule</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.</td>
<td>Drawing of cross</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.</td>
<td>Drawing of deconstructed cross</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.</td>
<td>Image of Crucified TuPac Shakur</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.</td>
<td>Image of Nas’s album <em>It Was Written</em> (1996)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.</td>
<td>Image of Nas’s album <em>I Am</em> (1999)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.</td>
<td>Image of Nas’s album <em>Nastradamus</em> (1999)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.</td>
<td>Image of Nas’s <em>God’s Son</em> (2002)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8.</td>
<td>Image of Kanye West as Jesus</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.</td>
<td>Image of Mookie in a Jackie Robinson jersey in <em>Do the Right Thing</em></td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.</td>
<td>Image of Mookie and Da Mayor in Spike Lee’s <em>Do the Right Thing</em></td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.</td>
<td>Image of rapper Shawna</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.</td>
<td>Image of female rapper Amil and male members of Roca-fella crew</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.</td>
<td>Image of female rapper Eve with male members of Ruff Ryder</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.</td>
<td>Image of MC Lyte on her album <em>Lyte as a Rock</em> (1988)</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.</td>
<td>Image of MC Lyte on her album <em>Eyes on This</em> (1989)</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.</td>
<td>Image of MC Lyte on her album <em>Act Like You Know</em> (1991)</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7.</td>
<td>Image of Da Brat on her album <em>Funkdafied</em> (1994)</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8.</td>
<td>Image of Da Brat on her album <em>Anuthatantrum</em> (1996)</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10.</td>
<td>Image of Eve on her album <em>Scorpion</em> (1994)</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.11. Image of Eve on her album Ruff Ryders’ 1st Lady (1999) .................... 166
4.13. Image of rapper Foxy Brown ............................................................. 167
4.15. Image of Christie Love .......................................................................... 167
4.16. Image of Pam Grier as Foxy Brown ...................................................... 167
4.17. Image of rapper Trina ........................................................................... 167
4.18. Image of rapper Lil’ Kim ...................................................................... 167
INTRODUCTION

I literally can't think of what could be worse than the way [rap] music, including all of its thuggish manifestations, is thought of warmly as expressing some sort of truth. It's awful. Just awful.

John McWhorter

I've heard enough of [our] youth to know that we ought to be holding them up and sharing with them what we know instead of standing on top of them telling them what they're not doing right. They're doing a lot right and some things wrong. We continue to fail these brilliant, very talented, very creative and courageous young people because they're not saying what our message was.

Afeni Shakur

What's love got to do with it?

Tina Turner

Rap music emerged in various impoverished U.S. urban contexts during the late-1970s. Rooted in both the complex ancestry of the African Diaspora and the performance styles of 20th-century Black music forms, rap was birthed on New York City street corners and in dilapidated tenements by children whose parents were Civil Rights and Black Power movement participants. It was bred in inner-city clubs, at block parties, and on urban radio stations in the late-70s and early-80s. What is popularly understood now as "hip-hop culture" started as rap, and it created unconventional verbal and visual communications systems, represented the talents of ethnically diverse youth, and reflected their socio-political and economic dissatisfaction. It is important at the outset to distinguish rap, or "Rhythm and Poetry," from hip-hop. At their cores, these cultural forms share similar political objectives, but they have taken different if parallel paths of evolution. Rap is a direct, albeit imprecise extension of Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement sentiments. What many cultural outsiders take for granted as
“hip-hop” is actually what I would call a distorted rap – a fusion of hip-hop sentiments with late-80s gangsta rap music.

Mirroring the rampant violence with which the 1980s War on Drugs terrorized America’s urban areas, West coast gangsta rap music, in particular, catered to the sensibilities of a growing number of youth who experienced urban blight first hand. Gradually, as more artists signed with larger labels, the emphasis of rap music shifted from presenting positive alternatives to gang violence and remedies for getting out of the “hood,” to presenting the drug dealers and neighborhood stick-up kids as outlaw heroes to be emulated. Because contemporary rap music, as opposed to early rap, is actually a by-product of the mainstream music industry, the genre as well as some aspects of larger hip-hop culture have strayed away from the music’s resistant political origins. Over time, however, hip-hop has come to mean a lifestyle and cultural and political agenda of Black youth, while rap is more narrowly characterized as rhythmic chanting and a beat track.⁵

In much the same way that music historically served as a common language between disparate African peoples separated from their homelands, language groups, and native cultures by the American slave trade, the diverse forms of late-20th and early-21st century rap coalesced a diverse generation of young Black Americans around “ghettocentric” and Afro-centric themes.⁶ Hip-hop has, thus, become a source of alternative identity formation and social status for youth in a community, as Tricia Rose has argued, “whose older support institutions had been all but demolished along with sectors of its built environment.”⁷ In this context, the four foundational elements of the culture -- with traceable roots to African, Caribbean, Latino, and Brazilian traditions --
combined fragmented cultural traditions to produce a narrative that exposed the hardships of the immediate socioeconomic and physical conditions in the South Bronx.⁸

In my view, since the late-80s, Black youth narratives have critiqued and shaped their racial and gendered space within American society, reenacting what earlier New Black aestheticians, Larry Neal, Mulana Karenga, and Amiri Baraka identify as characteristics of the historic Black experience.⁹ The project of contemporary urban music is aligned with the construction of a New Black Aesthetic – reawakening the spirit of Negritude that fostered racial pride, a continuing interest in Africa, and a redefining of “the black experience” in America. Paradoxically, these “new” definitions are inextricably linked to the period of slavery and Jim Crow and, further, are rooted in the major liberationist tenets of early nineteenth-century abolitionist politics and performativity.¹⁰

In his “The Trope of the Talking Book” (1988), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts that it is the literature of the slave – particularly that work published in English between 1760 and 1865 – to which the literary critic “must turn to identify the beginning of the Afro-American literary tradition.”¹¹ Gates goes on to say that although the slaves’ texts “could not be taken as specimens of a Black literary culture,” their written work could be read both “as a testimony of the defilement of the slave’s representation” as well as a “reversal of the master’s attempt to transform a human being into a commodity.”¹²

Gates’s critical perspective on the slave text has shaped my understanding of the ways in which literary critics might approach black youth popular cultural forms and, thus, has framed my case for their belonging within the larger Black literary and cultural tradition. Part of my project examines the similarities in the narrative structures of
fugitive slaves’ accounts and contemporary rap lyrics. Specifically, my discussion hinges on signifying practices in hip-hop vernacular, on cross dressing, and most significantly, on a phenomenon called the ride-and-tie. Each of these cultural practices prevail within both slave narrative traditions and hip-hop narrative production. My goal is to position hip-hop texts as the most recent arrivals in a long-standing tradition of African America’s instructional, survivalist tools. Black youth reinvent particular aspects of slave authors’ literary strategies and then pull them into the present in their own music and filmmaking works. Reframing contemporary rap texts as “hip-hop captivity narratives,” my project stands as a corrective to the negative attention accorded hip-hop, in general. In so doing, I aim to close two gulfs: the first, between “the literary academy” and “the street;” the second between hip-hop generationers’ and their Black civil rights forbearers’ perceptions of social and/or communal progress.

As a critical approach, African American Studies obviously occupies the center of my project as it constructs an historical framework within which Black-authored oral and visual contemporary popular cultural forms associated with inner-city youth can be contextualized, analyzed, understood. Fixed in the social visions and struggles of the 60's and, in large part, initiated by the Student Movements of that era, the mission of African American studies has always had both a social and academic thrust. At its inception, the discipline of Black Studies was dedicated to four primary objectives. The first and most urgent was addressing what is now understood as the "black experience": a history of everything Black people have encountered, accomplished, and endured. This experience was based on the history and contributions of, first, Black Americans and,
then, all other Africans in the Diaspora. A second objective was to assemble and create a body of knowledge relevant to African Americans which contributed to intellectual liberation and, thus, fostered political emancipation as a social goal. As a logical extension of this ideal, the third objective of Black Studies was to create a body of Black intellectuals dedicated to community service and development, not careerism. Fourth, Black Studies advocates posed the objective of cultivation, maintenance, and continuous expansion of a mutually beneficial relationship between the campus and the community. Proponents believed that in thwarting this classic alienation between the intellectual and the community, knowledge could be shared and applied in the service of development and liberation for all Black Americans, including the youth.

Such a program for racial liberation had historical precedent. Antebellum Black writers and orators (Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnett, Sojourner Truth, and Frances Harper) as well as those of the earliest twentieth-century (W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Arthur Schomburg, and Langston Hughes) testified to the political function and communal obligation of the Black intellectual. Regardless of his or her own foci – abolitionism; feminism; delineating the crippling psychological effects of “passing;” identifying a progressive sociopolitical agenda; or dignifying Black cultural forms of expression – these venerable individuals did not consider themselves disconnected from the masses of Black people who were less formally educated than they. Each of them responded to the larger Black community’s call for leadership and direction. But while Black intellectuals who have followed the historical efforts of their forebears continue to exist today, an increasing number of self-appointed leaders and contemporary academics share with Black political pundits
and other public figures an important limit: they have not made it a priority to bequeath to subsequent generations of African-American youth a cogent concept of selfhood, community, and culture — crucial tools for successfully negotiating a ever-racialized American reality.

At least the above feeling of social abandonment is the general, if implicit, sentiment of much of hip-hop music. Some of the most popular hip-hop artists (KRS-One, Niggaz With Attitude [NWA], and Public Enemy) rail against the erasure of Black history from youth imaginations and seek to restore to contemporary memory the political agendas of Black revolutionaries and historical Black figures. Often, their songs insinuate older generations of Black Americans as responsible for youths’ lacking cultural/racial consciousness. As both a larger cultural system and a popular musical genre, hip-hop is predicated on adamant and explicit links between past and present, race and place, senses of self and other. In what has become a musical game of cultural one-upmanship in which Black participants, in particular, scramble for definable, identity-based certainty — performances of ethnicity, race, gender, class, sexuality, urbanity, and artistic expertise are all forwarded in efforts to obscure others’ claims on hip-hop “authenticity.” For many hip-hop public spokespeople (artists, filmmakers, DJs, intellectuals, activists), the pivotal point for hip-hop’s legitimacy is racial identity. Hip-hop is considered a rendition of performative blackness with roots in everyday urban struggles against marginalization. It is popularly perceived as black cultural practice par excellence. When hip-hop artists record albums, perform on stage, or battle over one another’s access to “the real” — status as real ballers (wealthy), real gangsters, real thugs -
- they are also understood to be carving out the parameters of a more general understanding of "authentic" African-American identity.

To be sure, there are those scholars, like Mark Anthony Neal, who read hip-hop less monolithically, who petition for redemptive renderings of the contemporary community, and who see its ability to write songs that inspire, entertain, instruct, and enrage.\textsuperscript{17} Tricia Rose, for example, considers rap ingeniously political.\textsuperscript{18} In fact, she perceives the music as evidence of hip-hop cultural participants' progressive agency. By the same token, Russell Potter and Michael Eric Dyson see hip-hop as resistant and transcendent.\textsuperscript{19} Potter recognizes slavery as a shaping influence, and Dyson calls for a reworking of social perceptions not only of the culture but also of its participants. However, more often, scholars condemn what they perceive as hip-hop's essentializing practices, and in the process of doing so, they themselves essentialize the genre, quickly dismissing as misguided all rappers and all participants in or advocates of hip-hop culture. Some of the more prominent detractors, such as Deborah Dickerson and Paul Gilroy, propose that if African Americans would cease to focus on blackness as a political strategy -- that is, if they would put an "end to Blackness," as Dickerson names her book, or if they would divorce themselves from race-thinking, as Gilroy suggests -- they would not be vulnerable to "racial myths" that hinder their social, political, and economic progress.\textsuperscript{20} But the fact, for hip-hop participants, is that race remains a central tenet of their lives and, therefore, they must construct and deconstruct the social, cultural, and political boundaries that exist around black bodies, boundaries that prop up the very category of blackness itself. As such, Black youths' own theoretical work, of which hip-hop is an example, not only shapes the parameters of contemporary Black aesthetics but
also elucidate the discommunications between a so-called “hip-hop generation” and older African Americans who are unable or unwilling to identify with the music or to appreciate its importance to contemporary black cultural life.\textsuperscript{21}

A recognition of the contributions of hip-hop to contemporary aesthetics is not at all, of course, the normative view of present-day African American studies. Rather than developing a community framework and implementing strategies for racial uplift that consistently embrace Black youth and their popular cultural forms, contemporary Black literary critics have been, since the 1980s, preoccupied with what feminist critic Hazel Carby calls “academic legitimation,” the integration of scholars into a Western, academic framework, largely bourgeois, individualistic, and not community oriented.\textsuperscript{22} While they have been successful at presenting African American history and African-American literary canon as richly fertile intellectual terrain, Black literary theorists’ and feminist critics’ attitudes about community and responsibility have, in some respects, failed Black youth in their collective quest to erect positive, useful constructions of womanhood and manhood and, thus, to develop a sense of self-worth.\textsuperscript{23} Ultimately, culpability does not fall solely on the exclusive shoulders of Black scholars but also, I argue, on those of the Black church, on Black professional and political organizations, as well as on the growing Black middle-class, in general. If older critics of hip-hop culture hold Black youth responsible for misrepresenting African American culture and for disrespecting African American historical legacies, perhaps they might also consider that Black youth do not refuse older generations’ call to acknowledge and perform “positive” representations of Blackness as much as they confuse the call. They perform blackness
differently than their predecessors in a way that exposes the failure and impossibility to realize liberated racial, gender, and cultural ideals.

Each of the aforementioned political, professional, and generational groups reflects a larger inability to develop what Cornel West identifies as a “love ethic.” In Race Matters (1999), West suggests that this love ethic “has nothing to do with sentimental feelings or tribal connections.” Rather, for him, “self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one’s community.” Additionally, in Prophetic Fragments (1988), West considers the ways that, since late 1960s, the ineffectiveness of Black scholars and the Black middle-class in reconstructing positive self images and effective methods of resistance has increased the political, economic, and educational divisions between Black middle and underclasses and older and younger generations. Sadly, African-American intellectuals not only cite contemporary African-American popular culture – hip hop and rap in the main – as the “real” site of destruction that effects the whole of the Black community. They actually condemn members of the hip-hop generation for expressing pessimism about America’s racial climate; the lack of parity with the racial, judicial, political, economic, and educational privileges that their White counterparts enjoy; and their feelings of alienation from and resentment toward any Black Americans who do not, in turn, “show them love.”

Feminist critic Joyce A. Joyce was perhaps one of the first African American literary/cultural critics in the post-Civil Rights era to address this perceived ideological shift in African American studies away from constructing a cohesive collective Black consciousness. In “The Black Canon” (1987), Joyce targets two of the most prolific,
well-respected upper middle-class African American male scholars of the 20th and 21st century, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker. Joyce critiques Gates's and Baker's use of the critical strategies of post-structuralism to interpret and teach African American literature. She argues that Gates's critical language coupled with his denial of a shared Black experience not only renders invisible black people who are not elite, but also essentially diminishes and/or negates the critic's own Blackness. Questioning Gates's and Baker's motives for theorizing Black literature, Joyce further suggests that both scholars are nouveau Uncle Toms.

Gates offers his own defense in "What's Love Got To Do With It" (1987), arguing that there is no relationship between social institutions and Black expressive forms, that Black critics have never been in a position to guide African-Americans to freedom and, further, that emancipating Blacks, ideologically or otherwise, is not his task as a critic. Joyce counters in her succeeding essay, "Who Da Cap Fit?" (1987), insisting that the Black experience is directly related to the notion of identity, and the Black writer/critic has an obligation to not only identify with his/her people through his/her work but also to demonstrate Blackness as a "matter of perspective, commitment, involvement and love bonding" with the larger Black community. Most influential is Joyce's final contention that, ultimately, the construction of "Black Art" is more than a post-structuralist academic or professional event because it "embodies the union of sign and signifier independent of phenomenal reality." Joyce suggests that for African-Americans the artistic process is a form of strategic essentialism in that the construction of Black Art "is an act of love...demonstrating a strong fondness...for freedom and affectionate concern for the oneness of people, especially Black people."
In several important respects, this dissertation works in the midst of these tensions within African American studies. It sees Black youth popular cultural art forms, primarily rap music and corresponding film texts, effectively answer the call of Joyce, hooks, West and other scholars to generate a race- and gender-transcending love ethic.\textsuperscript{33} Through various hip-hop popular cultural forms, I argue, Black youth demonstrate love for each other and for their collective African-American community. Amalgamating and appropriating various tropes, such as the trickster, the bad-ass nigger, Sambo, and the coon, with aspects of fugitive slaves’ liberationist strategies such as cross-dressing, signification, and the ride-and-tie, the music and imagery of Black youth culture advocates a healing, liberating tough love. It has the potential to explore and rework essentializing, corrupting stereotypes of Black Americans while challenging racism and other forms of oppression in their respective communities.

To identify how a Black youth cultural aesthetic has provided a unique window on to contemporary youth experience, Black Youth studies has been particularly helpful. According to psychologist Nancy L. Galambos and juvenile judge Bonnie J. Leadbeater, current adolescent research trends focus on the resilience of adolescents in high-risk circumstances, especially on impacts of social context and social change.\textsuperscript{34} Education theorist/historian Nancy Lesko emphasizes the extent to which youth of color, especially black teens, are, however, largely excluded from conventional social science and medical representations of adolescence. In “Past, Present, and Future Conceptions of Adolescence,” Lesko contends that while social sciences are shaping concepts associated with adolescence, such as hormonal disequilibrium and cognitive reorganization, they have little to offer in the way of “understanding the lives and perspectives of youth who
are poor, youth of color, or youth who are raising themselves.\textsuperscript{35} She observes that sociologists and psychologists are just beginning to understand within-group differences in adolescent development, including the life experiences of minority youth. There is a strong need for more research that challenges pathological characterizations of black culture and black youth and which focuses on positive psychosocial behaviors and outcomes for youth of color.\textsuperscript{36}

As a discipline, Black Youth studies is perhaps less well known than other youth studies areas. Black sociologists who study black youth are surprisingly rare, and most of them tend to study black youth according to categories like race and the sociology of education, incarceration, peer dynamics, and political participation.\textsuperscript{37} As is true of the construction of youth more generally, America's legal system, various social and educational institutions, and the media have come together to produce black youth identity.\textsuperscript{38} But as I suggested above, the unique challenges prevailing in African American culture reflect differences rather than uniformities in the developmental processes between contemporary U.S. youth populations. The task of a Black youth studies is to disrupt conventional racist discourses which typically infantilize black people, in general, consigning adults to perpetual adolescence and eliminating the sense of agency which youth, may indeed, possess.\textsuperscript{39}

To explain important ways that contemporary urban oral and visual popular forms reiterate and advance certain aspects of Black 19th century narrative traditions, and to argue the significance of hip-hop performance as a pedagogical and a political exercise, I often rely on New Historicism approaches to the study of culture. Like rap music itself, New Historicism emerged in the early-1980s out of a diverse set of practices that are not
in themselves new. Indeed, new historicism might be regarded as one of the principle critical practices which enabled the recovery of nineteenth-century slave narratives and their subsequent incorporation into American literary histories and traditions. In his explanation of the field, M. H. Abrams observes, new historicists “attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of [a text’s] production, its meaning, its effects, and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations.”

New Historicism reconstructs literary texts by considering documents and methods previously excluded from traditional literary and aesthetic study. Carolyn Porter argues, “the turn toward history’ has been in evidence for some time,” and she associates the origins of new historicism with such diverse figures as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson, Raymond Williams, Mikhail Bakhtin, Terry Eagleton, Hayden White, Myra Jehlen, Bruce Franklin, Annette Kolodny, Sacvan Bercovitch, and Eugene Genovese, all of whom began their practice before the advent of new historicism and all of whom have been important resources for those today calling themselves new historicists.

New Historicist assumptions and strategies have been very useful to me in my efforts to connect hip-hop to the larger African American literary and cultural tradition. To be sure, a number of historical events other than those associated with slavery influence and shape hip-hop sensibilities, and none necessarily figure more prominently than the others. However, it is important to observe the ways that, as principle producers of hip-hop culture, Black youth rework what has become an allegorized and anecdotal version of slavery into their own candid survivalist texts. In practice, New Historicism enables me to specify a historical context in which hip-hop culture may be read. By deliberately rereading those statements or events that register in the lyrics or film, I am
able to make arguments about the codes and forces that actually drive the sub-culture. Bracketing together literature, African American Studies, and the New Historicism approach allows me to illustrate some principle ways African American youth who actively participate in hip-hop cultural production address their anxieties and articulate their views on a number of issues, including history, codes of cultural performance, and gender politics.

Chapter One, “The Education of Hip-Hop,” argues that hip-hop is more than a form of entertainment; contemporary urban music is an educational project. I delineate several key elements that contemporary rap music and film borrow from the slave narrative tradition. In so doing, I demonstrate how rap and film are mimetic of the inherent problems that have beleaguered African-Americans since the period of chattel slavery as well as the resultant oral and written non-combative survivalist strategies that enslaved ancestors devised. Additionally, I show how contemporary African-American youth cultural forms are mythetic, or requiring a similar kind of communal participation that African-American cultural forms have necessitated since the period of chattel slavery. The elements of collective consciousness and communal participation are perhaps most essential to the entire project of both the slave narrative and of contemporary African-American youth popular culture.

Essentially, if hip-hop oral and filmic performativity of cultural liberation and survival are to be successful, the African-American community, an externalization of what Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary calls a “collective African-American psyche,” has to develop language systems, establish common iconographies, and form myth-making techniques that map the boundaries of their own racialized cognitive space. Chapter Two, “Sounds
from the Underground: The Pedagogy of Survival in Rap Texts," examines some of the less obvious ways that periods of African-American history, especially the period of slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights era, continue to inform and, to an extent, traumatize Black youths’ collective consciousness. By redefining dominant constructions of racial experience constructing unique language systems, African-American rappers invoke melancholic psychological archetypes. The music of underground and mainstream rappers publicly and privately demonstrates Black youth’s cultural ties to one another and their history, reinforcing the bonds of shared political objectives, such as unity and liberation.

As is the case with rap music, urban youth cinema expresses the gamut of Black life – and the cinema of Spike Lee specifically is the subject of Chapter Three, “Be a Man!, Get a Job! Stay Black: Dangerous Ghetto Manifestoes in Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing.” Just as powerfully as hip-hop music delineates race and sexuality, hip-hop filmic narratives enunciate the liberationist objectives of Black youth, particularly those of Black males. Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing (1989) was one of the first to address some of the lesser-considered impediments hindering Black males’ actualizing their manhood, and I consider the film’s representations of racial diversity in detail. Examining Lee’s film through the lens of DuBoisian double consciousness, Chapter Three provides a novel reading of problems young men experience as they attempt to simultaneously actualize manhood, Blackness, and socio-economic mobility in a post-modern, post-Civil Rights era that is still fraught with vestiges of the period of slavery.

Within their own critical texts and within the boundaries of male-dominated popular cultural forms, Black women – critics, authors, political activists -- have publicly
and privately supported the actuation of Black manhood. Such is the case with Black female rappers who, in addition to writing and rapping about Black men, actively participate with them in a simulated homosocial performance. Imitating the male dress, gait, posture, and vocabulary of their male counterparts, female rappers masterfully negotiate the urban terrain as “gangsta misses” – physically and lyrically fit street revolutionaries. Chapter Four, “We Ride Together; We Die Together: Thug Misses, Gangsta Bitches, and ‘Ryde-or-Die Chicks’,” discusses the lyrics and images of female rappers and reads Black female characters in the hip-hop filmic text, Set it Off (1996).44 The history of strained Black male/female relationships necessitates that these Black women not only demonstrate their ability to “ride” with their male cohorts, but they also reassure males that they are allies, not competitors, for social space and cultural recognition. Essentially, by performing typically “male” behaviors, young Black women become one of the “boyz” in the hood as a means of showing men love and fostering strong communal ties. This chapter is perhaps in direct opposition to Trudier Harris-Lopez’s position in Saints, Sinners and Saviors: Strong Black Women in African-American Literature (2002) that strong female characters debilitate Black men.45 Additionally, the ideas presented in this chapter are somewhat at odds with both bell hook’s Yearning Race, Gender and Cultural Politics (1992) as well as Michelle Wallace’s Invisibility Blues (1990) and “Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism” (1992).46 Each of these texts argues for the centrality of Black female voices and for Black women’s inclusion in a phallocentric society. Yet none of them takes into account the ways that young Black women work alongside young Black men to create positive self-images within hip-hop culture.
This present study breaks new ground. First, it attempts to fill certain ideological gaps that exist between generations of scholars. Older critics tend to view rap music as representative of all that has gone awry in African-American culture. However, young scholars, particularly the participants in hip-hop culture, mirror contemporary critical efforts by focusing on establishing patterns of reading, repetition and revision – interpreting the works of other Black authors, addressing and/or reproducing recognizable themes, and modifying the cultural and linguistic codes of a common history. Second, this project fills a methodological gap in current critical debate regarding the representation or reconstruction of the Black youth experience. Rather than contributing to the body of metacriticism about hip hop texts, this dissertation focuses on the urban narratives themselves, identifying the most prominent and recurring themes of the new Black aesthetic, its graphic accounts of systemic racism, affection for immediate and extended family, and adherence to the codes governing communal solidarity. While aligning rap and urban film with the earliest African-American narrative traditions, this examination outlines the methodology of resistance that critics fail to perceive in Black-authored music and film. Ultimately, by fundamentally valuing contemporary Black youth narratives, I offer readers both inside and outside of academia an opportunity to perceive and “show love” for a generation of African-American who still strive to resist hegemonic and cultural repression and get free.
Notes for Introduction


7 Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Black Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) 34.

8 In Black Noise, Tricia Rose provides a good explanation of the cultural, social, historical, economic, and physical conditions contributing to the formation of hip-hop culture. See also Bitkari Kitwana, The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture.


10 Nineteenth-century orations of David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth, for example, exemplify the relationship between the political and the performative with respect to African-American liberation and survival.


12 Gates 128.

13 The following books present a clear history of the Black Studies Movement: Harry Edwards,

15 Nathan Hare, “What Should Be the Role of Afro-American Education in the Undergraduate Curriculum?” Liberal Education, 55.1 March (1969): 33. In a call-to-action speech, Nathan Hare said, “We must bring the campus to the community and the community to the campus.” Doing so would thwart the classic alienation between the intellectual and the community.

16 Perhaps the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Black writers and orators would not have considered themselves “intellectuals” in the modern sense of the word. Nevertheless, the earliest eighteenth-century figures understood the responsibility they had to slaves, Black freemen, and Black women. In the late 18th to early 19th century, Alexander Crummel, W.E.B. DuBois, and Booker T. Washington, and Alain Locke assumed the mantle of Black leadership.


18 Rose, Black Noise.


23 Again, this is the idea implicit in influential film and song texts. For example, Spike Lee’s School Daze (1988) and Do the Right Thing (1989) present Black youth who, unassisted by older Blacks in academia or in the community, respectively, are constantly conflicted about, among other things, inter- and intra-racial affiliations, historical memory, gender relations, and intergenerational relationships. See School Daze, dir. Spike Lee, perf. Lawrence Fishburne, Giancarlo Esposito, and Spike Lee, Universal, 1988 and Do the Right Thing, dir. Spike Lee, perf. Samuel Jackson, Spike Lee, John Turturro, Universal, 1989.
24 See Cornell West, Race Matters (New York: Vintage Publishing, 1994) 40. West further castigates academics, in particular, for their “utter marginality behind the walls of academe” as well as for their “impotence in the wider world.”


26 To my knowledge, no other scholar makes a distinction between the “rap generation” and the hip-hop generation.

27 It is important to say that for members of both the rap and hip-hop generation, “showing love” is the act of demonstrating respect for another individual or group and can be exercised in many ways. For example, one can show love directly by acknowledging another person’s presence — by giving him/her a verbal or nonverbal greeting, a handshake (dap), or a shout out in his/her album credits. Additionally, one can show love indirectly by taking care of a deceased friend’s family members or by maintaining another person’s memory and/or reputation in his/her absence.


31 Joyce 373.

32 Joyce 375.

33 In addition to West and Joyce, see hooks, bell. Salvation: Black People and Love (New York: Harper Row, 2003), 11.


40 Carolyn Porter, “Are We Being Historical Yet?” South Atlantic Quarterly 87 (Fall 1988): 743-49.


CHAPTER ONE

The Education of Hip-Hop

The struggle over slavery’s memory has been almost as intense as the struggle over slavery itself.

Ira Berlin

From the Narrative and the many other accounts of runaways published in Douglass’s day, right down to Toni Morrison’s Beloved in ours, there has been no escape from the slave in American letters.

William S. McFeely

At the root of our confusion…is a mental function with or without our permission, on both a conscious and subconscious level. We don’t discuss this problem though. It is a problem rooted in a forbidden topic. The forbidden topic is – shit -- slavery and the behavioral, mental, spiritual, and money problems it caused.

Sister Souljah

Of all the examples offered by the archive of hip-hop culture that would substantiate my claim that youth narrate a form of “contemporary captivity,” let us begin with Dead Prez’s popular song, “Dem Crazy” (2000). Lyricists M-1 and stic.man chant, “…This is what we be waitin for?/ 21st century we still poor…What happened to the future they always predicted?…Everything [America] got, is what it took from me/ Conditions on my block, just like … slavery.” I have begun through this song (although songs of KRS-One, Nas, or Digable Planets could also have been named) to illustrate the ways many African American youth cope with the threats dominant culture daily imposes on their psychological and physical development. My argument is that in the forms of rap music and hip hop film, youth fantasize about and anticipate a time when they will be free of the “ghetto life” – its abject poverty and educational lack. By closely examining
hip-hop cultural forms, it is possible to not only understand the extent to which black youth articulate their psychological distress but also to discover the complex methodologies they employ to facilitate escape. So, while popular perceptions of hip-hop culture usually understand hip-hop performativity as strictly entertainment, I conceive the majority of hip-hop music and film texts as part of a political project, an educational project. In fact, hip-hop is oftentimes the central educational institution in young people's lives.

This chapter makes two major claims. First, in spite of efforts by African American organizations to support the collective progress of the larger African American community and despite Black scholars' attempts to educate society, in general, about the multivalency of the African American experience, twenty-first century hip-hop cinematic and sound texts have become one of the most popular means through which black youth learn about African American history, politics, culture formation, gender roles, and sexuality. Second, in the face of the significant economic and socio-political strides the Civil Rights generation has made, one of the central problems Black youth attempt to resolve in their own contemporary cultural forms is the troubling similarity they perceive between their own lived experience and that of antebellum slaves. It is in the exchange and performance of their oral and visuals texts that black youth communicate their desires to liberate themselves from what I will call here contemporary "captivey.”

In this chapter, I first provide a brief history of the relationship of African Americans to educational institutions and organizations since Reconstruction. While numerous initiatives have historically sought to redress the deprivations of slavery, the most significant progress in African American education came after the Civil Rights
Movement. Hand-in-hand with the Civil Rights Movement, there arose a literary phenomenon -- the neo-slave narrative -- which brought to contemporary readers many stories about slavery that had been all but forgotten. These mid-century accounts, which hearken back to 19th-century slave narratives, along with the educational reforms brought by the Civil Rights Movement in the form of Black Studies, informed what have become the central tenets of contemporary hip-hop historical memory. A discussion of these developments serves as the second part of this chapter. The final section lays out specific strategies used by hip-hop participants to represent the hold the memory of slavery continues to have on contemporary youth imagination.

A Brief History of African American Education

To be sure, in the period following Reconstruction, Black organizations, churches, publication presses, colleges, and universities have focused intently on educating the African American community, in general, and Black youth, in particular. There are countless organizations designed to address the intellectual and political pursuits of African Americans. Whether academic or political entities -- the Congressional Black Caucus, The Black Think Tank, for example -- all of them enthusiastically advance the importance of education and disseminate information regarding the status of the race.\(^6\) In addition to birthing a number of important African American organizations, Black Civil Rights legislators have supported laws that increase the presence of historically underrepresented populations in institutions of higher education. Such efforts have forced college and university programs to not only open
their doors to new people but to also change their curriculum to make class content more racially diverse.

Nevertheless, historically, organizational initiatives did not necessarily foster racial or cultural pride, nor did they afford Black youth cogent reasons to assess their ancestral past. In post-bellum America, for example, the Freedman Bureau’s erected institutions of higher learning for Southern Black youth. Yet, similar to the schools colonists established before the American Revolution, the central educational aim of these late nineteenth-century college institutions, as well as the thousands of other public schools the Bureau established between 1865 and 1870, was acculturation, that is, helping African Americans learn Christian ethics and comportment that would enable them to more seamlessly fit into larger society. A number of normal schools as well as institutions of higher learning intended neither to educate Blacks about their history nor to engender in them a sense of cultural pride – at least not in the 20th century sense of the word.7

Northern Blacks and white missionaries did not consider that former Southern slaves had a culture or a cultural paradigm worth preserving.8 Therefore, the project of these institutions resembled the larger, unofficial credo of the Reconstruction period, in general – progress without looking back. It is this core principle that was at the heart of even the most influential early 20th century scholars’ push for African American participation in higher education. At the turn of the 20th century, academics, such as W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington advocated African Americans’ exposure to higher education. DuBois, in particular, strove to supplement and, at times, to disprove Booker T. Washington’s prioritizing industrial success and interracial cooperation over formal academic
education. Eventually, DuBois’s sentiments did give rise to African American organizations devoted to the promotion of letters, science, and art among the race. Nevertheless, the writings of sociologist himself indicate that he was not wholly convinced that education would be a cure-all for the inequalities suffered by the larger racial community or for the individual Black American. While the push for educational equality and inclusion began during the period of Reconstruction, and although the efforts of DuBois and other turn-of-the-century scholars were considerable, it wasn’t until the Civil Rights era that America witnessed the most significant progress in educational reform.

Civil Rights events won Blacks educational equality and inclusion. Moreover, participants in the Black Power Movement pushed American society to rectify their historical exclusion from the American mainstream by advancing African-centered pedagogical approaches and by acknowledging the relevancy of African American history and culture. In *African-Centered Pedagogy: Developing Schools of Achievement for African American Children* (2002), Peter C. Murrell suggests that this pedagogical approach promotes African American student learning and development by acknowledging their cultural, historical, and sociological experiences and by integrating that information into an inclusive curriculum that embraces contemporary African American communal experiences. While such approaches do not necessarily position African Americans themselves in the mainstream, their culture and history become more incorporated into mainstream cultural sensibilities.

In response to the demands of Black college students’ for an Afro-centric curriculum as well as the sustained pressure from the larger Black community for equal
education and other human rights, the discipline of Black Studies formally emerged in the late 1960s. San Francisco State University faculty members Nathan Hare and Jimmy Garret were the first in the country to organize a Black studies program. Hare defined the purpose of the program in this way: "The main motivation of Black Studies is to entice black students (conditioned to exclusion) to greater involvement in the educational process." Hare added, "Black Studies is, above all, a pedagogical device," an instructional tool, an instrument with which scholars impart effective methods and efficient strategies for contending with institutional racism." Historical Al Alkalimat says that at its inception, Black Studies combined "general intellectual history, academic scholarship with the social sciences and the humanities, and a radical movement for fundamental educational reform." Exemplary of the push for national educational reform, this program in American academia is one of the most enduring campaigns for movement away from the economic, social, political, and educational disenfranchisement of the antebellum slave.

Prominent African American scholars -- Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Cornel West, Anthony Appiah, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Mycelia Morgan -- have worked in the tradition of Du Bois and from the foundation of Black Studies to expand the scope of the discipline to include African philosophy, theology, critical race studies, and Black popular culture. Their status within the Ivy League and the respect they have garnered from peers in both the public and private sectors has rejuvenated confidence in African American academics to advance social and political progress. If these scholars’ efforts extend the earliest hopes of the field of Black Studies, unlike their academic and political antecedents, the labors of Gates, and so many of the other education-affirming
institutions noted previously, are not trickling down to the masses of African American youth who could benefit from the information. Less formally-educated Blacks remain skeptical about the ability of such political figures and sequestered academics to identify with their own lived experiences.\textsuperscript{17}

So, in effect, there exists a confusing dual reality. On one hand, education has been a central part of the African American agenda for over 125 years. Indicative of that longstanding tradition, Black Studies programs have been important organizing goals of activists, and colleges and universities have found much support among African Americans for both the recruitment of more faculty and students of color and the higher visibility of race studies. The discipline of Black Studies witnessed much growth in the 1970s and early 1980s. On the other hand, assaults on affirmative action as well as attacks on the poor fostered by Reaganomics throughout the 1980s precipitated waning support for those programs.\textsuperscript{18} So, just when institutions of higher learning were reaching minimal minority quotas, larger society’s interest in effecting positive race relations diminished and the U.S. economy experienced a dramatic downturn. Consequently, higher education suffered cutbacks. Oftentimes considered expendable, Black Studies programs have endured a crisis for better than two decades.\textsuperscript{19}

Public universities’ declining investment in Black Studies coincides with the time that the study of Black history and literature in secondary and elementary education stalled and then came to a halt. Perhaps more interestingly, it was also at that time that rap music gained popularity. In the late-80s, national curriculum standards required that students pass basic skills tests and also enforced heavy penalties – reduced school funding and teacher termination – when students failed to meet minimum requirements.\textsuperscript{20}
For the past 25 years, these federal- and state-mandated exams have significantly altered the dynamics of the secondary classroom. Whereas teachers once controlled their course content, they have in more recent years been pressured to teach to the test, that is, to cater their lesson plans to the specific objectives these tests cover. There is decreasing room in the curriculum for knowledge that is not measured by these standardized tests. The changing perspectives about curriculum, or course content, at the secondary levels have caused national and state education agencies to attend more closely to instructional standards. In essence, whereas between the 1940s and 1970, curriculum was equality driven, late-20th- and early-21st-century curriculum became so-called quality driven. As teachers and other education officials attempt to set and monitor the standards with which curriculum goals are being met, part of their determination has been largely influenced, not by the number of students who go on to attend Ivy League universities, but rather by the number of students who can strengthen American economy by effectively entering the workforce. It is safe to say that in as much as information detailing the historical African American experience is not that which is integral to students’ learning the rudiments of mathematics and literacy skills, it is part of that information not deemed crucial to junior- and high-school curricula.21

When compared to major mid-20th century grassroots initiatives – Martin Luther King’s non-violent marches, boycotts, and sit-ins; Malcolm X’s black nationalist approaches; and the radical gestures of groups like SNCC, SCLC, or the Black Panthers - - these think tanks and affirmative action gains cannot substitute for powerful social movements. As relatively more elite, sometimes even elitist, social efforts, they have
generally, according to hip-hop culture, failed to convince young African Americans that they have the power to implement workable solutions and to effect social change.

As a result, Black youth continue to create and participate in their own culture that, according to Bakari Kitwana, intensifies the “war going on inside Black America.” Unacknowledged by cultural critics, activists, or policy makers, this intergenerational battle pits the civil rights/Black power generations against their own children and grandchildren. More often than not, older generations often identify hip-hop music as the impetus for withering values and social irresponsibility; consequently, they generally disapprove of the social gatherings, of the decline in church attendance, and of the “ghetto,” or base culture that hip-hop culture allegedly generates. Kitwana’s observations about this generational rift echo the overarching goals of my own project:

these divided generations must begin to understand the ways that new Black youth culture both empowers and undermines Black America....As long as the older generation fails to understand the new Black youth culture in all of its complexities, and as long as the younger generation fails to see its inherent contradictions, we cannot as a community address the crises...facing Black American youth....

The complexities and contradictions Kitwana observes are bound to Black youths’ ancestral past and, most significant to this study, to the slave narrative tradition. Identifying plausible correlations between slave narratives and more contemporary youth texts is a necessary step toward closing the generational gap and inspiring collective social change.

*Neo-Slave Narrative and Contemporary Memory*
Certainly, their lack of formal exposure to Black cultural history has not prevented images of slavery from filtering into youths’ contemporary rap texts. While black youth themselves may not be able to locate the historical source, I contend that it is the slave narrative tradition, including the neo-slave narrative tradition, which sprang from the Black Power Movement. In the late-1960s, African American writers began authoring modern neo-slave narratives—works substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effects of American slavery. In addition to introducing fictional slave characters as narrators, subjects, or ancestral specters, these texts represent slavery as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences. Again, while black youth were not exposed to the written texts, mid- to late-1970s mainstream culture popularized made-for-television adaptations that chronicled the long-lasting impact of slavery. Arguably, the televised serial of Alex Haley’s novel *Roots* (1977) was one of the (if not the) most influential of neo-slave texts on hip-hop consciousness. Viewed by over 130 million people, the movie provided many early hip-hop generationers their first exposure to the African slave trade as well as to period of slavery in America. In as much as these visual texts significantly shape the hip-hop generation’s formative impressions of black history, the institution of slavery has become a significant fixture in their collective articulations of what it means to be African American.

As William McFeely observes about the prevalence of slavery as a theme in American literature, representations of Black characters’ enslavement reveal a fascination and a preternatural bond Black scholars have always shared with the historical black slave persona. Substantial proof of African American authors’ prevailing attachment to
the slave is evinced in the number of neo-slave narrative texts that have refashioned the period of slavery, the slave persona, and the slave narrative tradition for mid- to late-twentieth century audiences. Earnest Gaines, Shirley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor are among the late-twentieth-century writers who have created neo-slave narratives. Each of their texts represent what scholars identify as four types of historical narratives -- neo-antebellum narrative, the first-person narrative, third-person neo-slave narrative, and the pamphlet. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) is an example of a neo-antebellum narrative in that the story is a retrospective narrated by a manumitted slave.26 Similar to Gaines's text, Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) is also a historical neo-slave narrative.27 However, unlike Miss Pittman, Dessa consciously controls her story by relaying only those events she wants her white male amanuensis to report. The weight the former slave places on her status as powerful and literate is indicative of the sentiment post-civil rights African American authors adopted about the body of twentieth-century literature they created for a primarily Black readership. Like Gaines’s and Williams’s efforts, Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) is a historical slave narrative. Although fictional, it is predicated on the historical incident of Margaret Garner’s infanticide in Cincinnati in 1856.28 Finally, Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988) is an example of the pamphlet narrative. The text presents a contemporary subject who relays the influence of slavery on modern social conditions.29

By confirming the significance of historical memory, neo-slave narratives present heterogeneous voices which broaden the parameters of contemporary African American existence and connect generations of post-civil rights Black readers to those who not only endured the period of slavery, but who, employing various ingenious methods (including
literacy), liberated themselves from the continuing racism it occasioned. Neo-slave narrative authors' accounts do not cast twentieth-century Blacks as victims of the past. Rather, these authors' works reaffirm for Black readers, in particular, the irrevocable connection between their antebellum cultural history and their contemporary, collective social experience.

Twentieth-century neo-slave narratives offer the hip-hop generation a definitive point of departure from which to begin exploring the Black experience in so much as they reproduce for the twentieth century the literary techniques of nineteenth-century narratives. It is from these earlier texts that both neo-slave accounts and hip-hop forms ultimately draw a clear, rich legacy of cultural solidarity, survival, and liberation. The accounts of resistance to the cruelties Black slaves endured testify to the effectiveness of communal, clandestine non-combative liberationist approaches as opposed to acts of collective violence, individual attempts to run away, or even silent acquiescence. Much can be said about the politics governing America's negative portrayal of slave insurrections and the implications those doomed depictions have for contemporary African American youth. However, what is most critical to this examination are the ideas that while black youth recognize some general points of comparison between the period of slavery and their own contemporary disenfranchisement (see Figure 1.1), much of their engagement with neo-slave narratives or of their literary antecedents, nineteenth-century slave narratives, may have resulted from their exposure to visual accounts of the stories as instructional tools. While the hip-hop generation may be largely unaware of how much their new accounts mirror elements of their literary ancestors' liberationist discourse and practices, the pedagogy of survival and freedom in contemporary popular
cultural forms are products of the twentieth-century neo-slave and nineteenth-century slave narrative legacies.

*Lessons for Hip-Hop from Slave Narrative*

Hip-hop popular cultural forms suggest that Black youth consider themselves embattled politically, economically, and socially. For example, in “Timezone” (2000), underground female rap artist Apani B-Fly Emcee acknowledges the similarities black youth share with their slave ancestors.

…inspired by spirits of great grand descendants./ get rich off the dark-skin and signing over/freedom on documents marked with X’s./ illiterate, stifled up languages, slave masters/ metaphorically ripped out they larynxes, yet they beat drums and sang songs/ Now I keep it movin’ along in the same form and context/

My main motivation is to be cipher nation…/You still a mothafuckin’ slave!…/Doesn’t matter if you near-white or a little light or / blacker than a thousand midnights; we right in the new age with new slaves…

Here, the artist compares contemporary youths’ social condition with that of slaves. Additionally, she suggests that the “form” of her music resembles early slaves’ songs and that the “context” in which she orates her narrative is not much different from that of slaves.

Furthermore, her intention is, as was her ancestors’, to utilize a system of codes, of cyphers, to coalesce a nation of Black listeners: those whose complexions range from “near-white” to midnight black. We might consider “Timezone,” then, to be a statement about forms of contemporary individual and collective captivity.

Like underground rapper Apani B-Fly Emcee, mainstream male rapper Eightball insists that Black youth share a similar racialized experience with their ancestors, yet he insists that in addition to uniting members of his audience, his music can liberate them.

I’m like a legend or some kind of prophecy/ Sent here to set you free/ Dress, player, follow me/ into another world/ Deep inside
Fig. 1.1. Image of a bound Ja Rule in *The Source Magazine*, (March 2001) 210.
At the height of his music career, rapper Ja Rule perceived himself as a slave, a commodity of the mainstream music industry.
In “Hands in the Air” (2003), Eightball identifies his audience’s racial makeup and social condition. He speaks to impoverished youth, to those who wear “cornrows” and who live “in the gutter.” Again, he suggests that his music, his “poetry,” not only enables his listeners to identify themselves and each other (“this here’s about who we be”), but it also has the power to liberate those listeners who share his worries – making money, faking happiness, social climbing. Eightball himself identifies with youth who are preoccupied with the incarcerating strategies of capitalist America and suggests that to liberate themselves, his listeners only need to “follow [him] to another world deep inside [their] own soul[s]” wherein class status is immaterial. Like his audience, Eightball is familiar with the ghetto, the “gutter,” and he can attest to the emancipating power of hip-hop music. Both these examples demonstrate how hip-hop texts might be used by youth as useful educational primers.

Clearly, both underground and mainstream rap music, at times, advances an agenda of cultural identification and liberation. This fact has not completely escaped the attention of African American scholars. Addressing primarily academic audiences, the earliest inquiries into hip-hop culture focus on the cultural forces – literary and historical – that shape the hip-hop genre and have, to some degree, defended the inclusion of some rap texts in serious literary discourse. This scholarship describes, critiques, and theorizes rap for the purpose of validating the genre for academics who were either
unfamiliar with or who were still skeptical about popular cultural studies and who, perhaps, saw no feasibility in studying Black youth cultural forms. Tricia Rose, Michael Eric Dyson, and Russell Potter are among the few contemporary academics who recognize the redemptive qualities of Black urban music. Tricia Rose was one of the first scholars to examine the complexities of hip-hop music and culture. In Black Noise (1994), she argues that beyond its lewdness and irreverence, rap is an ingenious form of signifying on the powerful – a significant part of the cultural traditions coming out of the African Diaspora. According to Rose, rap music is deeply political, but often the political message of the music is hidden from those who only look at surface messages. Rose’s advises scholars to avoid cavalierly dismissing hip-hop culture, in general, but to carefully decipher the signifying systems of rap artists as a political play.

Arguing against the distinction of a post-modernism of play and a postmodernism of resistance, rap critic Russell Potter claims that what some academics term “play” may be the most resistant stance of all. Placing rap within a kind of “ludic” postmodernism, Potter argues that the historical experience of slavery forced African American youth to conceive rap – a cultural form that fuses past and present social conditions – as a potential healing agent rather than a debilitating one. Emphasizing the restorative characteristics of hip-hop music, critic Michael Eric Dyson supports both Rose’s and Potter’s ideas. In Between God and Gangsta Rap (1997), he challenges scholars to look past the violent and misogynist language of gangsta rap, in particular, for the purpose of witnessing how the lyrics are meaningful in modern Black communities that would resist their present oppressive social conditions.
Interestingly, at the same time that these scholars were encouraging their peers to take more notice of the redemptive qualities of hip-hop music and culture – its historical relevancy, its social consciousness, and its progressive politics – old-school rap was losing ground to more popularized forms. As a result, within at least the last five years, though some academics have continued to consider the genre fertile discursive ground, still more of them have adjusted their critical approaches to hip-hop texts, focusing more on those elements, such as the violence and gross materialism that are not central to the genre but that are, instead, reflective of the record industry’s appeal to profitable racist stereotypes. Disregarding the challenges set by Rose, Potter, and Dyson, more recent scholarship written by cultural critics, linguists, educators, psychologists, sociologists, and social workers attends to the ostensibly negative impact hip-hop music has on American cultural production, race and gender relations, and on African American historical memory. In the music, they see little if any redeeming value.

This project laments such a turn in critical understandings of hip-hop culture and attempts to persuade critics in an opposite direction. In their own representations of history and racism, Black youth have developed systems of community and communication that at once preserve historical definitions of “blackness” and shape, or redefine, their corporate “Black experience.” In so doing, hip-hop music, in particular, conjures tropes that effectively implement some of the most invaluable strategies slaves deployed to procure their own freedom -- signification, cross-dressing, and, most significantly, the ride-and-tie. In the final section of this chapter, I explicate similarities between fugitive slaves’ strategies and those hip-hop practitioners use to liberate themselves from their contemporary captivity. Rap texts are educational tools for
performers, and some of the oral and visual techniques by which hip-hop educates its youth audiences about survival and liberation are to be found under the categories of "signification," "cross dressing," and finally, the "ride-n-tie."

Dwight McBride defines the context in which signification occurs. The nineteenth-century discursive terrain was one in which "abolitionist discourse and/or debates... preexist[ed] the slave’s telling of his or her own experience." Applying a revisionist approach to the slave text, correcting historical and cross cultural misunderstandings about the relationship between black performativity, discursive truth, and cultural/historical memory, McBride identifies the evolving and "complex discursive conditions" that shaped slaves' public and written expressions about the institution of slavery, the construction of race, the political agenda of abolitionists, and the notion of freedom. Moreover, McBride asserts that slaves always already understood that within the racialized space of their autobiographical tales, they could create sets of codes which satisfied abolitionist politics by equating humanity with whiteness, while articulating the "authentic" slave experience and preserving a larger, collective cultural memory and, most significantly, by communicating with other slaves about strategies for escape. In other words, Black authors of slave narratives understood that their audience was predominately white. Likewise, they knew their narratives symbolized the black body in textual form, and that within the hands of white readers, even abolitionist readers, their narratives were as vulnerable to scrutiny and mistreatment as slaves were at the hands of masters or overseers. Authors realized the similarities between physically running away and publishing a narrative -- an act of liberating their textual bodies into the world. Those authors who wanted to be published had to employ certain literary strategies that at once
observed the editors’ propagandist needs and effectively negotiated the discursive terrain in ways that concealed their own meanings.

The slave narrative authors who most successfully navigated the racialized socio-historical landscape of the nineteenth century were those who identified a prestigious white amanuensis editor to provide written testimony, substantiating the veracity of the narrative and verifying that the slave had personally written the text. In his foreword to *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Biographies* (1977), John Blassingame acknowledges that amanuensis editors and publishers took certain liberties with slave narratives for their own propagandist ends. Oftentimes, the male editors and publishers of antebellum narratives, he says, “were an impressive group of people noted for their integrity” but who were “antagonistic to or had little or no connection with professional abolitionists.” Many of them were businessmen and attorneys who were simply interested in history, in general, and curious about lives of slaves, in particular. In many cases, however, editors and publishers were abolitionists and ironically, publishing slave narratives was not only an opportunity to advance their cause, but also provided them an opportunity to use the texts to secure their own positions as effective abolitionists and public figures.

Given the complicated demands of such a context, nineteenth-century black authors were oftentimes obligated to provide “authentic” signs of slave life, demystifying for white readers the communal codes of African American culture, particularly linguistic systems. At the same time, they misdirected white readership. Occasionally, black authors permitted a largely white audience to overhear conversations among African Americans, seemingly disclosing the most private aspects of slave life. For example, in a
general sense, Frances Ellen Harper’s novel *Iola Leroy* (1892) is a slave narrative of Iola. In the opening chapter of the text, Harper decodes the conversation between “Master Anderson’s Tom” and Robert Jefferson as they attend to their morning routine. Harper is careful to present the slave conversing about the condition of the market produce – “How’s butter dis mornin’?” or “Did you see de fish in de market dis mornin’?” Re-enacting stereotypical interactions of slaves as congenial, service-oriented, and unaware of larger political issues, Harper’s narrator later divulges vital secrets that facilitate African Americans’ mobility and furnishes white eavesdropping readers with useful information about their interactions. The narrator identifies instances in which slaves “invented phraseology to convey in the most unsuspected manner news to each other from the battlefield.” Ironically, the author’s seeming full disclosure of this aspect of slave inner-life is just as subversive as Robert and Tom’s exchange. Employing the strategy of misdirection, Harper identifies the slave language as a key subversive mechanism, encouraging white readers to concentrate solely on those systems she specifies.

Harper published this book after Emancipation, so there was really no reason not to divulge some of the “secrets” of slave culture. Nevertheless, in her textual disclosure, Harper misdirects turn-of-the-century white readers in an important way. White readers could perceive this instance in Harper’s text as an exposé of black slaves’ communication systems. By describing in detail the hidden meanings in certain phraseology, Harper affords white readers a peek into a little known aspect of African American life. However, as perpetual outsiders, white readers would never have been able to use the information to their advantage, and what’s more, they would always wonder, perhaps
they would even be paranoid, about what other dormant systems African Americans employ to subvert the white control. Unfortunately, there is a less positive consequence of Harper’s misdirection. An increasing number of African American readers might misunderstand the author’s intentions, contending that the author is “airing dirty laundry,” or worse, depicting what could be considered sinister workings within the African American community. Offering such information may appear harmful to those African Americans who are preoccupied with closing the racial divide.

If this particular nineteenth-century literary technique seems historically distant, my argument is that contemporary black youth cultural forms employ a fictional narrative voice similar to Harper’s, enabling rappers to converse with each other within earshot of a new generation of white listeners. Redefining social signifiers and constructing unique language systems, urban texts appear to divulge the general consciousness of black youth culture, seemingly undermining the insurrectionist potential of the music. Much of rap music convincingly depicts an “inner-life” of black youth, inviting growing non-black audiences to eavesdrop upon and participate in, and, more often, criticize the culture. However, the process of mass production of the music and subsequent commodification of the rap culture simultaneously misdirects non-black listeners as well as Black middle-class or even the most erudite African American scholars, falsely persuading them that they possess sufficient knowledge of black youth culture to effectively critique hip-hop cultural systems.

Cross-dressing is a performative extension of signification. Lunsford Lane’s narrative provides evidence that slaves disguised themselves to transgress their class, or social station; however, cross-dressing in the form of both race and gender
performativity was more common and better typifies the notion of communal participation within the slave narrative tradition. In the preface to *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. concedes that several popular slave narratives record the success of female slaves who cross-dressed to escape. In addition to discussing Hannah’s escape, Gates cites other instances of female cross-dressing in William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, or The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853), in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) by William and Ellen Craft, as well as in William Still’s *The Underground Railroad* (1872). In his recognition of the cross-dressing phenomenon, Gates does not address the way this method of escape elucidated the significance of communal participation in the lives of fugitive slaves. Although *Clotel* is a fictional narrative, Brown’s description of her transvestitism is representative of the practice.

In *Clotel, or the President's Daughter*, the author describes an exchange between the mulatto slave Clotel and a male slave named William. Despite the fact that the two do not know each other well, William volunteers to pay for Clotel’s freedom because he has not nearly the amount required to purchase his own. Clotel refuses the offer convinced that she has a plan that will provide both their liberation. She dresses as an infirmed master and encourages William to pose as her/his servant. In this way, they safely gain passage on the northbound boat.

Clotel’s assuming the leadership role in her relationship with William, coupled with her cross-dressing and securing both her and William’s passage is interesting enough and illustrative of female slaves’ complex gender roles. However, more remarkable is Clotel’s willingness to present herself as an infirmed, silenced male – one
whose presence alone dictates her/his position on the vessel and negotiates power in her/his relationship with William. Forfeiting her ability to speak in her own voice, Clotel allows her privileged masculine persona to speak for her and, inevitably, it is that performativity which secures her and William's freedom. Later in the story, and against William's advice, Clotel cross-dresses again to emancipate her daughter. The mulatto's desire to risk her newly acquired freedom to search for her daughter substantiates the range of femininities – in this case, a masculine femininity -- a black woman might perform to secure freedom for subsequent generations of women.

Black male youth in hip-hop culture also experiment with cross-dressing; however, pointing out that fact does stretch the concept. In this age of metrosexuality, an increasing number of young Black men wear diamond earrings and wear their hair in cornrows or permed. Oftentimes, excessive jewelry and carefully coiffed hair are indicators of a lifestyle that is removed from that of street ruffians. Unlike the case with many male rappers, female rappers' cross-dressing is a much more common phenomenon and it more closely mirrors the representation of masculinized black femininity within the 19th century slave narrative tradition. Within their own critical texts and within the boundaries of male-dominated popular cultural forms, black females have long facilitated the actualization of black manhood. Black females help to create and actively participate in a simulated homosocial bond with their male counterparts. Imitating the male dress, gait, posture and vocabulary as well as masterfully negotiating the urban terrain as do black men within contemporary hip-hop culture, black females reassure males that they are allies, not competitors, for social space and cultural recognition. Essentially by performing typically "male" behaviors, young black women become one of the "boyz" in
the 'hood as a part of their own love ethic and support men's desire to actualize a virile, potent, masculinity. Chapter four attends to the black female masculinization process in greater detail. For now, however, it is important to reiterate the idea that gender performativity is a critical aspect of the slave narrative legacy for contemporary hip-hop culture.

Signification and cross-dressing are both prevalent within the slave narrative tradition and continue to inform youth cultural production. Yet, there is one other strategy that is not only representative of the way that Black youth escape contemporary forms of racialized oppression but that also serves as a metonym for the entire project of hip hop culture – the ride-and-tie. Before elucidating the role I believe this strategy plays in contemporary popular cultural forms, it is important to note that slaves did not invent the technique. A fixture in American culture for some time, the ride-and-tie was employed in a number of different ways throughout history. For example, it was common practice for courier purposes. According to Benjamin Botkin, “two persons set out on a journey having one horse. One rides on while the other sets out on foot after him. The first man, at the end of a mile or two, ties up the horse at the roadside and proceeds on foot. When the second comes to the horse he mounts and rides till he is one or two miles ahead of his comrade and then ties. And so to ‘til the end of the journey.” In the Children of Cloverley, for instance, white children also used the technique to get to school. In chapter eight of the text, the author Hesba Stretton writes:

One of these lanes led up to Fern's Hollow, but, as Ben and Annie did not know the way, they were to go to Bottfield with Gilbert; and as they went along, Gilbert explained to them how he and Ben were to ride and tie to school at Longville; that is, how every morning they would take it in turns for one of them to start on walking ten minutes in advance, and the other, riding past him, would go as far as the Gorsy Bank, which he pointed out to them, and there dismount and tie the pony to a gate to wait for the one who was behind, while he would walk on himself as swiftly as he could; and the first would then ride on all the
way to Botfield, and leave the pony at the machine-house until the second came up to finish the ride to Longville.  

More than children’s performance, the ride-and-tie was also common practice for Civil War soldiers, who would also occasionally travel by train as well as by horse. During his now-famous Ohio Raid of 1863, General John Morgan struck further north than any Confederate force had gone before, taking his men on the longest continuous ride in military history. Pursued by Federal cavalry and in constant combat, Morgan and his men traveled more than 700 miles in just 25 days. In many instances, cavalrmen rode a distance and left their horses for upcoming infantrymen who, then, took a turn riding until they caught up again with the column and the cavalrmen remounted. Moreover, in an account of "The Seven Days’ Battle before Richmond," by marching and using the trains of the Virginia Central railroad in a "ride-and-tie" way, Stonewall Jackson and his men reached Frederickshald in 1862.  

Finally, according to early literary accounts, the ride-and-tie was not only a means of traveling long distances. In “Little Rivers,” for example, Henry van Dyke depicts two preachers taking turns to address a congregation:

The two ministers climbed the precipitous stair and found themselves in a box so narrow that one must stand perforce, while the other sat upon the only seat. In this "ride and tie" fashion they went through the service.  

Interestingly, Thomas Paine, was perhaps the first person to conceive of the ride and tie as a political strategy and/or ruse.  

Likening the “national purse” to a horse, Paine believes that members of the British government take turns mounting the “common hack,” and in so doing ride away with the country’s money.  

As both a ruse and an escape methodology, the ride-and-tie was ingeniously appropriated by the run-away slaves. The earliest narrative account of the method in the
Black-authored slave narrative tradition appears in Brown's *Clootel*. In chapter 19 of the text, Brown describes the strategy two male slaves practice on their way to the Ohio River. He writes,

> No country has produced so much heroism in so short a time, connected with escapes from peril and oppression as has occurred in the United States among fugitive slaves, many of whom show great shrewdness in their endeavors to escape....two slaves were seen passing; one was on horseback, the other was walking before him with his arms tightly bound, and a long rope leading from the man on foot to the one on horseback. “oh, ho, that's a runaway rascal, I suppose,” said a farmer, who met them on the road. “Yes, sire, he bin runaway, and I got him fast. Marser will tan his jacket for him nicely when he gets him.” You are a trustworthy fellow, I imagine,” continued the farmer. “Oh yes, sire; marser puts a heap of confidence in dis nigger.” And the slaves traveled on. When the one on foot was fatigued they would change positions, the other being tied and driven on foot. This they called the “ride and tie.”

Depending on the circumstances of the escape and the physiognomy of the participants, runaways modified their strategies in a number of ways. However, there is one primary method. Typically two slaves would obtain a horse. At the start of the journey, the slaves would determine which of them would ride the horse and which would be bound. The rider would pretend to be a dutiful slave, escorting a runaway back to the plantation. Taking turns at pretending to be the “bad slave”, fugitive slaves walked to freedom. The element of communal participation in this emancipating strategy is most critical to contemporary African American hip-hop culture.

In the same way that fugitive slaves performed roles of “good slave”/“bad slave” in the ride and tie, alternately binding themselves and working together to achieve freedom, rappers in both the mainstream and underground rap communities embrace historical racialized representations as well as positive cultural myths and rituals. Within rap music and hip-hop film, rappers sample and rearticulate the older stratagem, ride-and-tie, making it a cultural imperative “ryde-or-die.” Within hip hop culture and under this new directive,
then, young black men "ruff riders," and black women's, "ryde-or-die chicks," collective survival requires that they bind themselves together, alternately employing incendiary tropes and vernacular expressions and signs of nationalism, love, and forward movement to procure their own survival.

This theoretical perspective is closely aligned with Dick Hedbidge's notions about the ways Black youth construct legitimate forms of African American masculinity. According to Hedbidge, Black rappers, in particular, imaginatively rework and rewrite the historic tropes of black heterosexual, masculine (hyper)sexuality, detachment, and hard-heartedness into new trope of fascination and fear. Beyond the cool pose, however, the image of fear that hypermasculinity conjures is a potential foil to the very real threat of incarceration, effeminization, and death that dominant culture imposes. Unwilling to pretend as if the stereotypes do not exist, and girding themselves up against their potential opponents, it is my contention that in plain sight of a scrutinizing audience, black youth wear the derogatory racial stereotypes in public, or in their mainstream music, and arm themselves with militant stereotypes in private, or on the "down low" in their underground music. Within rap culture, the relationship between Chuck D and his sidekick, Flava Flav, provides a solid example of black male rappers' successful application of racialized pastiche and of this contemporary formulation of the ride and tie. Most significant about this particular relationship is the way in which Flava Flav's outlandish buffoonery distracts the attention of those unwitting audience members who might otherwise attempt to police Chuck D's black nationalist content. Alternately performing before a racially and politically diverse audience, these rappers' on-stage and
staged routine grants them social mutability -- mobility and volatility -- that more successfully facilitates their shared cultural agenda -- liberation.

I would like to return at the close of this chapter to Kitwana’s assertions about the generation gap currently plaguing African American culture. As is evident in the aforementioned relationship between Chuck D and Flava Flav, the dichotomy of public vs. private behavior is a key source of generational tension. I would like to reassert that I am not arguing that black youth cultural forms disregard the strides the Civil Rights generation has made. Nor do they necessarily define for the hip-hop generation what it means to be “authentically black” in contemporary American society. Instead, my argument is that in urban music and film narratives, black youth shape their own definitions of blackness, present their own perceptions of culture and history, and ultimately, formulate a culturally relevant pedagogy of survival. It is in their own cultural forms that black youth dialogue with one another and, therefore, feel free to engage in discussions and impart lessons about attaining freedom for those who embrace – who are “down with” – the culture and for those who sympathize with -- or “show love for” -- their collective position as contemporary captives. This strategically-structured discussion provides them a chance to articulate their concerns and to share their respective hardships and victories.

More than a source of mere information, or what Chuck D has dubbed “the Black CNN,” contemporary hip-hop music corrects Black youth’s lack of exposure to culturally pertinent information and compensates for the negligible “trickle down” effect of Black Studies during the late-1980s and early-1990s. Importantly, during that same time Black rappers and hip-hop filmmakers adopted the belated promise of Black Studies, popularizing
aspects of African-American cultural history, politics, religion, and social ethics for a primarily African American youth audience that never received a formal education or an African-centered pedagogy.

The wealth of African American slave histories -- narratives, interviews, testimonies -- and slaves' ingenious means of acquiring economic and socio-political agency have not escaped the attention of 20th century scholars and leaders. Nevertheless, to date, there has been no investigation of the relationship between the textual strategies fugitive slaves employed and those African American youth utilize in their own texts. To a large extent, this oversight may be attributable to one of the most effective survivalist strategies of Black Americans. Progress has been contingent on Blacks' ability to swiftly and collectively distance themselves from their enslaved past. This forward movement has necessitated the larger Black community's divestiture of memories -- language systems and communal values -- at a cost. It is the didactic philosophy of progress via historical distancing which has significantly impacted contemporary African American educational methodologies, and that, as female raptivist, Sister Souljah suggests, is the "root of confusion" for America's Black youth." Conversations about slavery linger in the Black community, yet, by and large, because Black youth know little about the era -- its politics or the long-term economic, social, political, and psychological effects it has had on them -- they do not actively participate in the formal discourse. Likewise, the few African American public figures and scholars of the Civil Rights generation who recognize Black youths' penchant for conjuring the history of slavery do not attempt to ferret out hiphoppers' rationale for rearticulating the signs and the tropes of the antebellum era. Instead, Black Americans who oppose Black youth culture, in particular, conceive hip-
hop as a destructive counterpublic. Consequently, these critics rebuke the music and other contemporary cultural markers without considering why the pedagogy of struggle inherent in the music uses so many allusions to the period of slavery and, further, how enacting certain liberating strategies enables hip-hop youth to organize and control their individual and collective identities and acquire their own freedom within/from their respective urban landscapes. Again, Kitwana is correct in his assessment that “the older generation’ must realize they “cannot claim any real [social and/or cultural] victory if the hip-hop generation cannot build significantly on [their] gains.”
Chapter One Notes


6 Since their inception in the late 60s and early 70s, the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (JCPES) have researched issues impacting the larger African American community, such as employment, welfare, and health. Moreover, both the CBC and JCPES continue to be deeply invested in educating African Americans, especially younger future scholars. Slightly more political than the publications of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, JCPES’s journals do not focus on African American literary and artistic accomplishments. Instead, the organization concentrates on funding local and national representatives and grassroots organizations that promote racial progress and mentor up-and-coming leaders. Likewise, the CBC has its own foundation through which it funds not only global civil rights initiatives but also undergraduate scholarships and research grants for African Americans who have a vested interest in the African Diaspora. Disseminating more accurate information about Blacks – their struggle against racism and their victories in the face of adversity – these institutes expanded their curriculum offerings with courses that appealed to African American students.


8 See Anderson 328. For example, during the post-bellum period, General Samuel Armstrong, decorated soldier and noted white supremacist, founded Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute in 1868. In The Education of Blacks in the South 1860 - 1835, historian James Anderson delineates General Armstrong’s pedagogical philosophy – Armstrong equated Blacks’ cultural uplift with their being introduced to European society’s morals and with their being trained to perform manual labor within that society. According to Anderson, “the primary means through which white civilization could be instilled in [Blacks] was by the moral power of labor and manual industry” (328).[0] Moreover, Armstrong maintained that it was the “duty of the superior white race to rule over the weaker, dark-skinned races until they were appropriately civilized. This civilization process, in Armstrong’s estimation, would require several generations of moral and religious development” (328).[0] Armstrong’s is but one example of the prevailing Reconstruction concept of “racial adjustment” that both post-Civil War whites and blacks promoted. Nevertheless, whereas black leaders may have considered “racial adjustment” one way of ensuring racial equality, white leaders, such as Samuel Armstrong, believed “racial adjustment” a means of acculturating Black students and, thereby, er(ace)ing their sense of cultural pride oftentimes before it could fully develop.

9 The American Negro Academy, founded in 1897, was devoted to these aims and was the forerunner of other organizations whose focus was African American scholarship – The Negro Society for Historical Research and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

Certainly, the history of African American education is richer than the above treatment admits. However, in general, during the Reconstruction period, the Republican agenda for public education in the South, or for what John Chodes called educating "common folk," was not necessarily a reform for the better. In John Chodes, Destroying the Republic: Jabez Curry and the Re-Education of the Old South (New York: Algora Publishing, 2005), the author discusses the idea that public education in the South during the period of Reconstruction was less about educating Blacks than it was about satiating Black voters, subsidizing them enough to vote Republican and to be content where they were, else they might migrate to the North and West. Keeping Blacks in the South as well as providing federally-controlled, "free," universal, compulsory public schools to control the immigrant masses of the northeast were two of the primary themes of Northern politics throughout the 19th century. Neither of these objectives constitutes an education that cultivates a better life for those who attended the schools. Real reform -- which was at the core of mid-20th-century "separate but equal" education -- was, perhaps, more beneficial to African American public school students.

Among the most notable events are the Brown vs. Board of Education victory in 1954, the busing of the Little Rock nine in 1957 and James Meredith's admission into the University of Mississippi in 1962.


Sims 9.


In terms of youth skepticism, consider this anecdote: When Cornell West visited the campus of Texas Southern University in March of 2005, I required my students to attend. Afterwards, many students admitted that they had never heard West speak before and that they were surprised to know that he was so "eccentric," so "down," and so "real." All of the students seemed equally impressed until one student reminded the class that West had shaken hands in agreement with Bishop Eddie Long a month earlier at the 2005 State of the Black Union conference. Long, pastor of Atlanta mega-church, New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, has become a figure of disdain in some parts of the Black community. His pro-Bush position coupled with his staunch, seemingly anti-Christian, attack on gays and lesbians has contributed to Black youths' (including those 100 or so attending my classes) skepticism about his impartiality as a Black leader. The fact that many of my students found West guilty by association is telling of a mindset that will listen willingly to Black leaders, but that also closely observes their political alliances.

Here, I am not only referring to the War on Drugs as a significant aspect of Reagan's assault on Black youth, in particular, but I am also referring to race as the critical subtext of Reaganomics -- one that affected every aspect of African American life, including education. For an interesting description of the ways Reagan's defunding of social programs impacted Black America, see Mary Mitchell, "Reagan Wasn't


21 Howard Klriebard, Changing Course: American Curriculum Reform in the 20th Century. (NY: Teachers College Press, 2002). Howard provides an interesting history of American educational reform and the national educational agenda as it relates to African American students


23 Kitwana 23.


25 In her interview with Bill Haley, a writer and son of Alex Haley, and Juliet Walker, a history professor at the University of Texas in Austin, National Public Radio host, Farai Chideya, discusses the impact Roots had on young Black viewers and the shaping influence the miniseries has had on Black America. See Farai Chideya, “Thirty Years of ‘Roots,’” News and Notes, Natl. Public Radio, KUHF, Houston, 4 June 2007.


30 To my knowledge, no studies have conclusively determined the extent to which Black hip-hop artists have been affected by their exposure to televised accounts of slavery. Nevertheless, as a member of the early hip-hop generation, I recall the significance that movie (and other television shows) had on my life, on the lives of my peers, and on the larger Black community in which I was raised.


33 Scholars’ inclusion of rap music into the larger African American canon is evinced in the most recent edition of The Norton Anthology of African American Literature. As general editors of the text, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nelly McKay do acknowledge works of “old-school” rap artists — Grandmaster Flash, Rakim, Queen Latifah, and Chuck D. — as representatives of black youth cultural expression.

34 Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).


36 Michael Eric Dyson, Between God and Gangster Rap: Bearing Witness to Rap Culture (Oxford University Press, 1997).


39 Blassingame, xviii.


41 Harper 8-9.

42 Detailed examples of this technique are provided in chapter two of this dissertation.

43 Lunsford Lane, The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C. Embracing an Account of His Early Life, the Redemption by Purchase of Himself and Family From Slavery, and His Banishing from the Place of His Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin (Boston: J.G. Torrey, 1842). In this story, Lane demonstrates that cross-dressing allowed slaves to disguise their social class. He did not want his owner to know how wealthy he was, so when the time came for him to purchase his freedom, he dressed as shabbily as he could before addressing his mistress.


49 ibid.

50 Taken from “The Seven Days’ Battles Before Richmond” in The Confederate Military History Volume 3, Chapter XVI <http://www.civilwarhome.com/CMHseven.htm>.


52 See Thomas Paine, “The Rights of Man,” From Revolution to Reconstruction, ed. Benno Leemhuis, 3 June 2003, University of Groningen, Netherlands, 2 July 2007 <http://odur.let.rug.nl/usa/D/1776-1800/paine/ROM/rofm04.htm>. In his 1792 response to Mr. Burke’s Attack on the French Revolution, Thomas Paine says: “Everything in the English government appears to me the reverse of what it ought to be, and of what it is said to be...The national purse is the common hack which each mounts upon. It is like what the country people call “Ride and tie - you ride a little way, and then I.”


54 Brown 269-270.


56 Distancing is not a new phenomenon. As early as 1925, Alain Locke addresses the dilemma facing “The New Negro” as he attempted to distance himself from the caricatured “Old Negro” who “had long become more of a myth than a man.” Locke’s rationale for distancing is similar to the contributing factor of the contemporary generation gap. See Alain Locke, The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance, (New York: Touchstone, 1999) 3.

57 Kitwana 23.
CHAPTER TWO

Sounds from the Underground: The Pedagogy of Survival in Rap Texts

It's called survival; and only the strong can survive...it's called survival, survival, Survival, SURVIVAL!

Melle Mel 1

In this industry, we gotta grow/ commercial some go, but y'know/ just as important as they are/ so is the underground superstar (like me)...Learn the lesson before you plan your career/ commercial or underground – where do you fit, cause both side write hits and all is rap...I've come to show a different look/ and that look is the whole of rap/ not just the commercial pop/ but the underground, that raw ghetto sound from which rap music was found...

KRS-One 2

Rap became a version of Malcolm and Martin...There's some ghetto secrets I can't rhyme in this song/There's some missing pieces I had to leave out...

Nas 3

Shawn Carter grew up in Marcy Park -- one of the toughest projects in Brooklyn, New York. In the early 80s, as a child of deindustrialized urban America and of a single-parent home, he dropped out of high school and supported his penchant for shoes, clothes, and cars by becoming a neighborhood stick-up kid and drug dealer. As a teen, Carter witnessed the murders of close family members and friends, and he himself stood trial numerous times for assault and other drug-related crimes. His nefarious behavior garnered him relative local celebrity and a modicum of financial success; however, when his family moved from New York to Trenton, New Jersey in 1986, he welcomed the opportunity to change his life. In his new environs, he befriended a number of aspiring rappers, and by 1991, when mainstream music video channel MTV had just begun giving rap music regular rotation, Big Jaz featured him in his popular video "Hawaiian Sophie." 4

As a sign of appreciation for his mentor, Shawn Carter renamed himself Jay-Z and soon after began narrating his own "life and times" in a series of platinum-selling albums about
his desire to be free of the pitfalls of inner-city crime.\(^5\)

Fifteen years after producing eleven of his own albums and after collaborating with the most acclaimed hip-hop artists in the music industry, Jay-Z has become one of the most popular and prolific rappers in the world. Characteristic of his other albums, his final release, *The Black Album* (2004), is autobiographical. However, unlike a number of contemporary artists, Jay-Z's successful mainstream repertoire illustrates what hip-hop pioneer KRS-One identifies as the "underground sound," that is, the music of ghetto youth who want to be physically and psychologically liberated. Laden with heavy-hitting beats and multi-layered song samples that characterize much of contemporary mainstream hip-hop music, Jay-Z's recent songs, in particular, present his evolution from street hustler to business mogul. If his lyrics seem (and are) blatantly misogynist, violent, and self-aggrandizing, what I am most interested in is the latent content of his music – the "ghetto secrets" to which Nas refers in the third epigraph of this chapter. It is this covert material which screens Jay-Z intentions to forge a community and to connect with listeners who aspire to liberation. What young listeners seem to hear most clearly in Jay-Z's music and what they understand about the corresponding music videos is the way his distinctive sound and visual texts function as how-to tales, teaching an in-tuned and a primarily black youth audience how they too might survive. It is this artist/audience relationship that grants them agency to emancipate themselves from social conditions that resemble the ones Jay-Z himself has overcome.

I have begun with a brief biography of Shawn Carter because his public rap culture persona embodies many of the key claims of this chapter: chiefly, that rappers and other hip-hop icons teach their audiences how to survive in urban America and, ideally,
how to get free. As is the case for most rappers, Carter demonstrates four core elements that comprise hip-hop artists' pedagogy of survival: renaming; creating healing, visual narratives; acknowledging historical and cultural forebears; and constructing cyphers, or underground sounds which encode the liberationist agenda of hip-hop cultural participants.

Whereas the previous chapter asserts that contemporary rap music and other cultural markers of the hip-hop generation signify the extent to which black youth have been denied a comprehensive linear ancestral history, this chapter lays out some of the key ways that various hip hop texts attempt to fill or correct historical/textual lapses. I examine two distinct cultural processes: one, the methodologies rappers create to teach members of their Black youth constituency how to cope with their own psychic and physical captivity; and two, the ways hip-hop youth discretely employ these methodologies, situating themselves anew inside a larger, racist cultural context. These new social locations simultaneously connect hip-hop cultural strategies with historically activist antecedents, defining the most effective cultural participants, establishing the rules for engaging in the culture, and, thus, preserving the viability of the culture for subsequent generations. Toward that end, renaming is the process by which hip-hop cultural participants construct alter-egos that can enable them to project their own everyday trauma onto fictional characters and thereby cope with the pains of ghetto life. Creating healing, visual narratives enables hip-hoppers to reconstruct cultural memory and insert themselves into historical contexts wherein they perceive black youth to have been erased or rendered invisible by America's racist politics. Acknowledging African American ancestors allows rappers to identify a common heritage and to build extended
communities with other Black youth with whom they share a collective consciousness. Finally, ciphers are secret codes that relay rappers’ respective struggles as well as they are physical spaces, often performance circles, wherein rappers “battle,” a form of competitive dialogue about achieving individual and communal liberation. Taken together, these four elements illustrate what I call in this chapter a “pedagogy of survival” – a blueprint for both identifying and escaping contemporary captivity.

Rap -- as many have argued -- is the current revolutionary poetry of the young black masses. Yet, as Tricia Rose suggests, to view the music simply as an outgrowth of the oral African American idiom is to romanticize and decontextualize it as a cultural form. In Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (1994), Rose sees the relationship of hip-hop with slaves’ narrative forms as “a dynamic hybrid of oral traditions, post literate orality.” But she is finally more invested in distancing rap from that history. Propelling the music into the late-20th century, she explicates rap as an “advanced technology.” Importantly, rap’s highly rhythmic, electronically-based instrumentals are composed by musicians who establish both a base rhythm and message which samples or “borrows” from rhythm and blues (R&B), soul, and jazz artists (such as James Brown, John Coltrane) and black American activists (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Louis Farrakhan). On top of this computerized baseline, the technicians and musicians then assemble, erase, and revise the sounds into multi-layered, thematically and stylistically diverse musical forms.

Although I agree with Rose that rap has evolved into a highly technological form, I nonetheless view it as unmistakably rooted in earlier and less techno-dependent African
American traditions. According to essayist Gerald Early in “Politics and The Black American Song,” the music is “an offshoot of black masculine toasts, the revolutionary poetry of the late sixties and early seventies from people like Gil-Scott Heron, the Last Poets, and American soul-funk.” Characterized by the dramatic incantations of the performer, rap is a fusion of jazz, blues rhythms, and street language channeled into a vehicle of protest and exhortation. The social consciousness of rap was apparent from the earliest hip-hop dance rhythms of “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang in 1980 or the release of “the Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five in 1982. Since that time, hip-hop generation griots such as Public Enemy, Eric B. & Rakim, KRS One, LL Cool J, MC Lyte, De La Soul, Paris, and other “Poor Righteous Teachers” have criticized America for its perpetuation of racial and economic discrimination against African Americans, especially in the form of police brutality. Shouting “Fight the Power,” a title borrowed from a 1975 hit R&B song by the Isley Brothers, rappers such as Public Enemy have addressed some of the most complex social, cultural and political issues Blacks face in contemporary American society.

Rap music did not become a commercially viable musical form until the early-80s. Prior to that time, virtually every rap musician, regardless of his lyrical technique (flow) or content, was “underground,” meaning that his records were hits in the community and on the street, but not in the mainstream. During this gestation period, rappers learned that the commercial record industry was not necessarily interested in promoting songs that addressed the collective concerns of black youth, nor were industry executives anxious to promote artists whose songs suggested that burgeoning hip-hop culture was anything more than a passing trend – one of at least five artistic trends that, as
it turns out, originated in the streets of New York: break dancing, beat boxing, graffiti, emceeing, and scratching. And for the most part, American popular culture has marginalized these other art forms because they have not generated revenue for corporate America the way rap does.¹⁰

In any event, well-established rap pioneers, or “old schoolers” such as KRS-One, advised aspiring artists against entering mainstream rap industry, or “going commercial.” In his album “Ghetto Music” (1989), KRS-One warns that the process of converting hip-hop culture into a product will eventually “enslave black youth,” creating partnerships that disadvantage young rappers “while the record labels make millions.”¹¹ Female rappers also cautioned youth about the hazards of the record industry. Unleashing her own jeremiad, for example, Sister Souljah echoes KRS-One. In "The Final Solution" (1995), she says that for Black youth in the music industry, in particular, “slavery's back in effect”:

We are at war!...It's time for us to take a stand/ Woman to woman and man to man/ Blood rushes through your veins/ you feel the fear/ Who would've thought that this would happen here?/ In the land of the free, home of the brave/ The year is '95; you're a slave....¹²

Here Sister Souljah speaks to the tenuous position black youth understand themselves to occupy within contemporary society: they are targets for extermination (“The Final Solution”). This terror shapes the “underground sounds” of rap culture, and even those relatively few artists who have enjoyed mainstream success continue to make music that caters to underground sensibilities and that advance communal struggle and racial uplift.

However, as I suggested in the Introduction, popular perceptions of rap conflate its multiple histories and diffuse its politics into either “commercial” or “gangster” rap. Audiences recognize the soft or playful pop rap of MC Hammer, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the
Fresh Prince. They recognize the self-effacing comedic lyrics of Sir Mix-A-Lot and Heavy D. Moreover, they distinguish the sexually explicit rap of Luke Skywalker’s 2 Live Crew, and the crime-laden content of Ice T, NWA, and other Los Angeles rap groups from Compton and Watts. These city are two economically depressed areas of the city -- whose West Coast style of gangsta rap narrates what has become the archetypal story of the young, poor, black male in the ghetto. Indeed, it is these select rappers’ frequent and seemingly irresponsible celebration of gang violence and violence against women that has brought hip-hop culture, in general, under heavy attack by the media and by various national organizations. For example, in 1993, public outcry about Ice-T’s “Cop Killer” forced Time-Warner to drop the artist from its label. Similarly, in 1995, C. Delores Tucker led the National Political Congress of Black Women (NPCBW) to pressure the same record company to sell its rap label.¹³

Contrary to popular belief, female rappers like Queen Latifah and Salt-N-Pepa have disagreed with the actions of the NPCBW. Although these women rappers have publicly acknowledged the misogyny of some male rappers, they have defended their male counterparts’ constitutional right to create their music. I present a more thorough discussion of female rappers’ role in the genre in Chapter Four. Rather than scolding the men, a majority of female rappers have countered the negative messages of the gangster rappers by focusing on issues that plague the hip-hop generation, such as the dangers of teenage pregnancy, AIDS, gang warfare, drug use, and dropping out of school. The deaths of Tupac Shakur in 1996 and of the Notorious B.I.G. in 1997 have underscored the need of these rappers to continue to deliver positive social messages to the young black masses. Nevertheless, mainstream media, fixating on the more negative aspects of rap
culture, consistently push the most menacing images of male rappers and the most startling or graphic lyrics as if these represent the sum total of the culture.

As the Underground Railroad functioned within the institution of slavery, so does the underground sound of rap music function as an intricate system of oral pathways that surreptitiously intersect with and make use of mainstream rap music networks and the broader popular cultural landscape. Underground rap culture continues to provide alternative escapist routes for those "passengers" whose ultimate goal is to "keep it real"—or to be empowered to effect their cultural, racial, and sexual liberation. Within rap music contexts, however, liberation always requires a rehearsal of memories of captivity. Within the rap lyrics as well as in the associated visual imagery of music videos, evidence of Black youths' collective psychological distress is palpable. Oftentimes, on their way to an ultimate message about survival and uplift, images of slavery seem to dominate the visual field. The processes of renaming, conceptualizing rap videos, and creating rap music itself reflect the extent to which rappers reinvent slavery's legacy in the hopes of overcoming it.

**Renaming**

In the same way that Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* (1861) constructs a fictional character, Linda Brent, onto whom she casts the trauma of her own lived experiences, members of the hip-hop generation oftentimes create alternate personas so they can psychologically distance themselves from their own trauma-laden lives. Such is the case for Shawn Carter aka Jay-Z aka HOVA aka Young Jove. As I
already noted, Carter has lived what he calls a "hard knock life," not just of streets and drugs, but also of paternal abandonment. In response to these traumatic experiences, I argue, he has developed a number of rap personas that reflect his predominant perception of his role as a divine presence in hip-hop culture — he calls himself the father ([Je- or J-HOVA]; the son (Young Hove); and the spirit (J[A]-Z, or Alpha and Omega) of rap music. These names are indicative of hip-hop mythos and rappers' penchant to reconstruct themselves as ineradicable, immortal beings. Unlike other forgotten black male heroes or slain civil rights leaders, most black rappers and DJs, beginning in 1979 with Wonder Mike of the Sugar Hill Gang and Grandmaster Flash on the wheels of steel, consider themselves a part of the hip-hop continuum of invincible superheroes, "gods on the mic," and, thus, "Saviors" of the race.

The process of creating an alternative persona, or renaming, is an essential method for historical insertion and resisting invisibility. It is not, as some psychological theories might label it, dissociative identity disorder or "multiple personality disorder." Rappers construct characters whose attributes represent their own alternative personas or alter egos, enabling them to cope with trauma. The name a rapper chooses can determine his fate both on the street and within the industry; it can also suggest the contours of his/her psychological trauma. Rappers' whose names are less culturally specific or political tend to garner more success within the commercial industry. Some rappers don humorous, or self-effacing names that reflect their physical appearance while urging potential emcee opponents to not underestimate either their lyrical or physical prowess. For example, the rapper Bone Crusher weighs in excess of 400 pounds. His most acclaimed song "Never Scared" talks about his eagerness to go to his trunk, retrieve
his gun, and fire at prospective enemies should they confront a member of his crew. Similarly, West Coast artist, Too $hort, stands barely 5' tall; however, most of his lyrics articulate his ability to pimp women, acquire money, and battle on the mic despite his diminutive stature. Rappers’ names spoof cultural phenomenon such as T.V. shows, pop singers, movies, and cartoons, like Thirston Howl the Third (Thurston Howell), Sonny Spoon, Richie Balance (Richie Valenz), Braveheart, Deadly Venoms, Richie Rich, Big Punisher, and Supafriendz. Oftentimes, as a sign that they have not forgotten their more humble beginnings, rappers keep childhood nicknames assigned them by respective neighborhood crews—Spoonie G, Kool Mo Dee, Eazy-E, Puffy, Lil’ Troy— or adopt names that describe their personalities as MCs who are/were outlaws before participating in the rap game – Killa Cam, Tec-9, and Trigger tha Gambler. There are groups -- Ghetto Dwellaz, Childrin of Da Ghetto, and Jungle Brothers -- whose names reflect their feelings about and/or proximity to their local urban environment; rappers who conceive of themselves as embattled – Bad Seed, Compton’s Most Wanted, Niggaz With Attitude, and Outsidadz. Some rappers’ names suggest their vision of participating in both real/ideological and communal/global warfare: 404 Soldierz, Noreaga, Haiku D’etat, and Tragedy Khadafi.

While a large number of rappers choose names that reflect their cultural and/or religious affiliation – Cocoa Brovaz, Talib Kweli, Dark Child, Darkim Be Allah, and Rakim – most rap artists use their names to insert themselves into historical contexts where Anglo-American history has either rendered them invisible or impotent. For example, a disproportionate number of black male youth fashion their rap personas after mobsters -- Nitti, Gotti, Cappadonna, Mr. Capone, and Scarface; or they inscribe
themselves into historical contexts, such as the American West, wherein conventional history narratives have rendered them invisible – Ruff Riders, Smith and Wesson, Bushwick Bill, Buffalo Soldiers. They also depict the extent to which they are psychologically bound to the period of slavery – Field Mob, Dred Scott, Brotha Lynch Hung, and Gat Turner. These last monikers reinforce my notions regarding contemporary artists’ psychic connection to their slave ancestry. The last name, in particular, a nod to insurrectionist Nat Turner, exemplifies rappers’ caustic reinscriptions of history. Although not necessarily commercially successful, these artists are among those who produce underground sounds about procuring cultural, religious, and political strength. The act of renaming grants rap artists powerful agency to transcend historical stereotypes and address issues that continually bind them to an enslaved past.

Creating Healing, Visual Narratives

As psychologist Douglas Bremner notes, victims of psychological distress can re-experience traumatic events as “flashbacks and intrusive memories over which affected patients have no control and that appear to flood their consciousness at will.” Perhaps nowhere do we see more obsessively the evidence of trauma associated with racial identity than in music videos, to which I next turn. If the videos and lyrics demonstrate black youths’ traumatic memory of slavery, I also argue that the incessant recreation, recollection, or reassembling of traumatic memories implies rappers’ ability to transcend or heal from the trauma. I consider three examples of music videos that prominently feature rappers’ preoccupation with the slave experience. In the first, Niggaz With
Attitude (N.W.A) seems finally held hostage to a racist past it cannot re-imagine. In the next, artist David Banner displaces historically supremacist figures and behaviors with communal solidarity. In the last video on which I work in the most detail, rapper TI demonstrates how robbing racist iconography of its power facilitates his success. In so doing, he stops the need to revisit those images. TI’s lyrics and associated images create a powerful survivalist text, suggesting that instead of revivifying images of slavery, black youth can look to other positive popular ancestors. As is true for renaming, then, music videos are revisionist texts which not only allow rappers to reinsert themselves into historical contexts as players and not just victims, but they also re-inscribe narrative history and rework cultural memory in a way that potentially liberates black youth.

In the mid- to late-80s, most rappers were signed with smaller record companies. An increasing number of smaller networks, such as the pay-per-video cable channel, The Box, and burgeoning African American all-music station BET, as well as MTV producers who had once been skeptical about the commercial viability of hip-hop, were now eager to present visual representations of the most popular rap songs. In spite of the new-found attention, few label executives allocated money for video production. Consequently, early rappers were largely responsible for conceptualizing the shoot and creating the finished product. Such was the case for Ruthless Records and their gangsta rap group Niggaz With Attitude (N.W.A.).

N.W.A. is perhaps best known for its groundbreaking album *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) featuring their most incendiary song “F**k the Police.” Despite the popularity of their more violent and anti-establishment songs, the only video that N.W.A. made for that album was “Express Yourself.”17 The lyrics faintly allude to the group’s
consciousness regarding their place in history ("I'm droppin' flavor, my behavior is hereditary") and to the period of slavery, or Jim Crow ("...doin' the job, NWA is the lynch mob!"). This latter reference reverses the power dynamics inherent in Anglo-American historical depictions of that era. However, the video itself, as a manifestation of the groups' own creative impetus, is rife with startling images revealing the harsh conditions of slavery and, ultimately, the death of its lead member, Dr. Dre, at the hands of a slave master persona.

The first scenes in the video depict the hardships of young slaves working in the cotton fields under the watchful eye of a mounted overseer who whips them. Fed up with their own mistreatment, three young men run away. From a worm's-eye-view, the camera captures the teens leaping over a row of cotton and then cuts to a huge sign which reads "I Have a Dream" through which members of NWA animatedly rip open. By bursting onto the scene in this way, the gangsta rap group suggests that their message is as pressing as that of esteemed civil rights figure, Dr. Martin Luther King. Perhaps more important, the imagery actually positions N.W.A. as a tether between the enslaved past and the present. Mirroring the fragmented narrative of a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the sepia-colored images characterizing the period of slavery are visible as incoherent flashbacks and partial memories that sporadically break up scenes of Easy-E and Ice-Cube stomping through the Compton streets and Dr. Dre and MC Ren sitting in a county jail cell. There are other brief flashbacks of the past that demonstrate the groups' irreverence for events and phenomena which dominant culture holds sacred. Among them is a reenactment of the parade in Dallas the day of President Kennedy's assassination. Members of NWA pose as bodyguards who walk alongside the
convertible carrying Dr. Dre (playing the role of JFK) and black female Jackie O. Whereas Kennedy was shot and killed while riding inside the car, the two black characters brazenly sit above the seats near the convertible top, defying someone to bother them. The shots are not audible, but everyone in the car flinches and the bodyguards reach for their guns. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Dre regains his composure and, unaffected by the assassination attempt, he and his entourage proceed with the parade.

The video reworks a number of images. For example, the text presents a visual conversion of the White House to the “Black House.” There is also an instance in which Dr. Dre appears as the new kinder version of the overseer who allows young slaves in the field to “express themselves” through dance. Ironically, while the video revises and inserts NWA into a series of other historical instances, the rappers merely recast the mood of slavery; they do not eliminate it. Moreover, despite all of the “gangsta,” or subversive images and words they deploy, in the end, Dr. Dre is not able to prevent his own demise.

The last scenes of the video depict Dr. Dre as he tentatively walks down a long hallway toward a small room. Just as the rapper crosses the threshold, a White priest (the same man who had been the slave master) unveils an electric chair. The camera closes in on Dr. Dre’s face, and in what appears to be a split-second technical glitch in the video, the rapper experiences a flashback of the slave master cracking his whip. The next full scene depicts a calm-faced Dr. Dre, shaking from the high voltage emitted from the electric chair. Taken together, these last scenes suggest two important ideas: one, the memories of slavery are so traumatic and so indelibly etched into rappers’ collective consciousness that even when given the opportunity to ignore them, many hip-hop artists
cannot; and two, the correlation so many hip-hop artists have drawn between contemporary, or "neo-slave culture," and what Angela Davis calls "the prison industrial complex." Unlike the rap music videos which I analyze next, "Express Yourself" cannot find its way to being more than a series of flashbacks. It does not present a coherent narrative of either the present or the past and, therefore, it fails to permit the viewer to heal from the disturbing images it screens.

NWA's video reveals the groups' fears and unconscious angst about the period of slavery, so too does one of the most recent videos by David Banner and Lil' Flip. Finally, however, the video stages resistance to those images through the imaginative reclaiming of spaces once occupied by slaves, including a graveyard. Because of their Southern roots, the rappers' collective sensibility is perhaps more informed by slavery than NWA's. In summer 2003, MTV interviewed Mississippi-born rapper, David Banner, at which time he admitted that the period of slavery is an indelible part of his consciousness.

Banner's debut album appropriately, entitled "Mississippi: the Album," (2003) features one of the most popular club songs, "Like a Pimp." The lyrics are undeniably misogynistic and violently pornographic, referring to women as "hoes," and suggesting that "real" men are pimps if they enjoy seeing women in the club dance provocatively and if they prioritize making money. Flip begins:

By the time I hit the door/ I saw hoes on the flo'/ Niggas dressed in suits
Trickin' all they hoes/ Me, I'm a pimp/ I ain't paying for no sex/ Man,
I'd rather buy a car or a new Rolex ...

David Banner continues:

you can catch us at E&J's pouring it up/ Flip whipping Cali trucks/ Girls licking my nuts/ We some south side pimps/ And we ain't giving a fuck/ Poke yo girls up in the throat/ And make her swallow the nut...
I concede that these lyrics are gross. However, important for my analysis is the disconnect between the lyrical and visual content. The lyrics to “Like a Pimp” do not broach the topic of slavery, and the thematic content is not at all related to the notion of physical or psychological oppression. However, the initial video depicts Banner running through a graveyard, shabbily dressed, barefoot, and draped in a tattered Dixie flag. Like an apparition, he appears and reappears on the screen, a ghost of the slaveholding past. In the next scene, the camera abruptly cuts to show a huge assembly of contemporary black youth dancing and singing in front of an abandoned school. Most of the video pans the crowd and shows close ups of David and Flip. However, intermingled with those images are flashbacks of robed and hooded Klansmen, burning three large crosses. Initially these images are startlingly frightening, but during the course of the video, a handful of black youth displaces the KKK figures, extinguish and destroy the crosses, and stand fearlessly in the dark woods.

If NWA’s “Express Yourself” expresses an immovable anxiety about slavery, “Like a Pimp” allows black youth to imagine themselves triumphant against the white supremacy that persists in national culture. Furthermore, to modify the work of psychologist David Bremner that began this section, I see videos’ act of remembering the past as one essential way of revising the initial traumatic event and overcoming it. Tying the rapper’s consciousness to the streets and to underground culture of youth survival, I turn to my final example, TI’s “Rubber Band Man,” which reconstructs the potentially devastating iconography of slavery in a way that reassures black youth that they can achieve freedom through unconventional means and by remembering their heritage.²¹

Freedom is a pervasive concept within black youth cultural imaginings. While it
may be less obvious how the more popularly accepted rap music songs articulate the theme of liberation, the sounds from the underground hip-hop/rap music culture express black youths’ desire to claim their individual, communal, sexual, and economic, autonomy. An overwhelming number of Black youth believe, as does TI, that freedom is a by-product of the hustle – the hustle for money – as well as an understanding of African American cultural history. Perhaps one of the most provocative images in the video for “Rubberband Man” (2004), are the letters T and I which are blazing in the background of a number of shots. These letters have become a trademark of the rapper, yet they are not only his initials, but I argue they are also a deconstruction of the burning cross that is metonymous with the KKK. (See Figures 2.1 and 2.2.) Remarkably, in the video, the “I” in the rappers’ initials is significantly smaller than the “T,” indicating that the rapper himself, or perhaps the person who conceived the video shoot, may be conscious of the power in reworking the emblem. In a very real sense, the modification of this potentially traumatic symbol accomplishes a similar objective as do the youth who chase out the clansmen in the David Banner video. Here, TI demonstrates the ability that all Black youth have to effect their own liberation, reconstructing powerful self-images using even the most ominous symbols of racist ideology. In the video, restoring elements of African Americans’ own cultural past is critical for transcending trauma and, hence, TI remembers Marvin Gaye and Cassius Clay -- two powerful African American icons. In “Rubber Band Man,” TI and other record industry celebs wear rubberbands around their wrists.

This trend is an East Coast, primarily male, phenomenon that began in the late 60s. Marvin Gaye and other high-profile black men wore rubberbands as a signal to their
brothers in the streets that, despite their wealth, they considered themselves part of the struggle and they had not forgotten where they came from. Paradoxically, within contemporary hip-hop culture, the drug dealer, the pimp, and the hustler occupy a similar social space as entertainers, and in many instances, black youth consider the former more representative of "the rubberband man." Street lore projects the rubberband man as a black male who has acquired so much money that he sorts his bills by denominations and wraps like monies with a rubberband.

Fig. 2.1. -- Cross

![Cross Diagram]

Fig. 2.3. -- Deconstructed cross

![Deconstructed Cross Diagram]
Who I’m is? Rubberban Man wild as the Taliban/ 25 in my right; 50
large in my other hand/ Call me “Trouble Man” [‘cause I’m] always in
trouble, man/worth a couple hundred grand…

Here, typical of rappers’ desire to project themselves as the most formidable persona, TI
equates his roguish character with the one of America’s most reviled band of outlaw
enemies – the Taliban. To be sure, TI does not use that simile to suggest his anti-
patriotism; rather, he wants to assure prospective enemies, or “haters,” that his being a
rapper does not in any way diminish his ability to “take care of business” in the streets.
Like Jay-Z and so many other of his peers, he is proficient at making money either as a
rapper or as an outlaw. Black males’ ability to garner mainstream success and
underground credibility is one of the most coveted and mythologized dualities within hip-
hop culture. Similarly, TI claims to be a manifestation of two powerful icons that
represent a similar soft/hard or lover/fighter duality:

I’m a young Cassius Clay of my day; the Marvin Gaye of my time/
Tryin’ to stay alive livin’ how I say in my rhymes…

Claiming to be a reincarnation of the legendary Marvin Gaye and a contemporary
manifestation of the physically powerful revolutionary Cassius Clay, TI illustrates the
ways in which black youth use popular cultural figures to link them to their ethnic roots.
Ultimately, this act projects him as “real” representative figure of hip-hop culture and as
a formidable “rider” for freedom and, thus, a hero.

Within black youth cultural mythology, the rubber band continues to represent a
tether, signifying the bond that affluent black males, regardless of their commercial or
gangsta lifestyles, have with their roots. As is the custom in the streets, when a black
man acts in a way that indicates he is forgetting his people, he or someone close to him
snaps the rubberband, inflicting pain. That immediate physical trauma only mildly
replicates the pain of slavery, yet it serves to remind him of both his ancestral struggle and the continued plight of those who haven’t accumulated enough wealth to prevent them from having to “put in work,” or hustle:

Grand hustle man, mo’ hustles than Hustle Man/ But why the rubberband? It’s representin’ the struggle man. My folk gon’ trap until they come up with another plan/ Stack and crumble bread to get theyself off they mama land…

As a resident of one of the toughest public housing communities in Atlanta, “The Trap,” TI is conscious that hustling is essential to black youths’ collective survival. Not only does he hustle to stay alive, but he and his “folk” hustle for two important reasons: to establish their autonomy by moving from their mothers’ houses (“they mama land”) and to move away from the poverty and disenfranchisement that the Trap represents. For black youth, America’s projects and ghettos, not the African motherland of freedom, signify the “motherland” of the enslaved as opposed to that of the free. As the “Rubberband Man,” TI envisions that he personifies the link between African Americans’ past and present. Consequently, in this song, he assumes responsibility for initiating the acts of communal participation that will produce economic success and, particularly, male liberation. TI conceives that he can do this by encouraging black youth – all his folk -- to remember historical/ancestral struggles. The acts of remembering and acknowledging ancestors, deifying rappers, and constructing cyphers create the culture that produces rap music’s underground sound and, ultimately, construct the hip-hop generation’s pedagogy of survival.

Whereas the earlier part of this chapter explicates some of the ways black youth popular cultural forms evince the trauma of their contemporary captivity, the latter half investigates proactive methods youth employ to withstand and transcend their
contemporary captivity. Rappers create pedagogical texts that advocate the surest means of survival for every member of the Black community, or according to TI, for all the “folk” who are willing to listen for the underground sounds in rap music and, equally important, for those who have the audacity to struggle against America’s oppressive politics.

In *Living with Racism: The Black Middle Class Experience*, (1994), Joe Feagin and Melvin Sykes suggest very few white Americans can conceive the rage African Americans feel toward this country. The prejudice and discrimination that is rampant within American culture forces African Americans to pay “psychological cost” in the form of “humiliation, frustration, resignation, and depression.” These costs, they say, “require major defensive strategies.” Rather than leaving the country, black youth actively participate in a system comprised of cultural conventions, myth-making techniques, and language practices that insulate but also empower them to survive in a socio-political environment they often liken to the period of slavery itself.

In the underground world of hip culture, rappers deploy words not weapons, and rather than running from or avoiding physical confrontation, members of the rap culture perceive America as a giant cypher. In the English language, “cipher” has several meanings: it means “zero” or nothing; it is a means of altering and/or concealing textual meaning; and, it can be a key to interpreting certain texts. For black youth, hip-hop culture is a huge “cypher” – a cultural code – that at once conceals their intentions, alters the spelling of the language, and provides keys for interpreting the underground sound, or “down low,” meanings inherent in their music. Outsiders consider hip-hop culture a system of words and images uttered by ignorant marginalized youth who have no sense
of purpose or of self. Nevertheless, members of the hip-hop generation consider the
cypher the code of the street and stand within it to share their individual stories, transmit
communal history, impart values and wisdom, and establish practical codes for survival.
Perhaps most significant to this study, these narratives answer Henry Louis Gates's and
Nelly McKay's questions regarding how African Americans can successfully use the
language of dominant culture to transcend their beleaguered existence. There are four
principle aspects of the cypher to which black rappers adhere: the accurate transmission
of hip-hop history, acknowledgement of African American cultural legends and icons,
signification, and battling. Combined, these elements generate the underground sound
and oftentimes distinguish oppositional hip-hop music from mainstream rap products.

*The past is ever present...*

During the period of slavery, the phenomenon of the underground railroad was
popular lore, and as pro-slavery forces maintained a watchful eye, slaves, even former
slaves, protected the their specific escape routes, to ensure their continued use. In an
April 9, 1851 installation to *Voice of the Fugitive*, former slave Henry Bibb submitted an
account of an interview he conducted with 23-year-old James McGuire. McGuire had
successfully escaped on the underground railroad from Louisiana to Canada. Bibb
himself eventually escaped to Canada, but because he was from Kentucky, it is unlikely
that he and McGuire shared the exact same route to freedom. Nevertheless, in Bibb's
account, he says, "We decline stating just how he escaped from that city to a free State,
lest it might expose our underground railroad" (emphasis added). Though Bibb was
free, he continued to acknowledge the underground railroad as a part of his reality and
most significantly, did not hinder his still-encumbered brethren from using it.

As Bibb’s account attests, fugitive slaves who successfully traversed the underground railroad had to leave behind clear, distinguishable markers that would not alert increasingly suspicious anti-abolitionists but that would enable subsequent escapees to chart similar paths to freedom. Names, images, and catchy phraseology were among the most impressionable signposts. Similarly, within rap culture, black youth carefully drop clues that testify to their cultural affiliations and sensibilities. Citing the names of recognizable cultural icons and using idiomatic expressions in their own music, rappers silently acknowledge their “down low” desires for freedom and cultural affiliation. Signposts vary, for example, a mainstream rapper who wishes to let hip-hop fans know where his loyalties lie may perform a “shout out,” or mention the name of an underground legend in his song. For example, in “Moment of Clarity” (2001), Jay-Z says, “If skills sold, truth be told, I’d probably be/ Lyrically Talib Keli/ Turthfully, I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/ But I did five mil; I aint been rhymin’ like Common since.” Hip-hop purists – those who make music for the pure joy of it and don’t cater to mainstream notions about content and style – make sense of the multiple meanings in these lines. In them, Jay-Z acknowledges underground superstars Talib Kweli and Common Sense (aka “Common”), who have received relatively little commercial success, but says that he has not been able to “rhyme like Common since” he began money selling records.

By performing this brief shout out and likewise, by admitting that his own music does not adhere to all of the conventions that are characteristic of black nationalist principles, Jay-Z demonstrates the extent to which his mainstream popularity potentially
compromises his street reputation even as his consciousness is bound to and aligned with the underground sound. Out of respect for Jay-Z, Talib Kweli returns the compliment in his song “It’s the Ghetto” (2003): “If lyrics sold then truth be told, I’d probably be just as rich and famous as Jay-Z/ Truthfully, I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/ Next best thing I do a record with Common Sense.”\(^{27}\) Here, not only does Kweli mimic Jay-Z’s delivery, but his text speaks to Jay-Z’s, subtly correcting any lingering doubts about the mainstream artists’ lyrical abilities and publicly confirming for the benefit of any prospective disbelievers Jay-Z’s strong bond with the underground in spite of his overwhelming mainstream success.

Occasionally rappers who want to garner attention and respect in their own right, borrow the lyrical stylings or phraseology from other more well-respected rappers. This can accomplish three primary objectives: one, a well-established rapper can reach out to their listeners who will empathize with, or “feel,” him despite the fact that his background or lifestyle choice is dramatically different from theirs; two, a non-black rapper can earn respect by referencing a popular name or a particular line from the work of a popular rap icon; and three a relative new-comer or lesser-considered artist can demonstrate his knowledge of hip-hop history by paying respect to hip-hop legends.

The late Christopher Wallace (The Notorious B.I.G.) is a huge icon in the rap world. Creating his own complex personas – Black Frank White, Biggie Smalls, B.I. -- Biggie created some of the most well-developed albums in rap history -- reenacting his birth, illustrating the trials of his life, and prophesizing his untimely death. Born in Brooklyn, the rapper’s work presents him as a beleaguered, remorseful criminal whose poor lifestyle choices do not reflect his soul’s striving but are rather a consequence of his
upbringing. Despite the ways in which his background and character differ from that of any typical member of his audience, Biggie's lyrics assure listeners that he shares with them a common hip-hop history. His memories of the origins of hip-hop illustrate the ways that black youth typically interweave the music with their own personal maturation processes. Likewise, his acknowledgement of black cultural icons and hip-hop legends helps to coalesce youth around the country who have either shared his experiences and/or who want to rekindle their connection with the culture. Quite a few of Biggie's songs begin with reminiscences. For example, in "Things Done Changed" (1993), Biggie compares the present-day streets of New York with his impressions of the city when he was young:

Remember back in the days, when niggas had waves/ Gazelle shades, and corn braids/ Pitchin' pennies, honies had the high-top jellies, shootin' skelly, motherfuckers was all friendly/ Loungin' at the barbeques, drinkin' brews with the neighborhood crews, hangin' on the avenues/ Turn your pagers to nineteen ninety-three, niggas is getting' smoked up, G, believe me...  

Biggie draws all listeners in with his first line with the word "remember." Even those Black youth who did not live in New York recall the mid-80s fashion faux-pas – Gazelles and finger waves – the barbecues in the park, and jelly shoes.

Interestingly, while Biggie does not exclude those youth who do not share these exact memories, he makes it clear that he is participating in a privileged dialogue with those who have a similar frame of reference. Similarly, in "Juicy" (1993), Biggie conjures quite a few memories that all members of the hip-hop generation, regardless of whether they lived in New York, likely will recall fondly.

It was all a dream. I used to read Word Up! Magazine/ Salt'n'Pepa and Heavy D up in the limousine/ Hangin' pictures on my wall; Every Saturday "Rap Attack," Mr. Magic, Marley Marl/ I let my tape rock 'til my tape popped; smokin' weed and bamboo, sippin' on private
stock/ Way back when I had the red and black lumberjack with the hat
to match/ Remember “Rappin’ Duke?” Du-hah, Du-hah.... You never
though that hip-hop would take it this far/ Now I’m in the
limelight’cause I rhyme tight/ Time to get paid; blow up like the
World Trade/ Born sinner, the opposite of a winner; remember when I
used to eat sardines for dinner/ Peace to Ron G, Brucey B, Kid Capri,
Fundmaster Flex, Lovebug Starsky/ I’m blowin’ up like you thought I
would/ Call the crib, same number same hood/ It’s all good... 29

In this song, Biggie reverts to the days before the advent of XXL, The Source, and Vibe
magazines, when Word Up! was the resource for hip-hop news and issues. Black youth
around the country collected posters of lesser-known rap artists and tuned into Marley
Marl’s radio show “Rap Attack” to hear the latest rap recordings. Club owner Mr.
Magic, the rap song “Rappin’ Duke” (1985), and each of the DJ’s who encouraged Big
and gave him his start had a significant impact on hip-hop culture. His proximity to these
legends, his acknowledgement of them in his song, and his extending an invitation to
them for keep in touch, provides a model for black youth of communal participation and,
likewise, demonstrates what hip-hop culture means by “keeping it real” – that is, being
true to the Black Experience and the black tradition – “showing love,” and “being down.”
Combined, each of these sentiments construct the “ryde or die” approach to community
and to life that the hip-hop generation adopts to survive.

Rappers who are an established part of hip-hop culture can reference hip-hop
history; however, those artists who are not necessarily part of what is understood as the
Black experience can pay tribute to hip-hop cultural phenomenon to demonstrate their
fidelity and knowledge of hip-hop history. Fat Joe (aka Joe Crack the Don), for example,
is a Puerto Rican rapper and member of the infamous Terror Squad in New York City.
The rap group was head by Big Pun(isher), one of the most dynamic lyricists of all time.
Joe, however, has always been a mediocre rapper who earned some respect as a sidekick
of Big Pun and as producer of smaller artists, such as female singer Lumidee in 2003. After Pun’s death in 2000, few rappers considered Joe a formidable solo act. To gird his reputation, the rapper began to expand his following by appealing to audiences outside New York. For example, he is featured on the successful hit “Salt Shaker” (2004) produced by two of the largest acts out of Atlanta -- the Yin Yang Twinz and Lil’ Jon, the king of what has recently been termed “Southern Crunk” music. Additionally, in the song, Joe pays homage to West coast phenomenon Snoop Dogg, by referencing lines from “Ain’t No Fun” (1999). Snoop says, “Now as the sun rotates and my game grow bigger/ How many bitches wanna fuck with this nigga named Snoop.”30 Similarly, in “Salt Shaker” Fat Joe says, “When the sun goes down and my dick grows bigger/ How many bitches wanna fuck this nigga named Crack.”31 Much can be said about the way that Joe, as non-black rapper, appropriates the language of sexuality to establish himself as a formidable figure outside his geographical comfort zone. However, that discussion will be reserved for the later in this chapter. What is essential here is the idea that Northern rappers are often accused of not acknowledging either Southern or Western rappers, so Joe’s collaborative effort and his “shout out” serve to dispel those insinuations.

Rappers who have made it big on their respective local underground scenes and who likewise want to be respected in underground settings of other cities have to acknowledge hip-hop legends. Such is the case for Houston-based rapper Lil’ Flip. For the past twelve years, Flip has enjoyed considerable success on the southern region. However, it was only with his latest effort, Game Over (2004) that he earned the respect of Northern and Eastern rap communities. His acknowledging Rakim’s classic song
"Eric B. is President" (1987) is indicative of his knowledge of hip-hop history and his preparedness to step into the cypher. Rakim says, "I came in the door, I said it before/ I'd never let the mic magnetize me no more..." Comparably, Lil' Flip says, "I came in the door, I told y'all before/ I never fall in love with a muthafuckin' hoe." Again, similar to the case with Fat Joe, the deviation in the newcomer's music away from an emphasis on the power of the rhyme onto more sexually explicit content is indicative of a general shift in mainstream music. In many ways this shift has a lot to do with the fact that more young white males consider rap a means to express their discomfiture with their own social status. In the past, black males were the largest consumers of rap music and black rappers emphasized words as powerful weapons of truth and "realness." Since the mid-90s, however, white males have comprised an increasingly larger consumer base for rap music, and therefore, mainstream rap music caters to them. An outraged black underground rap community has been extremely vocal about the priority shift in commercial rap music and the deterioration of various cultural signatures. While an overwhelming number of mainstream rappers assert their individuality, bragging and "flossing," underground rappers, such as Wise Intelligent -- the lead member of five percenter group, Poor Righteous Teachers and protégé of KRS-One -- sounds off on rappers who have succumbed to mainstream disrespect of hip-hop and its requisite ancestral features.

In his collaborative effort with KRS-One, "Conscious Rap" (1993), Wise Intelligent asks:

Yo, where the teachers went, with all that pro-black shit? Where all the conscious niggas who used to chat like this? See I remember yesterday when y'all was Gods and Earth/Egyptians and metaphysicians on the verge of giving birth to understanding and planting seed that grow?/ Now everybody's on that bullshit about killing and so, "Eat my pussy," "suck
my dick,” well that’s the size of the shit/ so in the head of ignorance, I rip
some conscious clip...I bring gift of life, light and God’s decree, ‘cause
God is the size of me…34

Protesting the absence of historical and ancestral references, and, likewise, identifying a
lapse in or lack of underground sensibility in contemporary rap music, Wise Intelligent,
like other underground rap artists, assumes the mantle of producing conscious rap that
acknowledges the larger community of cultural forebearers and revives the gift of
politicized speech.

**There is a God on the Mic**

Rapper KRS-One, aka Kris Parker, is perhaps one of the most prolific artists to
date. His music is not only indicative of hip-hop’s underground sound, but in the mid-
80s, it also motivated Black youth to consider themselves rap deities, or gods on the mic.
In 1967, KRS-One was born in the Bronx -- hip-hop music’s ground zero. His parents
separated when he was four years old and, he ran away in his early teens to join one of
the Bronx’s most notorious street gangs. It was during the nine years KRS-One lived on
the streets that rap music became increasingly popular. With few alternatives, KRS spent
much of his time honing his lyrical skills and “getting schooled” by Melle Mel, legendary
godfather of rap, and author of the most influential rap song ever recorded, “The
Message” (1979).

Over the course of his seventeen-year career, KRS-One has influenced the
work of numerous hip-hop performers. He has produced thirteen of his own albums and
has been featured on approximately 63 other hip-hop projects, including “Self-
Destruction” (1987) – the timeless anti-gang anthem. His early albums – Criminal
Minded (1987), By All Means Necessary (1988), Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip-hop (1989); and Edutainment (1990) – are hip-hop classics and have defined the content of “conscious rap” – music made for the spiritual uplift of black youth rather than for commercial radio rotation. As a teacher and hip-hop philosopher, KRS-One has refined the texture of the underground sound. Typical of many rappers’, KRS-One envisions that his own lyrics shatter the physical and psychological shackles that restrict black youths’ collective mobility. Moreover, he conceives that the communal practice of rap liberates hip-hop heads, introducing them to pertinent historical and cultural information. For example, in “Break the Chain” KRS-One says,

...the chain that used to be on your foot/ now it’s in your mind; behind your eyes...you can’t see it, you can’t believe it/ I’m breaking the chain of ignorance...open your eyes; realize I’m bein’ God...

Here, KRS-One creates a parallel between contemporary black youth and their enslaved ancestors. Presenting himself as God, however, the rapper imagines that his words are capable of liberating the mentally enslaved, by educating them about their own history and insurgent power. In this way, hip-hop is a Bible for Black youth and rappers become deities, namely the personification of Jesus, who will save them from bondage. (See Figures 2.1 – 2.6.)

Like many of his Bronx peers – Big Daddy Kane, Kool Mo Dee, D-Nice, KRS-One is a Five Percenter in the Nation of Islam, and most of his rhymes project a fusion of Muslim and Black Panther doctrines that have become pervasive within most underground hip-hop music. In the early 80s, Clarence X, a member of the Nation of Islam, asserted the “Five Percenter” philosophy, reversing prevailing racist ideology and
advancing the notion that the Black man is God. As was previously mentioned, this sentiment is evinced in rap lyrics; however, it is also apparent in salutations black youth extend one another, such as "What up, G?" or "Yo, God!" Ironically, the word "dog," which DMX popularized in the late 90s with his song "Ruff Ryders," is a more deeply

![Makaveli](image)

Fig. 2.3. Image of a crucified TuPac Shakur on cover of The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory, Death Row/Interscope, 2006.

The image appears on TuPac’s album cover illustrates a popular sentiment in the hip-hop community that, similar to Christ, the artist was a persecuted martyr.
Figures 2.4 – 2.7. Images of Nas’ album covers

Images of album covers for four of Nas’s eight albums illustrate the artist’s desire to at once remain rooted in his community and present himself as both a transcendent prophet and representation of African/African American history. Certainly his likening himself to 16th century prophet Nostradamus may seem out of sync with other representations. However, in his renaming himself “Nastradamus” exemplifies the rapper’s strategy of re-inscribing history and reinserting himself to counter historical erasure. Additionally noteworthy is the fact that in one version of the music video for “Hate Me Now” (1999), Nas re-enacts Christ’s arduous walk to Calvary.
Fig. 2.8. Image of Kanye West as Jesus on the cover of Rolling Stone Magazine, February 2006. When controversial rapper, Kanye West, posed as Jesus on the cover of Rolling Stone, the mainstream music outlet created a visual narrative for his popular song “Jesus Walks,” that publicly acknowledged rap artists’ tendency to deify themselves.
embedded code for the powerful, omnipotent black man. “Dog” is “God” spelled backwards, and while the former term is taken literally within mainstream culture, its latent meaning, “God,” reveals hip-hop’s down low consciousness.

In *Is there a God on the Mic* (2004), Kool Mo Dee substantiates the notion that black rappers consider themselves supreme beings. He says that “the original hip-hop trinity,” was established in roughly 1984 and included himself, as “master technician” and leader of the Treacherous Three; Grandmaster Caz, the master of the live rhyme, or the battle rap, and former lead member of the Cold Crush Brothers; and Melle Mel, the godfather of modern-day hip-hop philosophy, lead man for the rap group the Furious Five, and the architect of the groundbreaking rap song, “The Message” (1979).

In 1987, Mo “gracefully passed the baton” to Rakim; “Caz passed his to Big Daddy Kane,” and after some hesitation Mel relinquished his position to KRS-One. This last transfer of power is, perhaps most essential, because as Mel’s successor, KRS-One was bequeathed the mantle of preserving black history, a methodology for hip-hop survival. Whereas Melle Mel was the first rapper to equate the image of the slave with black youth in an urban environment, KRS-One was the first to compare Malcolm X’s diatribe of the house and field nigga persona to mainstream and underground hip-hop artists. In “House Niggas” (1990) he says:

> For every Jesus, there must be a Judas/ It’s the concept of the house nigga, field nigga/ The house nigga will sell you up the river so to massa he’ll look bigger/ and wouldn’t ya’ bet under a rock, he’ll slither/ But I’ll grab the tail of the house nigga; pull the trigger and his head I’ll deliver to the court of the righteous people...In the face of intelligence, ignorance dies dear, it’s simple edutainment/ Rap need a teacher, so I became it...with lyrics sharp as a machete/ Clap, there’s another house nigga’s neck/ Another soft Uncle Tom crew is in check....

In these lines, Parker distinguishes commercial rap artists from those who occupy the underground, suggesting that the former are “house niggaz,” veritable Uncle Toms who
are responsible for maintaining the status quo in the music. To mitigate any trauma they have caused on the culture, he’s going to slay those “weak crews” with his lyrics. Likening himself and all other “real,” or “field niggas” to Jesus, KRS-One asserts that underground recording artists produce music for “the righteous people,” in other words, for those who value intelligence rather than the buffoonery of commercial rap.

In “Why is That?” (1989), KRS-One suggests that not only do “wack” commercial emcees negatively effect the psychological health of black youth, but incoherent and erroneous histories also inflict trauma on youth culture: “…mental pictures, stereotypes and fake history reinforces mystery/ and when mystery is reinforced, that only means that knowledge has been lost.” The following excerpt demonstrates the way that the consecrated rapper reinscribes biblical narratives, providing black youth with information from which he believes society prohibits them full access:

…we’re not here for glamour or fashion, but here’s the question I’m askin’/ Why is it young black kids taught (flashing?)/ They’re only taught how to read, write, and act/ It’s like teaching a dog to be a cat... Why is that? Is it because we are the minority? Well black kids follow me/ Genesis chapter eleven verse ten explains the genealogy of Chem/ Chem was a black man in Africa/ If you repeat this fact they can’t laughed at ya/ Genesis fourteen verse thirteen Abraham steps on the scene/ Being a descendent of Chem which is a fact/ Means Abraham too was black Abraham born in the city of a black man/ Called Nimrod grandson of Kam/ Kam had four sons, one was name Canaan; Here let me do some explainin’/ Abraham was the father of Isaac; Isaac was the father of Jacob/ Jacob had twelve sons for real and these were the children of Israel/ According to Genesis chapter ten, Egyptians descended from Ham/ Six hundred years later, my brother read up Moses was born in Egypt/ In this era black Egyptians weren’t right; they enslaved black Israelites/ Moses had to be of the black race; because he spent forty years in Pharaoh’s place/ He passed as the Pharaoh’s grandson so he had to look just like him..."

The remainder of the song continues in this way. Rather than referring to slaves as the cultural antecedents of black youth, Parker, in a gesture resembling Langston Hughes’ in the Harlem Renaissance and Mulana Karenga during the Black Arts Movement, reaches
farther back into the past to establish an ancestral lineage that depicts the Black man as the original man.42

To ensure that false histories and memories do not interrupt the transmission of black cultural/hip-hop history and to present an alternative to the information received by black youth in formal educational settings, KRS-One schools his audience about African/Biblical history and racial politics. Not only does Parker’s music relay cultural history, but it also recounts the origins of hip-hop history and positions African American musical antecedents as creators, “gods” of black youth culture. In “Hip-Hop Rules,” (1989), the rapper says:

Way back in the days, 1979, Fatback Band made a record usin’ rhyme/ In the same year come the Sugarhill Gang with the pop pow boogie, and the big bang bang/ R&B, Disco, Pop, country, Jazz, all though Hip-hop was just a little fad/ But here comes Grandmaster Flash nonstop, and right after Flash, Run D. M.C. dropped/ Now, they had to pay attention to the scale where other music failed, hip-hop prevailed...”43

This is perhaps a crude history, but it set the standard for subsequent rappers who speak about the origin of the music and acknowledge their contribution as part of the cultural and historical continuum.

In “Health, Wealth, and Self” (1995), Parker fuses the idea that the black man is God with history, causing a mythic reverberation that divulges certain secrets about hip-hop production. It is also in this passage that Parker provides strategies for managing white postmodernity.

In the beginning was the word, the word was made flesh/ Knowledge K. Reigns R. Supreme S./ some of us guess while others of us are bless/ Take heed to the word that I manifest/ I manifest the future, the present, followed by the past...you a friend to me, so I’mma tell you the secrets of MC longevity... Secret one, if it ain’t fun, you’re done...if you don’t like what you do, you’re through/ Lesson two: make sure you got a dope crew...a mad crew that’s of some
benefit to you/ Lesson three: might be contradictory or funny, but MCs should have other ways of getting' money/ make money elsewhere, so hip-hop you won't abuse it / MCs just emcee, so their longevity is based on an Uncle Tom at the record company/ Lesson four: sell your image; never sell a record/ images is respected, records come and go and get collected...and can be bought, for a quarter at the thrift shop/ which brings me to lesson number five: the illusion has me thinking; the minute they drop a record they'll be cruisin' in the Acura...what separates the pro from the amateur is stamina.  

Parker preaches lessons to which many black male rappers adhere. Reminiscent of the opening lines in the Book of Genesis, the rapper deifies himself in his first lines, compares his words to the Word of God, and refers to himself as man made of the God's flesh. The next two lines, later made famous by Guru of the rap duo Gangstarr, express the timelessness of his lyrical manifestations. By divulging the "secrets" of hip-hop longevity, Parker pulls other rappers into the cypher with him, encouraging them to participate in the culture in a way that ensures they don't fall prey to the pitfalls of the industry and that they preserve its cultural legacy.

*Bring it to the Cypher!*

...A cypher manifested in the center of the jam/ I got to show these wack rappers really who I am...and wage the war, hardcore to the end/ for someone lookin' inside, yeah from the out/ it seems like disrespect is what rap is all about/ But hip-hop as a culture, is really what we give it, but sometimes the culture contradicts how we live it/ 'Cause every black kid lives two and three lives/ The city's a jungle; only the strong survive.

As I previously mentioned, the cypher is a sacred circle within which black youth feel safe to assert their anxieties, beliefs, and fantasies. Conceiving themselves as superhuman beings, black youth step into the cypher to perform powerful narratives that, at once, restore their faith in the power and legitimacy of black expression and enable them to liberate themselves without the assistance of and outside the reach of
conventional socio-political organizations.

Customarily, rappers envision that their own lyrics shatter the physical and psychological shackles that restrict black youths' collective mobility. Moreover, rappers conceive that the communal practice of rap liberates others in both the immediate and larger circle, introducing them to pertinent historical and cultural information. For example, in “Break the Chain” KRS-One says,

...the chain that used to be on your foot/ now it's in your mind; behind your eyes...you can't see it, you can't believe it/ I'm breaking the chain of ignorance...open your eyes; realize I'm bein' God...46

Here, KRS-One creates a parallel between contemporary black youth and their enslaved ancestors. Presenting himself as God, however, the rapper imagines that his words are capable of liberating the mentally enslaved, by educating them about their own history and insurgent power.

In “Avengers,” Mr. Lif and Akrobatik liken both the record industry and the government (“the powers that be”) to terrorists and predators, who reek havoc on America and who destroy anyone, particularly black youth, who oppose its policy-making procedures. Presenting themselves as higher beings, the rappers say that they are “the Avengers/ sent to tear down the terrorists’ perceptionists...”[sic] and that, further, they are endowed with lyrical skills that can control acts of nature: “Life what did Colin Powell say? Who knows? I had flood waters wash his ass.” Similarly in “Arise,” Mr. Lif says that his lyrical skills are so powerful that he can control the universe:

...[I] reverse gravity...I change the climate from cold to balmy...I squeeze acid water out of the skies...I still launch lyrical text that gets so intense it could disassemble all those other meds so you could fear what the God invents. Since I was sent under the name of
Lif, which means to ‘upLif’ it’s my never ending duty to attempt to shift your mind from one train of thought to a more positive state…

Young black males, particularly those who participate in rap culture, believe their individual and collective survival hinges on both their ability to present themselves as word-wielding immortals and their capacity to recuperate and/or preserve their manhood. Ironically, the processes of establishing and asserting masculinity are contingent on rappers’ ability to engage in lyrical warfare, that is, to simultaneously “talk back” to White American sensibilities and “talk black” (“go buck whylin’”), signifying on any and all forms of racialized oppression they experience. As was the case with slaves who demonstrated their mastery of signification in the presence of prospective White eavesdroppers, it is more essential that rappers exhibit effective, or “on point” lyrical skills than it is for them to employ physical force to secure their freedom. In some instances, a rapper’s insistence on using excessive force, or violence, actually bespeaks his effeminacy or worse, precipitates his emasculation. Thus, he jeopardizes his ability to survive. For example, in his protest against the increasing amount of violence in lyrics of West Coast gangsta rappers, Jeru the Damaja (Jeru the Damager) says:

I snatch fake gangsta emcees and make em faggot flambet/ your nines spray, my mind spray malignant mist that’ll leave cart de funk...you couldn’t come to the jungles of the East poppin’ that yang/ You won’t survive...I don’t gang bang or shoot out bang bang, the relentless lyrics the only dope I sling.

Because Black youth do not necessarily feel free to express themselves within the context of the larger American landscape, there are safe places to which they can retreat to practice the pedagogy of survival. The bellicose language in a significant number of rap music texts signifies on black youths’ anxiety and defensiveness about their own
sexuality. Despite popular misconceptions, rappers vehemently articulate their collective opposition to weakened manhood and wavering cultural ties, not to merely criticize or alienate other black males, but rather to ensure that all those who claim cultural affiliation can withstand the rigors of living in an equally combative, compulsorily heterosexual, racially hostile environment. In this sense, battling in the cypher actually models the trials that black men are bound to face within the larger cultural setting. Moreover, to this end, rappers use language that tests each other’s masculinity. Challenging one another in this way affords rappers an opportunity to more forcefully assert themselves within the larger community and filter out their potential enemies. Those rappers who take the battle too seriously or who do not fully understand its function are prone to become offended, lose control, and betray their inability to survive.

The battle rap forum is a microcosm of the larger hip-hop cultural cypher. Rappers can battle each other on their respective albums, in hip-hop films (as illustrated most recently in 8 Mile), or they can confront each other face-to-face before a crowd of their peers. In this latter setting, it is the crowd, not the mainstream record/film industry and certainly not hip-hop outsiders, who determines hip-hop’s local and/or national underground heroes. Just as rappers adhere to rules of engagement within the larger culture, there are several unwritten rules governing the battle rap, and lyricists strictly adhere to these guidelines. Some of the most important conventions are listed below in order of their importance. Kool Moe Dee has established the first five. The last three are my own:

1) A rapper must focus on his opponent, not on himself. The battle is not about how great the rapper is; it’s about how great his opponent isn’t. Therefore, rappers are expected to crystallize their opponents’ weaknesses and make them “step up their game.”
2) Freestyles usually lose in a battle rap competition. Despite popular misconception, successful battle raps are never impromptu performances, or "off the dome;" rather, they are prewritten.

3) Rappers are expected to assume the underdog position. In most instances, the crowd rules against the bully or the favored opponent.

4) Mothers, girlfriends, babies have nothing to do with the battle. For show diss value, sometimes a rapper can score points with the audience by making an occasional reference to a family or crew member. However, such disses cannot be the sole focus of the rhyme. A rapper cannot shock his way to victory.

5) A rapper's money, reputation, and mainstream industry status cannot win the battle for him. These assets mean nothing in battle. The rapper's lyrical abilities must speak for themselves.

6) An official presides over every formal battle rap contest. That designated person is well respected by the crowd and, therefore, cannot demonstrate partiality for any one rapper because he/she may sway the crowd's sympathies.

7) A rapper may not stall the battle performance. He must begin performing shortly (no more than one or two bars) after the DJ spins the record.

8) As is the case in formal debate competition, rappers engaged in battle rap may not extend the established time limit for each round.

Again, the purpose of the battle rap scenario is not to tear down one's opponent for the fun of it. Instead, rappers, particularly males, enter the cypher to test each other's resolve, lyrical skills, and knowledge of other fundamental cultural elements. Interestingly, the battle rap performance bears a striking resemblance to the ride 'n' tie strategy that fugitive slaves employed to emancipate themselves.

Both the ride-and-tie and the battle rap scenario are ruses. In the same way that fugitive slaves alternately perform the roles of good slave and bad slave for any unsuspecting passersby, the dueling rappers voluntarily step onto the stage, and before an unsuspicous crowd, the two pretend to be at odds with each other. In many instances,
opposing rappers may have battled before and, therefore, may be familiar with one another’s style; customarily, however, they do not know each other well enough to have developed any resentment between them. Taking turns on the mic, the rappers execute a carefully conceived routine, alternately binding each other with harsh words and metaphors, challenging each other’s episteme of hip-hop history, and forcing spectators to determine who is the most fit, the most capable, of upholding the cultural traditions. While there can only be one “winner” of any particular battle rap scenario, if the rappers correctly perform the lyrical confrontation, adhering to the rules of engagement, both rappers achieve the respect and autonomy they desire.

The gangsta mentality, or the adversarial demeanor that most contemporary rappers project, particularly these kinds of battle rap confrontations, does not support or advance the notion of alienation to which Black cultural critics often allude. For example, a representative voice of those critics concerned with the notion of black youth alienation is Shelby Steele’s as he identifies a correlation between the hyperbolic individualism in rap and the mistrust in Black youth relationships. Steele asserts that all the central relationships hip-hop generationers’ lives are sources of pain, and, therefore, they cultivate a brand of self-sufficiency that meshes with the simplistic capitalist motto of “every man for himself.” Furthermore, he posits that hip-hop cultural forms not only weave a fabric of alienation and, thus, perpetuate Black youths’ inability to make lasting, meaningful connections with other human beings. This critic’s assessment is short-sighted. While there is an ostensible “every man for himself” thematic running through the music, the latent content, or underground sounds, of the music reinforce alternative cultural and pedagogical praxes: no one man can do anything by himself.
The music and, by extension, the culture is about communal participation; however, only those people who demonstrate the physical ability and the desire to "be down" can accurately hear this message and are, therefore, allowed to "ride." While the music seems to suggest that sentimental love will wound hip-hop participants, Black youth demonstrate love for each other in unconventional ways – ways that render obsolete the kind of affection that either makes them falsely co-dependent on each other or that strips them of their ability to think rationally and objectively about survival and liberation. Black youth discriminately sift people out or separate friends from racialized and/or ideological foes by embracing shared traumatic experiences, demonstrating their knowledge of historical icons and deploying the established linguistic codes of hip-hop culture. Most significantly, using hard, abrasive language, black youth tests the resolve and stamina of those who profess their fidelity to the culture and to its larger political agendas. Doing so enables them to determine who is best fit to survive. According to the lyrics of many Black-youth authored music texts, only those of their peers who can prove their lyrical and physical fitness are equipped to overcome their contemporary captivity.
Notes to Chapter Two


7 Rose 63.


9 Here, I am giving a nod to Poor Righteous Teachers (known to rap fans as PRT), an underground rap group out of Trenton, New Jersey. Group members Wise Intelligent, Culture Freedom, and Father Shaheed dropped their first single “Rock Dis Funky Joint” in 1989. By the time their album Holy Intellect (1990) was available in record stores, the group was enjoying solid mainstream success.

10 See Nathan Rabin, “Interview with KRS-One,” The AV Club, 25 April 2001, 11 July 2007 http://www.avclub.com/content/node/22755>. In his interview, KRS-One explains the breakout success of rap music, saying that most of the forms of communal creative expression are easily dispensable until/unless corporate America devises a way to turn it into profit. Recently, other rap music forms have re-entered pop culture consciousness; however, for youth audiences, break dancing, graffiti, beat boxing, and scratching are primarily pieces of late-70s and early-80’s rap culture nostalgia -- remnants of the by-gone era.

11 Ibid.


15 Here, “culturally specific” means readily associated with African and/or with some African American cultural, social, historical, or religious antecedent.


18 Angela Davis has published widely about the prison industrial complex. Here, I am also considering the pamphlet written by Linda Evans and Eve Goldberg entitled The Prison Industrial Complex and the Global Economy (Chicago: Kersplebedeb, 1998).


23 Feagin and Sykes 293.


36 Conceiving themselves as Jesus or god-like figures, rappers often insert themselves in Biblical narratives. See images of TuPac, Kanye West, and Nas.


38 Kool Moe Dee 158.


41 Ibid.


49 See 8 Mile, dir. Curtis Hanson, perf. Eminem, Kim Basinger, Mekhai Phifer, and Brittany Murphy, Imagine Entertainment, 2002. The formal and informal battle rap scenes in the film 8 Mile provide the best examples of the ways in which white rappers, in general, and Eminem, in particular, disregard Black youth narrative and cultural practices. A more extensive discussion of white rappers' participation in hip-hop culture is forthcoming in a book-length publication of this dissertation.

50 Kool Moe Dee 18.
CHAPTER THREE

Be a Man! Get a Job! Stay Black!: Dangerous Ghetto Manifestoes in Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing

[African-Americans] must perpetually discuss the “Negro Problem,” with this come, too, peculiar problems of their inner life. . . from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid hesitancy is fatal to self-confidence. The worlds within and without the Veil of Color...must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words, and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism.

W.E.B. Du Bois

Rap became a version of Malcolm and Martin...There's some ghetto secrets I can't rhyme in this song/There's some missing pieces I had to leave out...

Nas

I’m just saying the same thing that the hard-core rappers are saying. They say it on wax, and I’m saying it on film.

John Singleton

Since Spike Lee burst into the motion picture industry, a number of African American directors have entered the hip-hop genre, and each of them has attempted to portray in filmic form various aspects and complexities of the “black experience.” While male and female directors — such as John Singleton, the Hudlin Brothers, Bill Duke, Gina Prince Bythewood, and Rick Famuyiwa -- have created many original filmic narratives, their presentations of hip-hop cultural issues are in some way, nonetheless, influenced by Spike Lee. In as much as Do the Right Thing was arguably the first African-American hip-hop cultural narrative, it has significantly informed these later cinematic entries. Throughout his film career, Lee has attempted what Hollywood dared not do – to recreate the lived experience of Black youth in America.
Although I am interested in the way Spike Lee’s first two feature films, *She’s Gotta Have It* (1985) and *School Daze* (1986), address issues of gendered double standards, intraracial prejudices (good hair vs. bad hair, light vs. dark skin), and socioeconomic conditions within the black community, it is Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* that ferrets out what Du Bois perceived as the “peculiar problems” of the Black male’s “inner life.” In this film, Lee explores the “worlds both inside and outside the veil,” including the psychosocial ramifications of a dichotomous existence for all U.S. people of color. Perhaps most significantly, Lee replicates the philosophical debate between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, and shows the difficulty the Black man experiences as he attempts to either adopt one or to reconcile both of the leaders’ ideas.

Over one hundred years ago, W.E.B. Du Bois alleged that one of the critical dilemmas plaguing the African-American male is that “[he] possesses no true self-consciousness.” In his classic *Souls of Black Folks* (1903) Du Bois attributes to American political history the cause of the psychological dilemma he names “double consciousness,” which forces the black man to make the impossible decision of either allying with and fortifying his community or attaching himself to the dominant culture – one historically opposed to the equitable treatment of African-Americans. Evidence of African-American double-consciousness continues to pervade contemporary African American popular culture a century later. In hip-hop culture, African American male youth strive to create both public and private spaces for themselves within which they can affirm their self-worth, thwart the racist gaze of dominant society, and emerge from behind the veil to claim their sexuality and their blackness. Oftentimes, in his quest to actualize selfhood, the young, black hip-hop male is forced to choose between assuming
an accommodationist posture, working within the political system to facilitate social change as did Dr. Martin Luther King, or adopting a Black nationalist attitude, working outside and against the system, as did Malcolm X. For the most part, both rap music and hip-hop film are socially-accepted and sanctioned public forums that enable Black youth to see their concerns addressed in the larger mainstream media. Understanding the way these media preserve and/or advance these cultural sensibilities of the black youth, filmmaker Spike Lee joined the legacies of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in what film critic Billy Baxter considers a “call-to-action.” In Do The Right Thing (1989), Lee woke the world up with what Baxter called his “unsettling parable of the eternal conflicts of race.”

Contemporary rappers like Nas understand their own rap music forwards some of the ideas that characterized a fractured Civil Rights struggle. However, what goes largely unspoken by either rappers or academic critics are the ways that Black filmmakers and the forms of their films about youth “say the same things,” as John Singleton suggests, that rappers say. They continually revisit the political strategies African-American leaders have been articulating since the early-nineteenth century. Ostensibly, the most popular hip-hop films, such as Boyz ‘n the ‘Hood (1991), South Central (1992), and Above the Rim (1994), as well as the more recent Baby Boy (2001) and Brown Sugar (2003), present the fractured Black male psyche. In many movies, two male characters represent both sides of the fractured male psyche. For example, in South Central, Bobby and Ray-Ray represent the duality; in Boyz ‘n the ‘Hood, it’s Tre and Dough Boy; and in Above the Rim (1994), Shep and Birdie are both sides of Kyle’s conscience. Yet, in some later movies, such as Brown Sugar (2002), this dichotomy is visible in two female
characters. In this film, Sydney and Reese represent Dre’s schism. However, I see these films as finally less about the streets than they are about the real socio-political dilemmas that challenge black youth audiences either to choose the path that insures their individual success or to revolt against the system that would thwart familial/communal uplift. In other words, these films stage the dilemma of double consciousness.

This chapter argues that Black rappers manage to satisfy both sites — accommodation and insurgency — in ways that are mimetic of the slave narrative tradition. It is from this same tradition that contemporary Black youths’ cultural politics evolved and remnants of its 19th-century political agenda survive in their 20th-century cinematic narratives. At times misinformed about a collective racialized history, and at other times feigning ignorance of self-constructions and/or of alternative ways to contend with disenfranchisement, Black youth constantly survey the contemporary discursive terrain. Utilizing mainstream cinema, members of the hip-hop community and their political allies construct language systems and other cultural codes — chiefly racial and linguistic signification, costuming, and the ride-and-tie — which surreptitiously elude the gaze of a hyper-critical mainstream culture. Ultimately, hip-hop visual strategies accomplish similar goals to that of rap music — they publicly addressing the otherwise private methodologies for identifying fellow hip-hop cultural participants while deploying an organized approach to racial unity.

The previous chapter discussed key ways African-American male-authored rap music constructs and expresses legitimate Black masculinity, reconstructs a cohesive, linear African-American history, and develops/implements viable strategies for social liberation. Considering the fact that since the advent of *Wild Style* (1982), the first of
what is now considered hip-hop films, mainstream and independent motion-picture companies have produced over 400 hip-hop films and documentaries, it would not be feasible to discuss the ways that each supports my claims. More helpful would be to identify a representative film that develops the key motifs others replicate. Toward this goal, this chapter explores the ways that Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing stands as a filmic example of the psychological “ties that bind” hip-hop generationers – their oftentimes dangerous political strategies for resisting Du Boisian double-consciousness which actually complicate the processes of actualizing their manhood and that, thus, problematize the notion of freedom. Ultimately, I argue that rather than coming down on the cultural nationalist side of the King/X split, the film attests to what can happen within an urban youth community whose members lack guidance and whose primary sense of the “right things” to do is driven by a mistaken recollection of assassinated cultural martyrs.

In hip-hop film, black youth are represented as bound to the ideological negotiations of both King and Malcolm X, willing to assume the mantle of the Civil Rights struggle. Yet, crucial to Black youth cultural efforts is devising systems that effectively identify genuine allies yet rid their communities of potential adversaries who unfairly profit from African American youth culture and labor and do not prevent nor grieve their demise. As does rap music, film affords hip-hop cultural participants a vehicle for introducing and maintaining self-sufficient alternative universes within which they can perpetually transform themselves, challenging Western perceptions of social/political and philosophical idealism, and raising/resurrecting cultural icons and heroes.
Some cultural theorists suggest that lifting up African-American iconic figures conjures a false sense of community. Maurice Stephens, for example, does not speak directly to the construction of rap music or hip-hop film; however, he does discuss the danger of African-American filmmakers acting as historiographers, such as Spike Lee, who reconstruct iconic figures, such as Malcolm X, for popular cultural consumption. In his explication, Stephens cautions that African-American visual narratives of self and community are often predicated on an "American social imaginary that has traditionally dehumanized or dehistoricized 'blackness.'" Because African-Americans have to produce popular cultural forms within the very same social climate that has historically represented them as "lacking," African-Americans' self-writing reflects a desire to displace those less palatable representations with others that might reflect what George Lipsitz identifies as "counter memories" or performances of vindication. Stephens's review of the application of Lipsitz's "counter memories" is, therefore, in my view, an appropriate interpretation of Spike Lee's hyper-masculine reconstruction of Malcolm X. The critics' further assertion that Lee's characterization of X actually "counts memory...overwrit[ing] dominant history [and] produc[ing] new material relations" is also accurate and quite to the point.

Not wanting to emphasize the constraints that tend to define the study of contemporary African American culture, my critical perspective in reading this film models the earliest improvisational form of the Black vernacular tradition and Black cultural studies – call and response. I recognize Spike Lee's filmic text as a call – a manifesto, a plan and a request – for Black youth to understand the danger they face as they attempt to reconcile the conflict of being at once male, Black, and employed. By
allowing the film’s young Black characters to articulate so many different issues that inhibit their own survival and success, and by casting himself in the lead role as the conflicted hip-hop protagonist, Spike Lee himself answers Cornell West’s call for African Americans to “deconstruct earlier modern Black strategies of identity-formation and construct more multivalent and multi-dimensional responses that articulate the complexity and diversity of Black practices in the modern and post-modern world.”

Accordingly, this chapter examines a set of complex imperatives, a set of calls: “Be a man!” “Get a job!” “Stay Black!” and “Do the Right Thing!” These finally are problematic and paradoxical directives, hard to answer, because they comprise a national identity that is hardly automatic for Black men.

**Be a Man**

In *Redefining Black Film* (1993), Mark A. Reid explains that the relationship black filmmakers have with the larger commercial studios is comparable to the double consciousness men have with themselves as identified by Du Bois. This relationship creates a dual consciousness in which filmmakers attempt or pretend to entertain the tastes of the broadest audience.” Reid suggests that black independent filmmakers’ desire to have their movies distributed necessitates their appealing not only to black audiences, but also to white ones. Moreover, the “mixed purpose permits (or requires) some studio-distributed black films...to be saturated with potentially subversive readings.” Unfortunately, critics of Lee’s work often misinterpret the final violent scenes as examples of his perpetuating false, negative images of African-American males. Generally, white America has molded society’s perception of the African-
American race and, likewise, has dictated how African-American men are perceived. In *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee entertains dominant culture’s fixation on black masculinity and, consequently, distracts their attention away from his clandestine messages.

On the surface, Lee presents the Black male characters as the antagonists -- ignoble, idle, belligerent, and sexually aggressive. Conversely, Lee positions the Italian-American males -- Sal Frangione and his sons, Pino and Vito, as the protagonists and, thus, as hard-working, living out the “American dream,” and repeatedly provoked to defend themselves against African-American youth who threaten their existence. However, like Du Bois’s “sorrow songs,” Spike Lee’s cinematic discourse is informed with a double story that eventually discloses his intentions through the riotous ending, illuminating and eliminating the considerable threat confronting African-American masculinity.

As was mentioned, Black film presents the dilemma of double-consciousness; a series of double identities contribute to that phenomena. First, Vito and Pino represent the duality of Sal’s psyche. This is evident in the beginning of the movie when Pino and Vito argue about sweeping the walk.

Sal: “Pino... get a broom and sweep out front.”
Pino: “Vito, pop said get a broom and sweep out front.”
Vito: “See Pop, it’s just what I was telling ya’. Every time you tell Pino what to do, he tells me to do what you told him what to do.”
Sal: “Both of you, shut up.”
Vito: “Tell Pino!”
Sal: “What, am I talking to myself here?”

Sal’s rhetorical question substantiates his duality, yet the quarrel about performing the menial task is not the larger issue plaguing Sal’s conscience. At the heart of Sal’s dilemma is his desire to maintain his manhood. During the course of the film, whenever
he feels threatened, Sal retaliates against his challenger with a bat, a signifier for his potent virility. On the one hand, Pino, the older son, represents Sal’s desire to restore lost manhood. Pino confesses to his father that his friends condemn him for being less than a man, by “serving food to the moolies.” In an effort to reclaim his dignity, Pino belittles the African-American patrons, criticizes Mookie’s job performance, and suggests that his father move out of the neighborhood while they are “ahead and alive.”

Vito, the other half of his father’s consciousness, represents Sal’s desire to forge a relationship with the African-American community. Vito respects Mookie because “Mookie listens to [him].” Likewise, Vito is the only member of the Frangione family who is willing to venture outside of the pizzeria. When Vito accompanies his friend on a delivery, Mookie advises him, perhaps ironically, about how to be a “man.”

**Mookie:** “... I know Pino’s your brother and shit... but you should kick his ass. The next time he touches you, you should knock him out.” Just fuck your brother up one time."

**Vito:** “You think it’ll do some good?”

**Mookie:** “Yeah, a lot of good.”

When the two return to the shop, Pino senses their camaraderie and questions both Vito’s and Mookie’s manhood. He says, “What’s going on between you two? You guys girlfriend and boyfriend or something?” Pino’s comment echoes the taunting of his friends who imply that empathizing or fraternizing with African-Americans connotes a lack of masculinity. This kind of homophobic taunt Pino initiates will be addressed briefly in chapter four.

Pino feels strongly about moving and is vocal about his disgust for both the pizzeria and “niggers.” Likewise, Vito vehemently opposes his brother’s bullying. Although the two wrestle in the storeroom, their confrontation is not vicious. Despite the
numerous opportunities each has to physically defend himself, neither brother condones violence. For example, when Sal’s anger provokes him to use his bat, it is Pino who coaxes him to put it down. Similarly, though Mookie advises him to, Vito resists the urge to fight his brother.\textsuperscript{21} Sal’s attempts to mediate his sons’ disputes signify his need to control his own masculinity and perhaps equally importantly, to rationalize owning a business in a neighborhood that is the source of his constant psychological conflict. It is precisely his attempt to reconcile Vito’s love and Pino’s hate -- the external manifestations of his own dilemma -- which drives Sal crazy.

Sal: “... I’m gonna kill somebody today. ... Why don’t you both shut up!”
Vito: “... Yeah, you tell him, Pop.”
Pino: “Me and you are gonna have a talk.”
Vito: “Says who?”
Pino: “Says who?”
Vito: “Says who?”
Pino: “Says me.”
Vito: “Who are you?”
Sal: “Now, what did I just say?”

Unable to contain his frustration any longer, Sal projects the film’s catastrophic ending -- “I’m gonna kill somebody today!” Eventually, Lee makes it clear that it is Sal’s inability to reconcile his own issues about his manhood that cause him to lash out on the African-American men who protest the establishment he “erected” in their neighborhood. While Sal’s sons represent the ethnic white’s double-consciousness, Buggin’ Out and Da Mayor are externalizations of the black man’s psychological struggle. Accordingly, both males evoke Pino’s ire as well as Vito’s sympathy. Drunken, destitute, and full of seemingly useless maxims, Da Mayor symbolizes what befalls the black man who attempts to work within the system to acquire the American dream.

More broadly, Da Mayor’s character signifies the Civil Rights generation whose
experiences and wisdom are devalued by members of a hip-hop generation. The audience first sees Da Mayor as he arrives at Sal’s before opening time, and though his name suggests that he may have a modicum of social currency in the neighborhood, his eagerly accepting Sal’s offer to sweep the front walk — the job that neither Sal’s sons nor Mookie would do — demonstrates his debased class status and, coincidentally, attributes that are antipodal to stereotypically masculine characteristics. Most of his opposition comes from outspoken young men, yet unlike the old man, they lack wisdom. Ahmaad, one of the younger males who degrades Da Mayor, badgers the old man to admit that at one time, he had helplessly watched his children starve. Da Mayor retorts that none of the boys in Ahmaad’s crew, “can even piss straight.” Of course, the implication is that because the boys have not lived long enough, have not experienced enough, they can’t control their own penises (read masculinity) and are, therefore, incapable of understanding how a Southern African-American father, who has endured the Depression, could watch his five children go hungry.

In opposition to Da Mayor, the visually-impaired Buggin’ Out embodies the characteristics of the black radical who adamantly vocalizes his dissatisfaction with an establishment that has no concern for its African-American patrons. His “poor vision,” prevents him from constructing a fruitful plan to counter the oppression he witnesses. Thus, to a certain extent, he enervates racial progress. If Buggin’ Out’s real aim is to “have brothers on the wall,” (meaning visual representations of Black patrons), he could do as Sal suggests:

“. . . Get your own place and you can put who ever you want on the wall. You can put your brothers, your cousins, your nieces, your nephews, your stepfathers, and stepmothers [up there] . . . but this is my place.”
Ironically, Buggin' Out admits that he is not willing to work to enact social change. The debate about whether or not to put pictures of African-Americans on the wall or even of owning a much-needed African-American business on Stuyvesant Street masks Buggin' Out's larger objective -- asserting his manhood. The parvenu is cognizant that The Wall of Fame signifies Sal's manliness and ethnic pride. Accordingly, though Buggin' Out is the progenitor of the insurgency against Sal's pizzeria, he cannot bear to leave the place in which he has so often asserted his own masculinity. When Mookie tells him to stay away from the pizzeria for a week, Buggin' Out's recalcitrance develops into disappointment for two reasons. One, Mookie forces Buggin' Out to find other, perhaps more positive means of asserting his manhood. In response, Buggin' Out admits that he doesn't need a job, and, likewise, when he's confronted by Jade, his reaction suggests that he is not "down," not willing to work, for social progress.

Buggin' Out: "Jade, you can't do that ... I'm organizing a boycott of Sal's Famous."
Jade: "Why? What'd he do?"
Buggin' Out: "We want some black people up. We don't want nobody spending good money in there until we get some black people up on that mother f*cking wall."
Jade: "You know, if you tried, Buggin' Out, you could direct your energies in a more useful way..."
Buggin' Out: "Jade, you gotta be down. What, you ain't down?"
Jade: "Yeah, Buggin' Out, I'm down, but I'm down for something positive in the community. Are you down for that?"
Buggin' Out: "Jade, I still love you anyway."
Jade: "I love you, too, Buggin' Out."

Two, Buggin' Out's hesitancy to leave Sal's and his unwillingness to work also reinforce the notion that his manhood remains intact only if he is able to challenge the white establishment. Mookie has already questioned his friend's popularity with women. In passing, Buggin' Out asks Mookie where the ladies are; Mookie replies, "You wouldn't do nothing with them anyway." Consequently, at Sal's request, Mookie
compels Buggin’ Out to find another object on which to project his anxiety. It is obvious that, as is the case with Da Mayor, Buggin’ Out’s maleness is inextricably tied to Sal’s business. In that place, he can, as he admits, “break Sal’s balls” and be a “troublemaker.” Realizing the threat Buggin’ Out poses, Sal grabs his “bat” in an attempt to eliminate the threat of black masculinity. Sal says, “You don’t have the balls to boycott me. … I got your boycott swingin’.”

After he is ousted, Buggin’ Out’s next target becomes the only other white man on the block. Once signified by the absence of pictures on the wall, the perceived attack on his manhood radically expands to include not only the defacement of his pristine tennis shoes but also the white male presence in his neighborhood.

| Buggin’ Out: | “You almost knocked me down, man. The word is ‘excuse’ me. . . .” |
| Buggin’ Out: | “You just stepped on my new white Air Jordans, I just bought.” |
| White Man: | “Oh, excuse me. I’m sorry . . .” |
| White Man: | “Are you serious?” |
| Buggin’ Out | “Yeah, I’m serious. I’ll fuck you up quick, two times. . . . Who told you to step on my sneakers? Who told you to walk on my side of the block? Who told you to be in my neighborhood?” |
| White Man: | “I own this brownstone.” |
| Buggin’ Out: | “Who told you to buy a brownstone on my block on my side of the street? What do you want to live in a black neighborhood for anyway? Mother fuck gentrification!” |
| White Man: | “It’s a free country; a man can live wherever he wants.” |
| Buggin’ Out: | “Free country? I should fuck you up for saying that stupid shit alone.” |

Mimetic of the failed boycott effort, Buggin’ Out is not able to reinforce his bravado with action. Although the mob encourages him to hurt the man for damaging yet another symbol of his manhood, his white Air Jordans, Buggin’ Out, like Pino and Vito and Da Mayor, whose weapon of choice is a push broom, does not opt for violence.
The general point in this analysis is that Spike Lee as writer, and member of the
hip-hop generation, is painstakingly illustrating the complex components that shape
Black male self-construction and self-perception. Vito and Pino comprise Sal’s divided
consciousness, while Da Mayor and Buggin’ Out constitute the dual consciousness of the
African-American male. Accordingly, and perhaps most significantly, both of those
doubles inform Mookie’s psychic dilemma. As the film’s true protagonist, he must decide
which is more important -- material pragmatism, which links him to Sal and promises to
elevate his status within American society, or ethno-cultural affiliation, which ties him to
dilemma which threaten his manhood, fulminating his frustration. Neither Vito/Pino nor
Da Mayor/Buggin’ Out exercise physical violence. What they do succeed in doing,
however, is psychologically murdering the other group’s masculine ideology. Sal, for
example, uses the bat to murder Radio Raheem’s revolutionary music; both of which are
symbols of their masculinity. Ultimately, the violence Mookie displays stems from the
realization that, regardless of his decision, the two sides of his consciousness have no
disposition to reconcile themselves, and, therefore, his manhood is in constant jeopardy.

Get a Job

In America, the Black community in which we live is not owned
by us. The landlord is white. The merchant is white. In fact the entire
economy of the Black community in the States is controlled by
someone who doesn’t even live there. The property that we live in is
owned by someone else. The store that we trade in is operated by
someone else. And these are the people who suck the economic
blood of our community.

Malcolm X

Significantly contributing to the threat on Mookie’s manhood and further
complicating his psychic dilemma are the women in his life. His girlfriend, Tina, and his
sister, Jade, are aspects of a binary which equates masculinity with Mookie’s getting a job and “taking care of [his] responsibilities.” Ironically, however, the women not only attack his manhood, but they also impede Mookie’s economic determinism.

On one hand, Tina’s luring Mookie into her apartment and detaining him risks his being fired and, thus, jeopardizes his ability to financially support his son. On the other hand, when Mookie spends more time working than being with her, the young mother calls Mookie a “bum.” She adds that at his job, he “[pulls] no major pub,” meaning although he is employed, he doesn’t make enough to move emancipate their family from poverty. In Tina’s eyes, for Mookie to be a “real” man, he must not only get a job, but he must elevate his position within the class dynamic and find a way to spend time with his family.

In one particular scene, Tina and her mother have an argument. Tina takes Hector, Mookie’s and her son, to the bedroom and angrily slams the door. Tina positions the sleeping toddler on her lap in a nursing position; however, instead of nurturing the child with mother’s milk, she feeds into his subconscious her frustration and anger towards his father:

“Your father makes me sick. Your father ain’t no real father; he’s a bum. A chump-change, to the curb, pulling-no-major-pub bum.”

This scene is significant in that it demonstrates that for black male children, their masculine identities are not only constructed by their father’s actions or inactions, but also by embittered mothers who may be caught at the crossroads of conflicts their black male counterparts endure. Though Hector is sleeping and, perhaps, too young yet to comprehend the implications of his mother’s words, the narrative suggests that he, too, will one day realize two very important notions: one, although his mother is Puerto
Rican, his physiognomy signifies that he is black in this country; and two, his manhood will be contingent on his economic production.

Just as Tina’s ordering pizza jeopardizes Mookie’s job, so does Jade’s presence in the pizzeria. As soon as Jade walks through the door, Mookie realizes that his boss is making a pass at her. After she has eaten the “something special” that Sal makes for her, Mookie grabs Jade and drags her outside where they argue in front of a graffitied wall, reading: “Tawana told the truth.” Spike Lee’s reference to Tawana Brawley’s being raped by a white man introduces another issue which threatens not only black masculinity, but also the African-American male’s social status.

Mookie: “Jade, I do not want you in Sal’s no more...”

Jade: “What are you so worked up about?”

Mookie: “The way Sal looks at you; the way he talks at you... All Sal wants to do is hide the salami.”

Sal’s obvious infatuation with Jade necessitates her brother’s protecting her. In Freudian terms, Jade’s presence in the pizzeria connotes her complicity with Sal in effecting Mookie’s symbolic castration. Rather than invoking his sister’s appreciation, Mookie’s actions threaten Jade’s mobility. Moreover, because her brother’s economic status is not equivalent to Sal’s, Jade, like Tina, is unable to perceive Mookie as a man who can adequately instruct or protect her.

Jade: “You make your little $250 dollars a week and you think you can tell me what to do?... You can’t even pay your rent!”

Mookie: “I’m getting paid.”

Jade: “Peanuts!”

Throughout the movie, Mookie and Jade engage in similar exchanges wherein she associates her brother’s being a man with his maintaining a job and making money. Jade believes that Mookie’s having a job will facilitate her liberation – it will allow her to have
her apartment to herself and, thus, will prevent her from having to take care of “a grown man.” Just as Mookie cannot reconcile the influence that race has on his manhood, he is not able to control all of the consequences regarding masculinity and class.

In much the same way that Buggin’ Out and Da Mayor formulate Mookie’s masculine consciousness, Hector/Tina and Jade/Mother-Sister represent perspectives within Mookie’s doubled class consciousness. Mookie’s dilemma is complex: while his acquiring material wealth will help him provide for his family, his desire for economic advancement necessitates his not only being away from his family but it also alienates him from his community. Further, his working hard for the white establishment endangers his physical and emotional well-being and jeopardizes his position in both his family and his community.

“Stay Black!”

Much of W.E.B. Du Bois’ writing focuses on the ways in which both white and black America’s definitions of masculinity and of the black man’s place within the class structure perpetuate the duality of African-American male consciousness. While Du Bois weaves sorrow songs, or spirituals, throughout The Souls of Black Folk to emphasize the significance of black language within American society, Lee’s Do the Right Thing infuses the double talk of black vernacular into his narrative, punctuating it with the rapped, revolutionary motto, “Fight the power!”24 Unlike the signified messages in the spirituals, however, this blaring imperative overtly states the need to resist dominant society’s suppression of black language and, subsequently, of black nationalist rhetoric.
The lyrics to Public Enemy’s rap text emphasizes the relationship between language and freedom:

Our freedom of speech/ is freedom or death. . . .What counts is that/ the rhyme’s designed to fill your mind/ Now that you’ve realized,/ the pride’s arrived./ We got to pump the stuff to make us tough from the heart/ It’s a start, a work of art. . . . Make everybody see, in order to fight the powers that be. Fight the Power! 25

In an essay entitled “Race,” K. Anthony Appiah substantiates the notion that any group who is subjugated by a “ruling class” desires to elevate themselves in society.26 Consequently, those people who are able to “pass” and/or oscillate between their “kind” and the dominant culture oftentimes adopt the very characteristics with which they have been subjugated. To make his point, Appiah cites Johann Gottfried Herder’s On the New German Literature: Fragments (1767), explaining that “Herder’s notion of the Sprachgeist, or “spirit” of language, embodies the thought that language is...the sacred essence of a nationality.”27 It is obvious that Mookie, as mediator between the white and black cultures, adopts Sal’s bourgeois disposition as well as his language. In the same scene in which Buggin’ Out inquires about Sal’s putting brothers on the wall, Mookie sits in a booth, casually talking with a young lady who is having problems with her boyfriend. Ironically, the characteristics that the girl uses to describe her boyfriend -- he is a bum, he is emotionally aloof -- are the same ones that Tina uses to characterize Mookie. In an attempt to comfort the girl, Mookie not only says that her boyfriend is not right for her, he also uses one of Sal’s expressions; he calls the boyfriend a “mamalook.” Though the young girl laughs at Mookie and dismisses his remark, Mookie’s using the term to describe someone who possesses the same shortcomings that he has, implies that Sal’s language is not only rubbing off on him but also reinforces Mookie’s using Sal’s
denigrating epithets against his own people. This act illustrates the bond that Mookie is subconsciously forming with Sal’s family. Later in the movie, before closing time, Sal reinforces Mookie’s position by likening him to one of his own sons. Buggin’ Out witnesses these and other manifestations of Mookie’s transformation into one of Sal’s “boys.” In an effort to counter his actions and to prevent his friend from becoming whitened, he admonishes Mookie to, “Stay Black!

Many of the characters in Do the Right Thing are conscious of the ways in which language differentiates themselves from other races in the block. For example, when Radio Raheem goes into the store to buy batteries, he reprimands Sunny and his wife for their inability to speak English. After Sal has ousted Buggin’ Out for threatening to boycott, Pino tells Mookie to “speak some brother talk” to Buggin’ Out. Additionally, when the Puerto Ricans on the street and, likewise, Tina, challenge Radio Raheem and Mookie, respectively, they infuse Spanish into their speech.

Language not only differentiates the cultures, but it also enables the Puerto Ricans, Italians, and Asians to denigrate the African-Americans to their faces. For example, Pino calls Da Mayor an “azupep” and Mookie a “moolie.” Stevie calls Radio Raheem “don chocolate,” and Tina calls Mookie a “bendejo.” My point here is that while African-Americans do not appear to be bilingual, within the black culture, the language of hip-hop music constitutes a form of alternative language in which they encode the contempt they have for members of other races who share their residential areas, produce their food and police their neighborhoods but who don’t show love for black youth. Hip-hop language systems are effective strategies of dissent for young African-Americans. Ironically, though Puerto Rican, Italian, and Asian characters are
able to articulate their hostility in their respective languages, they also employ music, the rhetoric of sports, and expletives. The varying speech patterns unify everyone in the community and, likewise, signify their collective frustration as non-white Americans.

By now, the pervasive elements of Lee’s discourse about the African-American males’ struggle to “stay black” and, further, to assert their manhood may be more obvious. However, Spike Lee does inform the movie with an even less perceptible psychoanalytic discourse about the clandestine ways Black youth resist larger society’s constant encroachment on their selfhood. Dr. Frances Cress Welsing’s theories of ball games and patterns of speech are helpful in decoding the cryptic signifiers of blackness, of social status, and, thus, of their manhood.

In The Isis Papers (1991), Welsing suggests that overtly racist acts of castration and lynching have been replaced by subconscious acts of controlling the African-American males genitals and, thus, of thwarting the threat of “white genetic annihilation.”

Since Black or other males of color are the only ones who...can initiate and carry forth the act of white genetic annihilation through sexual intercourse, the white preoccupation was/is specifically with male genitalia...namely the testicles (“the balls”) and the penis....Thus in the white brain-computer, there is a dominant association between “balls” and contests of power.28

Welsing further suggests that all ball games represent the subconscious playing out of fantasies about man’s ability to control the masculinity of another race. For instance, basketball is a game which is played with a large, brown ball, thus the object of the game is to gain possession of the means of African-American, or non-white, genetic reproduction -- the brown “ball.” Contrastingly, baseball is played when a small white ball -- a signification of white genetic inferiority -- and is hit by a large bat. Both of these
ball games signify Lee’s interest in exposing a larger political landscape. According to Welsing,

[b]aseball was the great all-time American (a.k.a.white) sport until a Black man Hank Aaron, become the world’s greatest hitter (controller) of that white ball, hitting it with a brown or black bat. It is little wonder that as he moved ever closer to taking the title of control away from Babe Ruth, Aaron began to receive letters from the white people threatening his life. . . the white ball is symbolic of the white testicles that a Black man had knocked out of the ball part. The Black man, in this manner, controls the symbolic small white testicles. This is not psychologically tolerable in the white supremacy culture -- as it represents white genetic annihilation. . .

Between the late 1940s and the early-1970’s, baseball served as a site for integration and as an early venue for the articulation of a Civil Rights agenda."30 As such, Jackie Robinson’s entry into the sport or Hank Aaron’s breaking Babe Ruth’s homerun record, for example, enabled Black males to establish their value “on dominant society’s terms.”31 Nevertheless, neither man was able to transform the sport; consequently, both men (and others Black men who have followed them) were rendered virtually powerless.32 Critic Todd Boyd says that “as Civil Rights gave way to the Black Power Movement,” basketball trumped baseball as the “cultural site” wherein black youth could articulate their culture.33 Throughout the movie, Lee’s references to ball games employ a variety of visual and verbal signifiers which substantiate Welsing’s and Boyd’s notions about how and why young male characters assert their blackness.

Mookie changes clothes several times throughout the movie, and each outfit is related to sports; yet, more significantly each outfit is indicative of Mookie’s shifting approaches to preserving his manhood, his status, and his blackness. The first time the audience sees Mookie, he wakes up and, wearing his Michael Jordan t-shirt, he counts his money. After realizing that he has $350, both his blackness and masculinity are intact
and the t-shirt symbolizes the fact that he, like Michael Jordan, is in control of his socio-economic status. As he dresses for work, however, Mookie changes his outfit. The Jackie Robinson Dodger uniform he dons becomes a metaphor for Mookie’s integrating Sal’s family (the last bastion of white male dominance in the Bed-Stuy neighborhood). In much the same way Robinson integrated baseball, Mookie must carefully assert his manhood in a way that defines the integrationist principles of Civil Rights Movement. (See Figure 3.1.)

Fig. 3.1. Mookie (Spike Lee) wearing a Jackie Robinson baseball jersey.
Source: images.amazon.com/images/P/B00004XQMV.01._AA2

During the hot, summer day, Mookie stops at home to shower. Jade admonishes him, warning that Sal will fire him if he doesn’t get back to work soon. Cockily, Mookie retorts, “Slavery days are over. My name ain’t Kunta Kinte…. Fuck Sal!” Eventually, he changes one last time into a green, red, and white bowling shirt, bearing a large inscription, “Sal’s Famous Pizzeria,” on the back. The colors, representative of the Italian flag, make more apparent Mookie’s gradual transformation into one of Sal’s
“people.” However, what viewers might miss is that Mookie’s wearing this shirt symbolizes his having control over the most powerful “ball” of all black ball games. Welsing says the following about the game of bowling:

[T]his game is played with a large black ball being rolled forcefully down an alley where it is expected to knock down 10 white pins: the central pin is referred to as the “kingpin.” Clearly, the bowling pins are white and, in shape, are phallic symbols. In other words, the pins are white phallic symbols over which the bowler attempts to gain mastery. The bowler sees himself as master and possessor the larger Black ball and thereby in control of the harm it can bring to the white genital apparatus (the white pins). 34

It is shortly after Mookie returns to work, escorting Jade, that Sal flirts with her. After pulling her outside and telling her not to go back into Sal’s, Mookie clearly asserts his masculinity by telling his boss, “Sal, I don’t care if you fire me this exact minute, leave my sister alone.” In this one sentence, Mookie reveals his awareness that laying flat Sal’s virility is the only way to preserve his sister’s honor. Unfortunately, he also realizes that bucking the system that has historically preyed on Black female virtue may entail his giving up his livelihood and, consequently, the existence of his whole family.

Both Mookie and Sal are subconsciously aware of the symbolic significance of ball games. However, whereas Mookie changes his clothing to reflect the intensifying threat on his race, Sal does not. Coincidentally, Sal’s using the bat as his only weapon to combat the perceived threat against his existence likens him to the other black men on the block. As was mentioned, black men who play the game of baseball symbolically threaten to knock white genetic material out of the park, so to speak. Therefore, one could interpret Sal’s using the bat as his subconscious attempt to retaliate against the white supremacist culture that has forced him into the position of having to choose between allegiance to his own community and maintaining a paternalistic presence in a
community for which he's developed a strong attachment. According to Michael Rogin, ethnic whites have historically ventriloquized blackness through the performativity of blackface minstrelsy for similar reasons. For example, the famous Jewish minstrel, Al Jolson, rejected the wishes of his cantor father and of his Jewish heritage, not only to become a successful Hollywood singer but also to become "American" and, therefore, white. Italians are not "prefigurative white" as society considers Jews to be, so Sal's attempts to appropriate the technique of "blackface" would be unsuccessful. Instead of blackening his face in an attempt to elevate his status within white society as Jews and Irish immigrants did Sal adopts a perceived semblance of black masculinity, the brown bat, to compensate for his racial difference, and, therefore, to preserve his status within the Black community. Again, paradoxically, Sal is not white; consequently, his ultimately using the psychodynamics of baseball lingo to eventually "kill" Radio Raheem's masculinity does not suppress any of the riotous activities that ensue. As a matter of fact, the act of using non-white masculinity against itself ultimately results in the simultaneous "rape" and castration of Sal's pizzeria -- his female space and male capitalist place, which he says he "erected with his own fucking hands."

Spike Lee indeed seems obsessed with the theme of ball games. In the film, the language of ball games is apparent in the confrontation between the white man wearing a Boston Celtics jersey and Ahmaad who wears a Lakers jersey; in Vito and Mookie's debate regarding black male vs. white male baseball players' prowess; and in the dialogue M.L., "Sweet Dick" Willie, and Coconut Sid have at the dead end of Stuyvesant street. A sign above them reads, "No Ballplaying Allowed," yet the very nature of their conversations does just that -- teases, manipulates, challenges, attacks all their neighbors'
as well as their own “balls”—their blackness, their class status, and their masculinity. However, equally important is Lee’s presentation of the ways in which language, particularly profanity, unifies each of the ethnic groups. Certain expletives link Black characters to the other ethnic characters, shaping their ineffective subversive strategies. Sid, Willie, and M.I. initiate the use of profanity in the film and, interestingly, elucidate the function of language itself as a form of verbal “intercourse” — a means of “fucking” with other males. In one of his many bouts with M.I., Willie calls him a “test tube baby,” implying that M.I. is a fatherless child, or bastard. Though neither M.I. nor Cococut Sid states where he is from, their accents suggest Caribbean, South American, or African ancestry. Together with Willie, all three collectively represent various places within the African Diaspora. As ancestors of slaves who were sold away from their families, each of the males is a displaced offspring, thus, broadly speaking, a bastard. Spike Lee continues this theme in the character of Mookie and Tina’s bastard son. Hector is the product of an interracial relationship; however, his black skin will one day force him to be grouped within African-American culture. The notion of the Diaspora, which the three men raise, coupled with the remark that Mookie makes to Pino about “dark Italians,” and Stevie’s calling Radio Raheem “bro” are just a few of the incidents which connect all the characters’ heritages in complex ways.

Whether products of miscegenation, bastard sons, or fathers of bastard sons, each of the non-white males in *Do the Right Thing* feels powerless against the attacks on their ethnicity; consequently, with the exception of Vito and Da Mayor, each identifies himself or another person as a “mother fucker.” Again, Wesling has examined the phenomena of
expletive phrases within African-Americans’ and other non-whites’ speech patterns. She says:

The term “mother fucker” is a pattern of speech used with extremely high frequency amongst Black people, specifically Black males in the U.S…. Black adult males often refer to Black adult female peers and companions as “momma,” often expecting those “mommas” to provide food, clothes and shelter for them…. The brain thus computes: an adult male who refers to another adult male as “The Man” (meaning, the only man), to himself as “baby,” to the woman that he sleeps with as “momma,” and to the place where he sleeps as a “crib,” will call himself or any Black male reflection of himself a “mother fucker.”

One scene in particular exemplifies an aspect of Wesling’s theory. Early on in the movie, in front of WE LOVE Radio station, Vito looks on as Mookie and Buggin’ Out challenge each other by calling each other “The Man.”

Buggin’ Out: “You da man.”
Mookie: “You da man.”
Buggin’ Out: “You da man.”
Mookie: “You da man.”
Buggin’ Out: “Nah, you da man. I’m just a poor black man tryin’ to keep my dick hard in a cruel and harsh world.”

In this exchange, Mookie and Buggin’ Out appear to be praising one another’s masculinity. However, upon closer examination, both characters are denigrating each other’s blackness, insulting each other for the manner in which the other asserts his manhood -- either by pursuing economic gain within white supremacy culture (accommodation) or by touting empty, black activist rhetoric against it (insurrection). In a final effort to reject Mookie’s accusing him of being “the Man,” Buggin’ Out’s final response suggests that his preoccupation with his genitalia and, thus, his Blackness and his low class status, prohibits him from being “the Man.” Perhaps as a means of countering his feelings of powerlessness, Buggin’ Out frequently calls anyone and
everything that "screws" him -- that threatens his blackness -- a "mother fucker." For example when Sal doesn't put cheese on his slice, he uses the term to refer to the pizza; he calls the Wall of Fame a "mother fucking' wall;" and though it is under his breath, he calls the white man who runs over his tennis shoe a "mother fucker." This last example bears another connotation of the expletive and perhaps explains why Spike Lee uses it so frequently within the cinematic discourse.

As was previously mentioned, Buggin' Out's only allies in the boycott effort are Radio Raheem and Smiley -- two men who have not only tried to articulate their blackness through the vernacular of street art and rap music but who also represent the love/hate binary of the collective African-American consciousness. Within the context of the movie, Spike Lee ultimately suggests that any Black male who attempts to express his veiled frustration about being African-American and, further, who tries to counter his feelings of powerlessness against an oppressive system will fail.

Conclusion: "Do the right thing!"

Da Mayor: "Doctor, come here."
Mookie: "Mayor, I gotta go. What is it?"
Da Mayor: "Let me tell you something, doctor."
Mookie: "What, what is it?"
Da Mayor: "Doctor, always do the right thing."
Mookie: "That's it?"
Da Mayor: "Yeah."
Mookie: "I got it. I'm gone."

When Da Mayor admonishes him to "do the right thing," Mookie responds apathetically. (See figure 3.2.) Bordering on disrespectful, the young Black man's tone is wholly uncharacteristic of the way he usually relates to Da Mayor. Prior to this exchange, Mookie has been the one to defend the wise old man against Pino's racist slurs and to protect him from the cops' interrogation. What, then, could have altered Mookie's
disposition? During the course of one morning, Mookie has watched his friends, his sister, his girlfriend, and his employer test his masculinity, jeopardize his economic status, and question his cultural affiliation. All the while, he has been trying to do what he believes are the “right” things -- be a man, get a job, and stay black. Mookie’s resultant frustration stems from his realization that no matter what he attempts to do for himself, his family, or his community, doing one or a combination of any of these “right” things emasculates him, undermines his economic situation, and strips him of his cultural identity.

In Race Men (1998), Hazel Carby addresses how America has molded society’s perception of the African-American race, and, likewise, has manipulated Du Bois’ emphasis on black masculinity to further its racialized politics and prohibit inequality. To illustrate her point, Carby evaluates white society’s elevating Paul Robeson to the status of “a black national symbol of masculinity.” Carby purports that Du Bois’s fixation on masculinity, coupled with American society’s successfully portraying
Robeson as an embodiment of “virility and solidarity of being” comprises the racial dilemma for all African-Americans. As a product of the American “modernist aesthetic,” the presentation of Robeson’s masculinity is manipulable by society, and when his “soul” becomes allied with “activism for social change,” his body -- a manifestation of his masculinity, his Americanness, and his blackness - is perceived as a societal threat. Ultimately, Carby’s argument substantiates the overarching notion presented in this chapter and addresses the dilemma of the Black male’s, or Mookie’s, conscience. Lee’s film is certainly advancing the notion that because white society has controlled systems of racial identification and because African-Americans oftentimes consider themselves powerless against the White supremacist system, the Black man cannot simultaneously assert his manhood, rise above his prescribed class distinction, and maintain his blackness.

While leading cultural critics, such as Todd Boyd and Michael Eric Dyson, have been quick to identify hip-hop film texts like Boyz N the Hood and Menace to Society as culminating examples of hip-hop’s political insurgence, what they fail to articulate is how, as one of the first hip-hop films, Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing both typifies black youth’s spirit of revolution and survival and prophesies the ways that all aspects of cultural production and communication would have to change dramatically in order for black men to be free.

Ultimately, Lee’s message is aligned with the pedagogy of survival outlined in the previous chapter. Mookie’s throwing the trashcan through Sal’s window and beginning the revolt against the pizzeria is the first step in what filmmaker Spike Lee offers as the “right” thing -- undoing all the wrong people, places, and ideas which reinforce the Black
man's dilemma of double-consciousness. Forcing Sal out of the neighborhood necessitates that the black community, including Sunny, who, like the African-Americans, are subjugated by the dominant culture, create its own means of food production, its own system of economic determinism, and its own definitions of cultural pride and communal responsibility.
Notes to Chapter Three


4 Some critics would question my calling *Do The Right Thing* “the first African American hip hop cultural film.” While I acknowledge the now-classic films about early rap and break dance cultures — *Beat Street* (1984), *Breakin’ I* (1984), *Breakin’ II: Electric Boogaloo* (1984), and *Krush Groove* (1985), I distinguish Lee’s as the first to locate, so fundamentally, the issues and concerns of the African-American hip-hop generation within broader social and historical contexts.


7 The film presents rap music and the burgeoning youth culture. No character in the film uses the term “hip-hop.” It wasn’t until the late-80s that the term denoted urban youth cultural forms.


9 *Malcolm X*, dir. Spike Lee, perf. Denzel Washington, Angela Basset, Spike Lee, 40 Acres and a Mule, 1992 is an excellent example of this kind of gesture. Additionally, the more recent film, *TuPac: The Resurrection*, dir. Lauren Lazin, perf. TuPac, Amaru/Interscope, 2003 accomplishes a similar objective.


11 Stevens 4.

12 Stevens 4.

13 Stevens 6.

14 Page: 134


16 Reid 132.

17 Reid 132.

19 “Sorrow song” is the name Du Bois uses to identify Negro spirituals. In chapter XIV of The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois says that although these songs seem full of sorrow, it was actually “hope that sang in the songs of my fathers well sung.”

20 As ethnic Americans, Sal and his sons are susceptible to similar kinds of psychological dilemma that African Americans experience.

21 Interestingly, it is in Mookie’s urgings that Lee illustrates one of the pervasive notions within a burgeoning hip-hop mentality: physical violence is the ostensible means of effective conflict resolution.


23 Through Tina’s character, particularly in her exchanges with Mookie, Spike Lee makes a larger statement about the dynamics of interracial relationships. In his subsequent film, Jungle Fever (1991), Lee examines this theme more fully. Because Tina has not necessarily been privy to the hardships Mookie faces, she is largely unsympathetic to the challenges he endures.


25 Ibid.


27 Appiah 284.


29 Welsing 139.


31 Boyd 119.

32 The league’s treatment of Darryl Strawberry in the late-90s and more recently of Barry Bonds is evidence of the ways mainstream (read white) imagination continues to shape popular perceptions of even the most physically gifted Black male as powerless.

33 Boyd 119.

34 Welsing 136.

36 Rogin 84.


38 Rogin 92.

39 Welsing 121.

40 Carby 48.

41 Carby 48.

42 Carby 68.
CHAPTER FOUR

‘We Ride Together and We Die Together’:
Ride-n-Tie Feminism for Ryde-or-Die Chicks

[H]ip-hop is not only the dominion of the young, black, and male, it is also the world in which young black women live and survive.

Joan Morgan

I got a boss b*tch and that’s why I talk shit/ she walk with a switch, and she might smack you if you call her a b*tch/ She like them real niggas and hate fakes, and recognize snakes...When niggas shot at me, she bust back/ She carry gats, her arm’s tatted “Big Mac”...a paper chaser got her job, got her own ride and own place/ Grabbing on it in public, and quick to tell you you ain’t shit if you was quick when you nutter/ Street educated; keep her mouth shut when interrogated/ She ain’t a snitch bitch that’ll get you incarcerated/ ghetto fabulous drenched in her finest gear...

Mac

I need me a girl that be true to me, know ‘bout the game and know how it do to me/Without a girl by my side, shit’ll ruin me/ Forget the world, girl; it’s just you and me/ Now let’s ride...

P. Diddy

People want me to hate on [black men], but I don’t. I got nothing but love for them....

Amil

The previous chapters have identified rap music and hip-hop film as contemporary cultural narratives through which black youth, particularly males, attempt to rectify fragmented historical memories and establish strategies for psychic and physical liberation. Using a unique mythology and ever-evolving language system, hip-hop culture is, thus, a practice of “mixing” these historical distortions together with truisms about contemporary African-Americans’ shared and lived experiences. This enduring language, coupled with urban legends, form collective hip-hop consciousness. Ultimately, many members of the hip-hop generation believe that their historiography accomplishes three goals: one, it affords them an opportunity to compensate for their ancestors’ inability to defend themselves; two, it enables them to resist contemporary
oppressions and, thus, impending death; and three, the principle focus of this chapter: it
restores Black male/female relationships, the integrity of which has been jeopardized
since the period of slavery.  

Typically, young black males’ subcultural survival is precariously hinged on the
extent to which they successfully perform the ride-and-tie – that is, how successfully they
manipulate stereotypical depictions of U.S. Blacks and how well they work in tandem
with black women to secure racial uplift. Both these strategies misdirect the White gaze;
however, in using them, Black youth also run the risk of confusing the attention and/or
raising the ire of other African Americans who are already hypercritical of the potential
destructiveness of black youth cultural practices. Representative of such ire is the
otherwise astute critic, Ellis Cose, who condemns hip-hop narratives, suggesting that
black males reiterate and identify with denigrating representations of blackness, “totally
without irony, without realizing that much of the so-called reality [black males] cling to
is nothing but a tragic myth rooted in a time when White Americans, in order to feel good
about themselves needed to believe we were something vile, something disgusting,
something inhumanly strange.”  

The critic’s condemnation does not concede the paradox in the youth self-constructions and is mistaken in arguing men’s relationship with young
black women is entirely unhealthy. Cose’s views typify larger mainstream judgments,
which underestimate the ability of Black youth to dexterously and cooperatively employ
cultural artifices of race and masculinity for their own ends.

As I argued in Chapter Two, many rappers’ on-stage and staged performances
deftly facilitate their freedom quest. Certainly, black youths’ collectively acknowledging
and embracing the degrading images that American continually deploys may preclude
them from moving past their present psychological enslavement. Nevertheless, it is this same performativity that necessarily prevents them from developing an optimism and/or a sense of liberal individualism that could ultimately render them vulnerable to the increasingly and deceptively conservative racial and gender politics of contemporary neoliberal society. Because hip-hop culture, in general, is an exercise in communal participation, or collectivism, the concept of individualism actually runs counter to the cultural reality projected in its by-products – rap music and film. Young Black men and women of the hip-hop generation share strong cultural/communal ties and, by and large, both groups share the political agenda of liberation and uplift.

Whereas the bulk of this project has focused on the emancipating strategies of Black male youth, hip-hop generationers’ collective pedagogy of survival and liberation is not realized solely through male-gendered practices. Certainly, the work of female hip-hop artists significantly contributes to the politics of racial uplift. The goal of this chapter is to examine some of the key ways that Black women carve a space for themselves while working alongside and in collaboration with their male counterparts. Beginning with a long discussion of feminist critics’ most recent arguments against hip-hop culture, this chapter eventually explores some lesser-considered hip-hop texts that reveal the themes that govern female rappers’ unconventional pedagogical approaches.

**Feminist Thought and Hip-Hop**

Contemporary Black feminist criticism continues to address and to parallel the notions that early Black feminists initiated in response to both the Black Power Movement and the second wave of the Women’s Movement. Among the issues
Black/feminist theory and criticism find important are the representation and misrepresentation of Black women in literary and popular cultural texts, the education of Black women, the access Black women have to the economic means of survival, Black motherhood, the roles Black women play in their communities, Black female sexuality, and women's role in politics and revolution. Underlying this array of specific interests is a general anxiety about the ways that race and gender render Black women invisible and, thus, limit their ability to accurately represent their lived experiences within American society. While each of the concerns is essential to the physical and psychological liberation of Black women, Black feminists have historically articulated their own reservations about the core agenda of the feminist movement. According to Barbara Smith, Black feminists fostered several myths that prevented them from fully claiming the larger Women's Movement.\(^7\) Despite Black feminists' more recent attempts to rectify these false perceptions, some of the myths about black women inform what have become rigidly-held critical perspectives about hip-hop culture. Two of these stereotypes, in particular, feminist critics vehemently refute: one, that Black women possess extraordinary strength which they exhibit in the face of tremendous oppression to procure their own liberation (the superwoman myth); and two, closely related to the first, that Black women are resentful toward men, and, often motivated by anger, they facilitate female liberation in isolation.

Some of the most influential Black feminist critics, such as Michele Wallace, Veronica Chambers, Lisa Jones, and Joan Morgan, adamantly contest the above notions. Though most of their theories are not concerned with hip-hop music or culture, each concedes that, by and large, young urban women exhibit symptoms of the
superblackwoman syndrome—a seeming celebratory ideal that does much harm, causing Black women to believe that “no matter how bad shit gets [they must] handle it alone, quietly, and with dignity.” Certainly, this image of the super-human Black woman is a modern-day representation of enslaved Black women who demonstrated their physical and mental stamina on the auction blocks, in the plantation fields or, like Sojourner Truth, on the orator’s platform. Morgan’s, Chambers’s, and Jones’s observations extend not only the ideas Wallace posed in the early 1970s but they also allude to racist stereotypes about Black female strength and invincibility (and, thus, suitability for enslavement) that American society erected during the antebellum period.

In her investigation of the superwoman myth, Kimberly Springer makes a similar connection when she maintains that “19th and 20th-century crusaders trumpeted the strong, black woman as a model for “lifting as we climb” This notion, engineered by Pauline Hopkins in the 19th century, implies that in creating positive images from exploitative conditions and also distinguishing black femininity from frail, neurasthenic Southern mistresses, Black women assumed responsibility for revitalizing their communities, supporting their families, and consequently, for elevating Black men’s status in America.

Without question, the lyrics of popular rap songs suggest that young Black women in hip-hop culture are influenced by this heroine image. Numerous female artists reproduce the superwoman myth. For example, artist Lil’ Mo recorded two records—“Superwoman” Parts I and II—that illustrate the extent to which she conceives herself the black man’s heroine:

Yo, Black baby/ I'm your superwoman / You ain't gotta look up in the sky/ For a bird or a plane... I'mma save your day/ Check it I got the 'S' on my chest...I'm a superwoman...
Comin' to your rescue...\textsuperscript{11}

On the surface, Lil’ Mo’s lyrics reiterate feminist critics’ notions about superblackwoman syndrome. Nevertheless, what escape contemporary critics’ attention are the nuances of Mo’s self-fashioning. Rather than coming to the rescue of her Black male counterpart who is defenseless against larger society, Mo distinguishes herself as his “superwoman” who is the lyrical, financial, and cultural equal to a strong, empowered Black man.

Mo does not save her man because he is helpless or disadvantaged; rather, she rescues him from other females who find him physically attractive and who, after sizing him up, are plotting to take advantage of his kindness and his wealth.

\begin{quote}
I'm a superwoman / I see, a thug on the wall standin' two o'clock
I see, chicks at the bar and they made a plot...And girls trip cause I played it cool...He just know a real girl from a fake / And he know I'm not a ho that's out for the dough that he make...
\end{quote}

Throughout the song, Mo is the only “woman:” she refers to the other females as “chicks” and “hoes” (whores) who do not have a genuine interest in the strong Black male, the thug. Like male rappers, female rappers wield seemingly misogynist terms to refer to females who are “fake,” and, thus, whose agendas are not aligned with the larger cultural goal of uplift and liberation.

Part II of the “Superwoman” illustrates these ideas, and in so doing, shatters critics’ notions that young black women “handle their problems” alone and quietly. In the song, male rapper Fabolous joins Mo to lend a voice to the male character. In their exchange, both rappers profess their love and admiration for the other. Fabolous says:

\begin{quote}
[S]uperwoman ‘bout to save my day / It's like I'm under your spell
If feelin you is a crime they gon’ have to put me under the jail ...You know I care for you / And anytime this nigga's there for you / These feelings I only share for you...
\end{quote}
Mo responds:

Baby they can't play you 'cause I'll save you with my super powers
Boy I'm only human / but I'll be your super woman...

Despite feminist critics’ arguments to the contrary, contemporary hip-hop artists, Mo and Fabolous realize that because they are equally strong -- they have similar lyrical skills and are both fiscally stable -- they are willing to “ride together” – that is, to work together to build a better life. It is this pairing that epitomizes gender relations and the pedagogy of survival in hip-hop culture.

Contemporary feminist critics’ theories mirror what I have argued since Chapter One about the similarities between historical and contemporary emancipating strategies. While it may be true that the superwoman image provides a way for the Black female to “appear to keep it all together” just as “our mothers used to do,” contemporary Black female rappers do not believe that liberation does not come at the expense of “deny[ing] their emotional, psychic, and even physical pain.” As exemplified in Lil’ Mo’s songs, Black women (and men) in hip-hop culture make it a point to disclose their psychological and physical limitations, dispelling the myth that to be strong, they must show themselves infallible individuals. In fact, the prevailing sentiment of hip-hop culture seems to be that empowerment and liberty are products of young black male and female cooperation.

In addition to the “superblackwoman” myth, contemporary feminist criticism also raises consciousness about another persona – the “angry Black woman.” To a certain extent, this representation has been nurtured by a series of feminist theories, which suggest that women have no room in American society to speak to themselves and for themselves. Supposedly, women’s inability to freely express themselves coupled with their resentment about having to carry the burdens of the race by themselves has
contributed to Black women’s silenced rage. This position of compulsory silence was popularized by early twenty-first century discourse of Johnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. In *Gender Talk: The Struggle For Women's Equality in African American Communities* (2003), these Black feminist critics assert that Black women feel they bear much of the burden of racial uplift. Accordingly, one of the potentially stultifying offshoots of that perception is their realization that they have no legitimate way of coming together with other black women, no means of self-affirmation in other words, no women’s movement, and therefore, no collective ideology. Speaking directly about female rap artists, critic Gwendolyn Pough, has gained recent attention for her theories which draw connections between Cole’s and Guy-Sheftall’s notions and female-authored rap texts. Pough argues that, like the sexism of larger mainstream political and social traditions, hip-hop music does not offer a “front-seat place for feminism anywhere and that there is no open space where feminist ideals are held and practiced.” Inherent in her claim is the idea that black female rap lyrics are angry, and that their collective anger is, most often, directed toward black men. Pough’s sentiments echo the ill-conceived perceptions an increasing number of Black feminists critics have about male and female hip-hop generationers’ inability to properly execute feminism.

Early- to mid-twentieth century research about African-American sexual politics has well-documented the ways that Black male/female self-concepts as well as their loving relationships with each other have been significantly and, perhaps permanently, marred by the period of slavery. In *Blood Rituals: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries*, Orlando Patterson reexamines some of the prevailing late-twentieth
century social distortions of Black men and women shaped by the institution of slavery
and perpetuated by institutionalized and/or new racism. The critic says: African-American men and women of all classes have a terribly troubled relationship. Slavery and the system of racial oppression engendered it, and poverty, economic insecurity, and lingering racism sustain it. While he recognizes that history does play a significant role in African-American gender relations, Patterson clearly agrees with Cose in his assertion that Black youth have to transcend their present psychological encumbrances. Patterson further states that “blaming these injustices alone (slavery and the system of racial oppression engendered it) will get [Black Americans] nowhere...because only they as individual men and women can find the antidote to heal themselves. Without question, hip-hop music is rife with examples of black youths’ desires to assume responsibility for rectifying their seemingly dysfunctional relationships. However, as young Black men and women attempt to restructure and repair their rapport, they confront myriad obstacles that considerably hinder their communication. These barriers are a partially attributable source of what critics identify as angry black women with a superwoman complex. While slavery may be one of the variables, Black youth also contend with critical and ideological imposition from cultural outsiders and the corrupting influence of new media/television narratives. Society so closely screens their conversations and polices their lifestyle choices that it is increasingly difficult for black men and women to carve spaces in which they can “heal themselves” – at least in ways that do not appear destructive to would-be critics.

Analysts of hip-hop lyrical content and tone misinterpret artists’ authorial intent regarding gender politics. Often in their condemnation of Black youth culture, the vast
majority of cultural critics focus on male rappers’ misogynist vernacular as an indication of their pathological sexism. Again, in his examination, Orlando Patterson suggests that the shape of contemporary African-American culture, and by extension, youth culture, is a reaction to not only the negative extra-cultural forces, but also to the failings of Black men. bell hooks echoes Patterson’s sentiments in her suggestion that the fervent penchant of male-dominated rap music culture for denigrating women reflects the extent to which young Black males, in their attempt to compensate for their historical emasculation and to more forcefully reinsert themselves into American society, have appropriated the oppressive tendencies of White patriarchy.21 Essentially, according to hooks, young black men believe that if they participate in the same gendered practices as their white male counterparts, society will cease to perceive them as victims and, more importantly, as subhuman.

While much critical focus is directed toward male-authored rap texts, Black females, either as superwomen and as angry black women, are not exempt from the culpability of poor gender relations. Critics offer competing perspectives of Black females’ participation in the genre, pointing to the lyrics and images in hip-hop cultural products as either confirming Black females’ hypersexual predisposition (super sex goddess) or evincing their beleaguered status at the hands of rapacious Black male beasts (angry Black woman). Similar to the assertions Patterson makes about the black male, the lamentable characterizations of Black women are also remnants of the period of chattel slavery. In the Plantation Negro as Freeman (1889), for example, Phillip Bruce cites the lascivious, “openly licentious,” Black female as responsible for not only the downfall of the entire African-American race, but also for the increasing wantonness of
white women and the promiscuity of white men. Similarly, contemporary American society obliquely acknowledges that the black female body bears a considerable amount of power. Ironically, while critics have historically characterized that authority as a negative influence, I argue that within hip-hop culture, the Black woman’s embracing her sexuality, and even surfeiting on negative stereotypes, can be cathartic and, thus, revolutionary.

Countless slave narratives illustrate the ways in which black women used their commanding sexuality to reverse the master/slave dynamic. Ex-slave Fanny Berry, for example, recounts the story of a “big strappin’ nigger gal” named Sukie:

...ole Marsa was always tryin’ to make Sukie his gal...Den he tell Sukie to take off her dress. She told him no. Den he grabbed her an’ pull it down off’n her shoulders. When he done dat, he fo’got ‘bout whuppin’ her, I guess, ‘cause he grab hold of her an’ try to pull her down on de flo’. Den dat black gal got mad. She took an’ punch old marsa...and push his hind parts down in de hot pot o’ soap...was near to bilin’ and it burnt him near to death...a few days later he took Sukie off an’ sold her to de nigger trader...dey put Sukie on de block, an’ de nigger traders ‘zamined her an’ pinched her an’ den dey opened her mouf, and stuck dey fingers in to see how her teeth was. Den Sukie got awful mad, and she pult up her dress an’ told old nigger traders to look an’ see if dey could fin’ any teef down dere...Marsa never did bother slave gals no mo’.22

Berry’s account illustrates Sukie’s power and resolve to use to her advantage the slave holding community’s notions about Black female sexuality. Obviously, the slave was physically strong; yet, contrary to the prevalent stereotypical depictions of Black females, Sukie’s public display of her body does not necessarily indicate her deviant sexual tendencies. To be sure, her actions reveal not only the extent of her own psychological trauma, but also, and more significantly, Sukie’s rebellious performance exposed the slave traders’ own sadistic propensities and indirectly curbed “old Marsa’s” treatment of other female slaves in his care.
Similar to what Sukie understood about her nineteenth-century captors, what Sojourner Truth apprehended about her ante-bellum audience, and perhaps what Harriet Jacobs identified about the professional motives of her would-be amanuensis editor, Harriet Beecher Stowe, female rappers recognize that America’s desire to examine and evaluate the sexual display within their own oral and visual, corporeal or written texts actually betrays society’s hypersexual inclination, not necessarily their own. bell hooks confirms that the corporeal and textual authority African-Americans have fuels dominant culture’s anxiety about the construction of positive Black relationships:

No group of black people knew better than the slaves that positive unions between Black women and men threatened white supremacist claims on Black bodies. Free and enslaved Black folks fought hard to privilege these relationships...because they recognized that solidifying these bonds gaining public recognition of their valued was crucial to the freedom struggle....remembering that white supremacist thinking is always challenged by loving unions between Black males and females shed light only why there have been so many obstacles placed in the path of such unions.23

Consequently, American visual narratives conceived by news media and movie industry consciously or unconsciously spin these kinds of images to perpetuate friction between black men and women. hooks identifies the conflict between Mike Tyson and Desiree Washington as well as that between Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill to demonstrate the role mass media plays in projecting black male sexism as merely a reaction to the oppressive or even “predatory” relationships they enter into with Black women.24

In general, rap lyrics indicate a cultural awareness of these negative depictions of Black men and women in the media, and their cultural forms reflect their adamancy that similar gender conflicts do not surface in their own relationships. For example, in Master P’s “Watch These Hoes,” featured artist, Mr. Serv-on says: “I ain’t trippin’ if some hoes look like Robin Givens...hoes and money and pussy can never be my friend...if you
fakin' bitch, I'ma leave your whole body shakin'...

Here, Serv warns his listeners that, unlike the docile and/or hen-pecked Black males the news and entertainment television project, he can spot a scheming female a mile away, and regardless of how beautiful or wealthy a woman is, he has no qualms about hurting anyone who is "fakin'," or who fails to prove her allegiance to him.

Loyalty and genuineness are cornerstones of Black males' rap music, and in much the same way that Mr. Serv does, many rappers convey disdain for women who do not "show love" for their male counterparts. All too often, American society constructs the Black woman as an opportunistic man-eater who is complicit with either an individual white man or with larger White society in the downfall of the Black male. Yet another remnant of the period of slavery, these kinds of contemporary popular characterizations of Black women reiterate the myths of emasculation that implicated an overweening black matriarchy, or Mammie, Jezabel, and Sapphire characters as primary negative influences on African-American gender relations. Rather than examining that perspective critics seem willing only to point out how these songs promote young Black males' hyperheterosexual/hypermasculine self-constructions and actually impede the healthy psychological development of Black females and, thus, of African-American gender relations, in general. Yet, in addition to holding young black males liable, critics also fault young Black women who seem to have grown increasingly tolerant of rappers' negative depictions of them. While it may be true that in the past young Black women have not been publicly vocal against the sexist content of rap music, the recent backlash against Nelly's "Tip Drill" video, for instance, suggests that black female rap music fans neither condone nor endorse music that defames and defiles black womanhood. In fact, in
April of this year, Spelman College had slated Nelly to appear on campus and campaign for resources to fund sickle cell anemia research. In February 2004, after having seen the video, members of Spelman’s Feminist Majority Leaders Alliance (FMLA) withdrew their invitation for the rapper to join them in the campus charity event. Among the images the women found most insulting was a depiction of the rapper sliding a credit card down the crack of a stripper’s backside. Interestingly, although they considered the imagery disturbing, the women found it even more problematic that Nelly’s participation in the video was not an act of sexual pleasure; rather, he seemed to be performing for the benefit of other men on the set and in the viewing audience.27

African-American author, Jill Nelson, was among the group of critics who applauded FMLA’s decision to rescind Nelly’s invitation. However, other detractors particularly Spelman College outsiders, spun the story positioning members of FMLA as “angry emasculators” who were “unwilling to stand behind a black man, even though he [was] doing something good.”28 Journalist Moya Bailey, observed how quickly the media recast the women’s interrogation of Nelly’s imagery as “vociferous attacks” on Nelly, “a supposedly helpless bystander caught in the misdirected rage of young Black women.” To be sure, “Tip Drill” and quite a few other rap videos are distasteful and do revivify early American perceptions about the commodified Black female body. However, even the most extreme misogynist rap music and associated images have not evolved in a vacuum. Clearly they are indicative of the extent to which Black youth are affected by historical constructions of race and gender. Similarly, Black women’s reticence to speak out directly against the men who project these representations is influenced by their
unwillingness to give into stereotypical depictions of themselves as conspirers against solid gender relations.

While Black critics were lauding the young feminists for their progressive public stance, and while the press and other detractors were condemning the angry women for their poor treatment of the best young black man, everyone failed to notice the way the male and female hip-hop generationers assuaged gender tensions on their own. In the spirit of communal participation, the Spelman students invited males from the neighboring Morehouse College to attend a public screening of "Tip Drill." There, in their private space, the students engaged in the communal practice of production, reading, interpretation, and evaluation. FMLA member, Bettina Judson observed that the men in the audience noticed that watching the video in a room full of women made them feel differently about the video. It helped them see the misogyny they had overlooked before. In a very real way, by quietly convening out of earshot of the press and academia, this group of young intellectuals reenacted the escapist strategies of hip-hop cultural practices. Further, by deprioritizing their gender differences in the interest of pro-activist Black feminist theorizing and action outside of the classroom, the young Black women and men engaged in an effective form of what Cole and Guy-Sheftall dub "gender talk."

As was previously mentioned in earlier parts of this study, slaves often used this tool to mask their insurgent inclinations. Early rappers had no idea that, in time, American culture would examine their culture so closely. Nor did Black youth believe that their social and cultural practices would one day impose this powerful an impact on such a diverse audience. For example, in the mid- to late-70s, who would have suspected that White males would be the largest consumers of rap music and hip-hop clothing
products? It is only now that America is so engrossed in hip-hop that critics have begun to give it more than a cursory glance. Americanists, ethnologists, queer theorists, theologians, historians—academics are having a field day with the material, and because most of them only know about hip-hop culture, they can only bring to the texts their limited perspectives. Perhaps most interesting is the general critical perspective of black feminists. In an effort to counter the kinds of narratives and to offset the negative characterizations of Black women that rap music perpetuates, critics, such as Kimberly Crenshaw insist that black women adopt a feminist stance. In “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew,” Crenshaw illustrates how the inherent race and gender politics of male rap texts marginalizes black women, rendering them virtually voiceless. In the critics’ opinion, Black feminism—an alternative feminist approach that specifically addresses black women’s history—is an effective tool against this silencing because it enables women to construct a political identity that thwarts various forms of patriarchal oppression. While Black feminism may appear an appropriate solution, its critical precepts are actually grounded in first- and second-wave criticism which argues for female self-sufficiency, or independence from their male counterparts. Fortunately or unfortunately, the only model of gender relations the early feminists had were those they observed between white men and women. White women’s pleas for equal treatment appealed to women who were doubly disenfranchised, and Black women’s desire to establish themselves as human and female very often appeared to take precedence over their being grouped with the rest of the African-American race. Again, because Black youth always already understand that they share, or “ryde” in, the same socio-economic and racialized space within contemporary society, it will not do for
them to adopt a cultural and political agenda that advocates gender autonomy. Both Crenshaw and, later, Trica Rose seem to be unaware of this important point in their advocacy of their respective brand of feminism.

Extending both hooks’s and Crenshaw’s arguments, Rose believes that, in general, scholars give little critical attention to male rappers’ non-sexist and pro-women commentary. Nevertheless, she also concedes that too often when women speak for themselves, their own identity construction merely affirms patriarchal norms and courtship rituals. The critic herself waxes nostalgic for the days when female rappers symbolized strength and virtue. In *Black Noise* (1996), Rose devotes the chapter “Bad Sistahs” to interviewing female rappers Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, and YoYo. Like Crenshaw, Rose focuses on the music of 2 Live Crew as explicitly misogynist and typical of most male-authored rap. However, unlike Crenshaw, Rose believes that the music of these female hip-hop pioneers does effectively counter the sexist messages by projecting a critical feminist posture. Ironically, each of the interviewees resists claiming feminism as her guiding ideology. Rose’s own rationalization of the artists’ actions substantiates her own unwitting perpetuation of Black female innocence. She attributes their silence to the fact that “they are acutely aware of the dominant discursive context within which their response would have been reproduced.”

Essentially, Rose suggests that because the women know that their ideas will be evaluated and discussed outside of Black youth culture, they are careful not to say anything that might either cause a gender rift among in the hip-hop community or stultify the progress of the Black men in question.

The critic’s initial observations are in accordance with the code of communal participation within which male and female rappers operate. Nevertheless, notably
dissatisfied with the young women's responses, Rose pushes a little harder to get the young women to claim that they are feminists; when they deny it again, she presents them as naïve victims who, in addition to feeling as if they are "being used as a political baton to beat male rappers over the head," did not feel "affirmed as women who could open up public dialogue to interrogate sexism and its effects on young Black women." Rose's critique demonstrates the ease with which even the most sincere feminists can slip into sexist or patriarchal diagnostic modalities. Rose is so heavily invested in preserving the innocence of younger Black women whom she believes ill equipped to assume the mantle of liberation. While it may be true that female rappers are cognizant of the way that mainstream press presents them as "progressive respondents to regressive male rappers," not one of the interviewees has given any indication -- in their individual work or in their respective interview -- that they are incapable of interrogating sexism.

As is the case with hooks, Crenshaw, and Rose, still more cultural critics are prone to identify hip-hop music, not larger society, as a problematic site of sexism; however, they do not advocate feminism as a panacea. For example, in Between God and Gangsta Rap (1997), Michael Eric Dyson is perhaps one of the most vocal advocates of hip-hop music and culture, yet rather than insisting that society alter its unbalanced practices of African-American narrative strategies and/or gender construction, he offers an "up-by-the-bootstraps" methodology for remedying the gender "problem." In general, he suggests that Black men develop alternative modes of self-identification that do not hinder Black females' self-concept or mar their ability to define themselves as effective helpmates.
To be sure, Black female hip-hop generationers understand as well as do their male counterparts how to manipulate the gaze of dominant culture, through their own self-deprecating performance. In their music and filmic presentations, young Black women’s coalescing with male partners is illustrative of their shared ideology of communal participation. Within the transmission history of the hip-hop cultural narrative, the female-authored strain provides supplementarity to the Black males’ metanarrative of Black nationalism. Thus, I argue that hip-hop visual and aural methodologies are equally combative and liberating for both men and women. The sexually-charged lyrics and hypersexualized characterizations both sexes create and project in their music often provide a buffer behind which they can dialogue with each other about their embattled social positions, define the qualifications for engaging in loving relationships, and test each other’s resolve and level of commitment to the larger political goals.

*Ryde or Die: Women Rapping and Male/Female Bonds*

On the surface, each of the aforementioned critical perceptions is valid. It is indeed reasonable for critics to believe that the tenor of Black females’ individual and collective narratives too often subscribe to conventional forms of patriarchal oppression. Likewise, it is true that Black male rappers should refrain from echoing the discourse of female-objectification that larger society perpetuates. Despite their insights, however, not one of these scholars, not even Pough or Rose, seem willing to concede the possibility that beyond reiterating the sexism and misogyny America’s patriarchal system preserves, rap artists do cooperate to solve their gender conflicts.
As was argued in Chapter Two, the language systems inherent in rap culture are not squarely aligned with that of mainstream culture; therefore, the fact that black youth and dominant culture share lexical elements, particularly those which typify sexist behaviors, does not necessarily suggest the compatibility of their respective political agendas. Male and female rappers are constantly defining for themselves and for their listeners what these terms mean. Virtually no critical work has focused on the correlation between Black female rappers’ self-fashioning and their developing a positive rapport with their male counterparts. It is this link that demonstrates how the legacy of signification, cross-dressing, and the ride-and-tie performances applies to young Black women. In much the same way that male rappers’ success is largely attributable to their performing the ride-and-tie, black female rappers are only successful to the extent that they can “ryde-or-die.” That is, their survival (in urban America and in the music industry) is hinged on preserving certain stereotypes about their sexuality while simultaneously demonstrating their willingness to uphold the fight for liberation either alongside or in the stead of their Black male comrades. Rather than adopting a critical feminist stance, which breeds individualism/self-sufficiency to the exclusion of Black men, female rappers employ a “ryde-or-die” theory that is comparable to Alice Walker’s theory of “womanism.”

I agree with Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham explanation that, unlike feminism, Black womanism demands the “recognition on the part of both Black females and males of the nature of the gendered inequities that have marked [African-Americans’] past and present.” Further, they propose that unlike feminism, womanism ‘creates a space for an informed African-American male participation, and heartily
welcomes, in fact, it insists upon the joint participation of Black males and females as comrades.\textsuperscript{35}

Critically, in an effort to more seamlessly incorporate themselves into the genre, females in the "rap game" effectively utilize some of the same narrative strategies black males do in order to define their own cultural and gender roles. Customarily, female rappers alter their real names or assume aliases that bespeak their position as a member of a larger, predominately male group. For example, rapper Dana Smith named herself "Latifah" which means "delicate and beautiful one." When she joined forces with DJ Mark the 45 King, she tailored her name to Queen Latifah to better define her role as co-collaborator, to signify her equally powerful position as hip-hop royalty in the genre, and to command equal respect and attention from her audience.

In as much as they envision themselves as occupying a position as contemporary captive alongside men within both the music industry and larger society, female rappers adopt stage persona, which align themselves with their ancestral past. For example, in her latest album, rapper Rah-Digga fashions herself "Dirty Harriet." In a recent online interview, Jon Wiederhorn asks Rah if she was a Clint Eastwood fan. The female rapper admitted that although she recognizes the moniker is a word play on the hard-nosed gun-toting, take-no-prisoners character Dirty Harry, the title of the album does not refer at all to the actor. Rather, she confessed, "I named [the album] that to throw wimpy critics off the trail. To me, Dirty Harriet represents a strong female presence, leading the way and gathering a following in the process." Rah-Digga’s song "So Cool," illustrates her intentions:

\textit{Call me conductor, I lead the way for ya underground vibe, status self-employed/ R-A-H aka Harriet Thugman; carry out the legacy with seed and husband...}\textsuperscript{36}[b36]
Here, the female rapper links herself with the enslaved past, as is the case with other female artists this chapter examines, she also conceives that her music, her “underground vibe,” is a continuation of a cultural legacy that necessitates her working for and with her child (seed) as well as with her male partner. When asked why she identifies with Harriet Tubman, the artist said that she is “actually living out the same legacy through [her] music.”

In addition to acknowledging their bond with an enslaved past and with figures of powerful resistance, female rappers also firmly position themselves within the history of hip-hop music and acknowledge their rap music forbearers. Again, in “Handle Your B.I.” (2000), Rah Digga recounts her entrance into the rap scene:

Digga, Digga, first name Rashiya/ rock the mic crazy, wouldn’t wanna be ya/ had a nice wind since my early teens;/Now I’m grown rockin’ microphones...Gotta thank god for my chance to blaze/ next album gonna see a fat healthy raise/ and he who makes mistakes, says “that’s the Breaks (That’s the Breaks), True, hit ’em with the Woo! Fine young woman now, long time coming now (coming now, her me with the Fugees/Still ain’t making a connection...rep the thing for my hip-hop brothers take care of them before I take care of others/ Juice Crew, Rakim, Prince P., big influence/ You sayin’ I’m the dopest, but I already knew this…”

Critics who are unfamiliar with certain aspects of African-American youth culture, might mistakenly consider the opening lines of this song as patent examples of the rapper’s self-aggrandizing behavior. However, employing a cadence reminiscent of an African-American children’s jump rope rhyme, Rah is actually cueing the listener to remember his or her own childhood. In this way, the rapper forms a kinship with the listener, lessening the geographical, racial, and, thus, ideological distance between herself and the audience. The artist hurries through her teenage years during which time she struggled to get a record deal. Referencing Kurtis Blow’s “The Breaks” (1984), she offers a historical
signpost by which listeners can estimate her age. Jumping ahead again, Rah recalls her breakout performance with the legendary Fugees in the early-90s and recounts how that coup did not enable her to “connect,” or get the credibility she deserved. Most significantly, she insists on giving homage to those hip-hop legends – Juice Crew, Rakim, and Prince Paul – who influenced her career and rhyme stylings. Rah’s ability to string together her personal milestones with hip-hop historical signposts is illustrative of the craft which the most skilled underground and mainstream rap artists employ. Her successfully executing the unwritten rules of rap music establishes her as a true “ryder”, a true cultural revolutionary and freedom fighter.

More essential than adhering to renaming practices, remembering history, and acknowledging the works of hip-hop antecedents, is female rappers’ active participation in the battle cypher. “Roxanne, Roxanne” (1985), Run D.M.C.’s “Dumb Girl” (1986), and L.L. Cool J’s “Big Ole’ Butt” (1989) were some of the first in a long line of seemingly negative rap music accounts about Black women. However, rather than degrading women, per se, these early songs enabled men to engage in a playful practice of the dozens, offering the most discrete way of challenging women and, ultimately, of inviting them to participate in the genre. Rappers actually initiated these kinds of challenges by playing the dozens with them, by challenging licentious women in the 'hood, and by cautioning young Black women about the hazards of falling in love with the wrong kind of man. Ostensibly misogynist and potentially offensive to women, these songs were intended to be springboards from which the female rappers could become visible and assert themselves in ways that counter these negative depictions and articulate women’s concerns. As a testament to the success of men’s call-and-response
challenge to women, female rap artists created over 150 Roxanne songs and, in so doing, paved the way for some of the most popular female rap artists. These women, wielding their own brand of feminism, have consistently responded to male-initiated challenges by working alongside them for visibility and respect within the genre. Since the early 1980s, Black female artists have accomplished these objectives by dressing and/or cross-dressing as sexy thugs, gangsta boos, thug misses, and ryde-or-die chicks, effectively “flipping the script” on American cultural narratives that fashion them as sexually deviant. (See figure 4.1). In addition to demonstrating their ability to stand in staunch opposition to the jibes male rap artists sling at them, female rappers insure their professional longevity and, more importantly, their street credibility by aligning themselves with strong male rap crews and by maintaining loving relationships with these men.

Every male crew has at least one female member. (See figures 4.2 and 4.3.) There are four key reasons for this phenomenon. One, because male crew members share a homosocial bond as “soldiers” in the rap (war) game, the female narrative affirms the heterosexuality of male group members. Customarily, the female rapper is not romantically involved with any of her rap cohorts. Her lyrics can be sexy and sexually charged, yet, restructuring the “angry black woman” stereotype, she projects herself as inviolable, intense, and prepared for battle. Two, women’s presence in the crews confirms their own ability to stand their ground with some of the best lyricists in the genre. The most skilled male rappers in the world can take their pick of any female rappers in the industry. Therefore, within the hip-hop community, the presence of a female rapper necessarily signifies that woman’s own lyrical/mental fitness and, by ex-
Fig. 4.1. Shawna is the only female member of Disturbing the Peace – a raucous rap group headed by noted rapper Ludacris. Her cross-dressing, here, is indicative of her psychosocial bond with her male crew.

Fig. 4.2. Here Amil is featured with her crew, the rappers of Rocafella Records.
Source: amazon.com

Fig. 4.3. Female rapper Eve is “the first lady” of one of the largest hip-hop groups, The Ruff Riders.
Source: amazon.com
tension verifies the fact that women, in general, occupy a powerful position in the larger hip-hop community. Three, male rappers offer a physical hedge of protection around the female whom they consider the best of a select group of female freedom fighters.  

Finally, there are a disproportionately fewer female than male rappers, and not surprising the record industry, the media, and, more recently, academic/critics target and encourages each of them to use rap as a vehicle for advancing the brand of gender politics that calls for Black women to isolate themselves from their male peers.

The anti-male lyrics and subsequently diminishing careers of quite a few female rappers reflect the long-term benefits of being associated with a larger male rap crew. Oftentimes, there is a danger associated with female rappers’ striking out on their own to the exclusion of their male counterparts. For example, in “Progress of Elimination” (1993), female rapper Bo$$ suggests that while this praxis may be an effective means of lending artists street credibility and, ultimately, or shedding the legacy of slavery, it is detrimental to Black men:

…I think I jumped into a maze and now I’m being surrounded by dead niggaz in a daze/ some kind of way I have become a slave – Yes, sir, Masta’; No, sir, Masta’/I work fasta, even if it means my brain being tampered with…now every member of my click is in his grave/ I’m truly the Bo$$ bytch now/ Nobody’s slave/ How do I plea? Listen, I’ll never give an explanation ‘cause as far as I’m concerned the only way to progress is through elimination…

For Bo$$, not only do lyrics separate the authentic rappers from others in the industry, or the “maze,” but by challenging everyone in her own crew, she runs the risk of “murdering” them. While her feat may be indicative of her strength as a rapper, it certainly does not promote communal progress or racial uplift. Female rappers who create their own music to the exclusion of a male counterpart or crew also run the risk of catering to dominant cultural sensibility about the appropriate performativity of
femaleness or "feminine" womanhood. Just as the woman's presence in a male group implies the men's heterosexuality, so too does a female's independence indicate her masculinity – her social and cultural autonomy; perhaps, her homosexuality; or worse, her hatred for Black men altogether. Categorically, female artists like Bo$$ who present themselves as man bashers are not successful. Examining the shifting personas of MC Lyte, Salt 'N' Pepa (SNP), Da Brat, Eve, Foxy Brown, Trina, and Lil' Kim illustrate how important gender representation and male/female collaborations are within the hip-hop community. Each of these women has significantly impacted the industry, and they each have their own lyrical and personal styles. However, the images they present throughout their respective careers and on their album covers provides some insight into the importance of male-female gender alliance and cooperation.

MC Lyte, SNP, Brat, and Eve began their careers and tomboyish, or "mannish," females yet gradually adopted more feminine rap personas. This change is directly related to their distancing themselves from their respective male counterparts. For example, on the cover of MC Lyte's first album, she appears with both her manager and DJ. Gradually, as Lyte's career progresses, she sheds not only her male cohorts, but also alternates between her tomboy persona and a more feminine character. As Lyte became more feminine and more isolated, her songs became more preachy and indicative of her mistrust for Black men. By 1991, the rapper produced, such as "When in Love," "Eyes are the Soul," and "Search of the Lyte," that are not commensurate with the practice of gender cooperation. By the time her album Bad As I Wanna Be dropped in 1996, Lyte's lyrics had become anti-man. In "Drug Lord Superstar," for example, Lyte teams up with Da Brat to kick her trifling man out of the house.
To be sure, female rappers do feel free to voice their objections to the ways men might treat them and to discuss their relationship problems. For example, many of them address the negative consequences of loving a “thug” and the importance of female solidarity.\textsuperscript{49} Nevertheless, Lyte’s male-bashing music coupled with her increasing distance from a male crew did not resonate with Black youth who were, at the time, the primary purchasers of female-generated hip-hop music. As a result, her career suffered. Other rappers have experienced similar fates. MC Lyte, Da Brat, and Eve have all evolved into more feminine representatives of hip-hop culture. (See figures 4.4 – 4.12) Their individual development outside and apart from the male sphere may appear to be a positive “feminist” strategy (or merely an indication of their maturation). However, as was the case with MC Lyte, each of these rappers began to create songs that asserted their sexuality in ways that neither engaged nor encouraged male participation or response. As a result, their record sales diminished, and they each, in turn, stopped making rap music.\textsuperscript{50}

Conversely, Foxy Brown was the first female rapper who embraced/exploited her sexuality.\textsuperscript{51} Jay-Z introduced her to the hip-hop community when he collaborated with her on “Ain’t No Nigga” (1996). (See figures 4.13.) Unlike any of the previously mentioned rappers, Foxy’s stage persona is an amalgam of 1970s Blaxploitation characters, such as Coffy, Christie Love, and Foxy Brown. (See figures 4.14 – 4.16) In her own time, each of these female persona demonstrated her ability to negotiate the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Just as successfully as did their fictional antecedents, Foxy, Trina, and Lil’ Kim create narratives that at once offer stereotypical
depictions of Black female hyperheterosexuality, proclaim Black female authority, and confirm the Black textual female body as beautiful, desirable, and dangerous. Interestingly, unlike some of the more popular female rappers -- Lyte, Latifah, Rah Digga, YoYo, Brat, and Missy Elliot -- Eve, Foxy, Trina, and Lil' Kim have maintained their relationships with their male crews. Foxy was never a member of the Rocafella camp, but her first album Ill Na Na (1996) established her as lyrically and physically fit. Early in her career, she teamed up with AZ, Nas, and Nature to form The Firm, one of the most well-respected and prolific male/female rap partnerships to date. Like Foxy, Trina gained her notoriety on Trick Daddy's "You Don't Know Nann" (1998).

Trina is one of five principle female rappers to hail from the South. The fact that she is from Miami -- home of the now-infamous 2 Live Crew -- bears significantly on her raunchy lyrical content. Certainly, some listeners might consider her songs offensive. For example, in "Nan Nigga," the rapper distinguishes herself as a sexual forced to be reckoned with. She says:

You don't know nan hoe (uh-uh)/ Done been the places I been; who can spend the grands that I spend...

In this song, Trina's is a response to her male partner's indirectly challenging her ability to hang -- to occupy an equal social and cultural place -- with him. Her rap persona does not necessarily correspond with her actual off-stage character; however, the album cover to her first solo project, "Baddest Bitch" (2002), clearly suggests that she believes her sexually charged narratives and representations are capable of resuscitating, competing with, and sustaining the Black male-authored hip-hop strain (See figure 4.17.). As is the case with music videos, rap artists often have the freedom to conceive their album covers in ways that reflect their personalities and/or their beliefs. Clearly, the foregoing inter-
Fig. 4.4. MC Lyte (in blue) on the cover of “Lyte as a Roc” (1988).
Source: google.com/images

Fig. 4.5. MC Lyte with DJ Shakim on the cover of “Eyes on This” (1989).
Source: google.com/images

Fig. 4.6. MC Lyte on the cover of “Act Like You Know” (1991).
Source: google.com/images

Fig. 4.7. A tomboyish Da Brat on the cover of “Funkafied” (1994).
Source: amazon.com

Fig. 4.8. A slightly more feminine Da Brat on the cover of “Anuthatantrum” (1996).
Source: amazon.com

Fig. 4.9. Da Brat on the cover of “LimeLite Luv and Niteclubs” (2003).
Source: amazon.com

Fig. 4.10. Eve on of the cover “Scorpion” (1994).
Source: amazon.com

Fig. 4.11. Eve on the cover of “Ruff Riders’ 1st Lady” (1999).
Source: amazon.com

Fig. 4.12. Eve on the cover of “Eve-Olution” (2001).
Source: amazon.com
Fig. 4.13. Image of rapper Foxy Brown
Source: google.com/images

Fig. 4.14. Image of Cleopatra Jones
Source: google.com/images

Fig. 4.15. Image of Christie Love
Source: google.com/images

Fig. 4.16. Image of Pam Grier as Foxy Brown
Source: google.com/images

Fig. 4.17. Image of rapper Trina on cover of “Baddest Bitch” (2000)
Source: amazon.com

Fig. 4.18. Image of rapper Lil’ Kim on the cover of “La Bella Mafia” (2003)
Source: amazon.com
pretation of the imagery on Trina’s album cover gleams some insight into the way the artist perceives herself as both “superwoman.” Furthermore, her referencing herself as the “baddest bitch” is suggestive of her accepting her role as “angry black woman” in the genre and, by extension, within the larger hip-hop community. Despite her sexualized persona, Trina’s heroine image (that part of the the superblackwoman mythos which rescues jeopardized Black masculinity) most often registers in her lyrics. Not coincidentally, she has had a difficult time sustaining her career. Again, it is quite possible that her relative failure is directly related to the fact that although she sporadically collaborates with men, she is not affiliated with a male crew.

Far more popular than either Foxy or Trina, Lil’ Kim has garnered more mainstream attention than any other female rapper to date. (See figures 4.18) The rapper’s success and longevity is primarily attributable to the fact that she is affiliated with one of the most well respected icons of hip-hop culture – the Notorious B.I.G. Like Lyte, Kim began her career as a tomboyish character; she was just one of a six-member group -- Junior M.A.F.I.A. Her first big break came in 1996, following the release the group’s first single “Get Money.” Like Foxy and Trina, Kim did not pull any punches with respect to exploiting her sexuality; however, Kim distinguished herself from other female rappers and set a trend in hip-hop culture by challenging males to “come correct,” or to demonstrate their ability to handle a strong Black female partner. In “Get Money” Kim says:

...Now you wanna buy me diamonds and Armani suits/ Adrienne Vitadini and Chanel line boots/ Things that make up for all the game and the lies/ Hallmark cards, saying, “I apologize”/ Is you wit me? How could you ever deceive me? But payback’s a bitch, motherfucker, believe me/ Naw, I ain’t gay; this ain’t no lesbo flow/ Just a lil’ something to let you motherfuckers know. 55[b55]
In this verse, Kim speaks directly to an anonymous male, letting him know that, unlike other “feminized,” or soft, women, she cannot be bought with material goods or sentimental offerings. Significantly, at the end of this verse, Kim assures her male partner that her rejection of him is in no way illustrative of her lesbian tendencies. This proclamation is significant because it splinters the urban myth that Black women who resist a man’s advances are homosexual, or that they are somehow sexually abject. Dissimilar to other rappers before her, Kim lyrics extend the parameters for female performance – they could be sexy, yet bitchy and gangsta. The image Lil’ Kim projects on the cover of her most recent album, *La Bella Mafia* (2003), is a composite of these representations.

Black women in hip-hop culture acquire positions in their respective “crews” and, subsequently, bolster their street credibility by effectively defining the kind of men they believe are prepared for the larger cultural struggle. For example, in “Stuck Up” (1999), Eve says:

> Yo, niggas, if you shy, move on/ only room for a thug that can hold on...I need a dog that can buy it if the pressure’s on/ Damn, I hate it when I find out that you niggas is soft/ go run and hide for cover when the trouble starts/ I like it when he stay and play his part...³[b56]⁶

Likewise, in “That’s What I’m Looking For,” Da Brat asks:

> Where my rag wearing soldiers at that love to watch the dough stack/ Never leave the house without their strap? (That’s what I’m looking for)...Where my Rolley wearing thugs who claim they don’t love you, but any time you want something done, they do it? (That’s what I’m looking for)...³⁷[b57]

Interestingly, both Eve and Da Brat suggest hip-hop gender politics requires men’s and women’s ability to show and prove, not simply profess, their mutual love and respect.
In addition to defining the attributes of fit male comrades, women must position themselves as allies with them in a common struggle. In “If Headz Only Knew” (1996), Heather B says:

...labels flippin’ on me, but I’m true to the street / This greedy world don’t give a fuck how I eat, so I do my thing, survive or die / My back against the wall and they tellin’ me I can’t talk to the streets no more / Are they stupid? I’m riding through the avc. on a hollow-tip bullet / sipin’ on Remi got a magnum of Mo-E / I only want niggas and shorties to know me / they feel what I feel and they talk what I talk / I gotta please heads in New Jerz and New York / Move me from my post when I’m strictly East Coast / Recognize the most thoroughest / Word is bond! Armored clips of lyrics and stack of steel tracks / Still slashing niggas ‘cause I’m on it like that....

In these lines, the female rapper says she is at war with both the mainstream record industry (labels) that would persuade her to break her ties with the inner city audience and, by extension, with an inner-city that is thought to impede her survival and success. Heather B implies that her brand of retaliation requires that she deploy similar tools (“armored clips of lyrics and stacks of steel tracks”) and employ a similar non-combative strategy that male rappers use.

Equally important as defining fellow soldiers and demonstrating their participation in a communal struggle, Black women must also display their lyrical fitness -- that is, their aptitude in battle, their authenticity as “bad bitches,” and their ability to keep a secret. For example, in “The Pros,” Queen Latifah recalls how she handled a lyrical challenge:

I stepped into the a basement party in Brooklyn / The brothers was looking as soon as I put a foot in / A female walked up to me and said, Latifah...I don’t think you’re on the strength, show me the time.” I said, ‘If you really want to do this, we can do this, fine. Take six paces and begin to rhyme.’ / As soon as I attempted to make a sound, I ate her up with the verb, broke her down with the noun / ‘Cause I hate it when someone challenges me, but cannot balance with me/ I get annoyed when they can’t go blow for blow....
The artist makes it clear that males are watching her when she steps into the party. While their attention may certainly be an indication of her physical beauty, she is aware that they are also waiting to see if she can effectively engage in lyrical battle. Similar to what Heather B suggests, Latifah’s talent for wielding words is more important than her physical appearance in that it accurately reflects her skillfulness at effectively participating in the larger nationalist movement.

An essential aspect of the craft with which Latifah and other rappers use to convey their mental and physical potency is their ability to keep a secret. Within American culture, excessive talking and gossiping are typically considered feminine behaviors. Critically, within rap culture, men and women consider these same activities detrimental to communal liberation; therefore, in order for women to prove their ability to successfully participate with men in the signifying practice of ryde-or-die, they must conceal their strengths, often hiding them in violent and or hypersexualized rhetoric. For example, in “U.N.I.T.Y.,” Latifah defines the characteristics of an authentic bitch, or “bad girl”:

you wear a rag around your head/ and you call yourself a ‘gangsta bitch’/...I saw you wilding, acting like a fool:/ I peep you out the window/ jumpin’ girls after school.../you a wannabe... real bad girls are the silent type....

Latifah suggests that the woman who is superficially tough and who uses her physical, as opposed to her mental strength, is ignorant and, ultimately, useless to members of the collective struggle.

In that same vein, in “Gotta Man” (1999), Eve demonstrates how and why she silence is an essential component of male/female relationships:

...the love I feel is serious...I’m the get away driver so my nigga can escape...I’m the bitch he’ll never leave...Carry stories that can hurt him,
still he only trustin’ me/ Secrets never leave my mouth even if they torture me.$^6$[b61]

In this verse, the rapper adheres to a couple of critical cultural codes – fidelity and secrecy. Characterizing her relationship as one of espionage and potential danger, Eve assures the audience that her man can trust her with even the most intimate and potentially damaging information about him.

Female rappers rarely challenge males to lyrical battles. Feminist critics, particularly Black feminist critics, might point to this fact as evidence of females marginalization within the culture. Nevertheless, their actions are dictated by both ancestral gender politics and conventions of the genre itself. Critics should not misinterpret female artists’ willingness to play by the rules of the game as a sign of their political naïveté. As suggested by the trajectory of Lil’ Kim’s career, women are able to alter the rules governing female performativity; however, in order to enter the game, Black female rappers must display certain sets of skills and demonstrate their commitment to the larger hip-hop political agenda. Thus, verbal exchanges with men are more cooperative, and like forum of Morehouse and Spelman students, indicative of “gender talk” that Black feminists advocate. Moreover, regardless of the exact methodology female rappers use to prove their lyrical readiness, each of them intuitively understands that the fitness test of rap text construction is also vital component of African-American youths’ communal praxis. Consequently, more often than not, rather than going head-to-head in battle, men and women in hip-hop culture engage in a call-and-response performance. Within the various rap texts, neither rapper prohibits the other from speaking his/her mind, and because the rules for rap performance have already been established within the culture, both rappers are free to demonstrate their craft.
There are countless examples of these kinds of exchanges. The most popular theme within these call-and-response systems is that of the ruthless insurgent outlaw team of Bonnie and Clyde. To date, eight songs and records as well as the name of one rap duo directly refer to the notorious couple. Certainly, in the same way that the practice of renaming allows Black youth to more forcefully insert themselves into America’s cultural memory and/or compensate for their invisibility in popular narratives, rap teams conceive that the dangerous duality inherent in the Bonnie and Clyde union effectively encapsulates and projects an analogous threat of liberation that Black youth want to publicly declare. Additionally, these songs provide some of the only ways that Black men and women can openly profess their love to each other. For example, in one of the earliest entries into this volume, Foxy Brown and Jay-Z join forces on “Bonnie and Clyde Pt. 2.” The following are the first two verses in the song:

[J]Now would you die for your nigga?
[F] Yeah, I’d die for my nigga.
[J]Would you ride for your nigga?
[F] I gets lie for my nigga.
[J]Would you live for your nigga?
[F] Do up big for you, nigga.
[J] Would you do a bid for your nigga?
[F]Shit, you my nigga!

[F]Would you ride for me?
[J]Rapper robbery
[F] Would you die for me?
[J]I hang high from a tree.
[F]They ain’t ready for us nigga.
[J] Obviously
[F] Sound like a Bonnie-and-Clyde thing to me.62[b62]

Analogous to the way a couple might recite their vows in a wedding ceremony, Fox and Jay take turns interrogating and professing to the other about the extent of their mutual commitment. Even in the female rapper’s narrative, the male rapper begins the dialogue,
inviting the female to enter the exchange with him. In the first round of questions, Jay asks Foxy if she would die, ride, live and go to jail, or “do a bid,” for him. Once Foxy has answered his inquiries, she begins her own interrogation, asking him if he would ride and die for her. These affirmations publicly confirm the couple’s unromanticized and platonic love, yet, perhaps more importantly, they alert the audience that their engaging in this dialogue fulfills a larger purpose. By talking to each other in this way, Foxy and Jay model the kind of gender politics that are most effective for contending with “them” – their prospective lyrical opponents, the record industry, cultural outsiders, and ultimately, dominant cultural ideologies that would prohibit their successful alliance. The “Bonnie-and-Clyde thing” Foxy observes is no different from the larger ryde-or-die phenomenon I observe about the project of hip-hop cultural production. Bound to their cultural history as well as to each other, male and female hip-hop generationers take turns identifying and reinscribing the lyrical and physical attributes that will best facilitate their survival and liberation.

Ryde-or-Die Chicks in Hip-Hop Film

There is more that can be said about the ways in which Black females’ disinclination to challenge Black males is a reflection of hip-hop racialized politics. However, that discussion is outside the scope of this examination. Certainly hip-hop film is often too far removed from the direct control of hip-hop generationers and is, therefore, more keenly policed by a system that would prevent positive Black male/female partnerships. For this reason, hip-hop filmmakers are able to only obliquely articulate the importance of male/female cooperation.
Some critics of Black popular culture assert that Black women often adopt masculine personalities either to compete with men for, among other things, social, cultural, or political space. However, there are instances in filmic narratives wherein strong male figures are absent. Why then, even if men are not present, do Black women perform masculinity? I agree with Berretta E. Smith Shomade’s contention that filmic representation of masculinized Black women at once stabilize white normative standards and facilitate Black women’s agency. However, I disagree with her assertion that “most ‘boyz-n-the-hood’ cinema situate Black women as bitches and hoes while centering on the inhumanity of Blacks and crime.” I argue quite the opposite: Black women in hip-hop film are, oftentimes, the Black male conscience, telling him to “do the right thing,” so to speak.

Analyzing the female characters in *Set it Off* (1996) as both masculine and feminine, Smith-Shomade demonstrates the conflicting ways that Black women negotiate their presence across traditional lines of gender and race within hip-hop film. Judith Halberstam extends Smith-Shomade’s observations, citing *Set it Off* and especially Queen Latifah’s character, Cleopatra “Cleo” Sims, as exemplary of Black females’ transgressive performativity. According to Halberstam, Cleo is a “butch lesbian” who “trades off a rap version of black masculinity” to demonstrate yet another alternative to white normal maleness. Informed by race, class and sex, Cleo’s masculinity enables her to execute what the critic perceives as an “authority that is not borrowed from men but part of her own masculine presence.” Further, “infused with racial and class dynamics,” Cleo’s particular masculinity is “part and parcel of a particular form of abject female identity.”
Rather than duplicating Smith-Shomade's efforts by examining the ways Black women occupy the male-gangster site, I contend that Cleo's brand of Black female masculinity is more aligned with Halberstam's observations about the ways that race, class, and sex shape those identities. However, disclaiming the parallels that Halberstam draws between convincing Black female masculinity and abject Black female identity, I argue that although Cleo's blackness, gender, and lesbianism may render hers an abjectly masculine performance within larger society, it is her willingness to perform maleness without adhering to the codes governing communal participation that define her abjectness within the hip-hop community. It is this fact, not her "abject sexuality," which ultimately necessitates her death. Two of the other women in the movie—Tashon and Frankie—face a similar fate as Cleo because neither of them successfully "performs" her sexuality. As a single mother, Tashon has no male partner, and she is unable to prove her fitness as a mother to her son whom the state removes from her care. Additionally, although Frankie is attractive and intelligent, she has not heterosexual relationship. Of the group members, Stoney is the only one who demonstrates an ability and willingness to engage in a meaningful relationship with and, likewise, protect the man she loves. Of course, her ability to successfully protect Keith's honor and employment is directly related to two terribly traumatic ordeals she has with other men in her life—the death of her brother Stevie and her encounter with a wealthy car dealer who pays her for sex. Nevertheless, Stoney's character is intended to symbolize Black women's collective journey to find the balance between stereotypical depictions of the smothering matriarch and whore. Because she is the only character who successfully navigates that passage, she is the only female to survive.
The claims of this chapter and, likewise, my contribution to the field of hip-hop cultural studies demonstrates that young Black women, particularly those engaged in rap culture, have a self-possessed narrative voice and space to articulate their concerns. There is enough room within academia for critics to continue their interrogation of the ways in which female-authored rap music and cinematic images of Black women disrupt traditional feminist discourse. However, academia might enjoy the more fruitful practice of actually listening to the music and allowing hip-hop generationers to speak for themselves about their authorial intent and larger political objectives. As it stands, the practice of scapegoating Black youth culture for America’s failures does little else than cause African-American youth to bind themselves more tightly to their collective stigmatized past and to each other.

It may be true that women who cannot access a forum with the global reach and power of hip-hop are less able to carve a space for themselves and other likeminded women. However, young black women, particularly those who participate in rap culture, create ways of coming together to affirm their political and communal ideologies. Rap music legitimates their cultural strivings, and just as significantly, enables them to dialogue with and, thus, begin to identify black men who share their goals.
Notes for Chapter Four


5. TuPac’s “White Man’z World” provides a good example of this kind of compensation—“We must fight for brother Mumia! We must fight for brother Mutulu...we must fight for brother Geronimo Pratt...we must fight for Zulu...” See TuPac, “White Man’z World,” Don Killuminati: The Seven-Day Theory, Koch Records, 1996. In this song, TuPac’s retracts Black youth lineage back to Africa, suggesting that they must bear the mantle of liberation for the leaders who have been incarcerated, slain, or colonized.


7. See Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., But Some Of Us Are Brave: In All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: Black Women's Studies (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1982). Hull, Bell Scott and Smith discuss Black women’s rationale for breaking away from the larger women’s movement. They suggest that these myths continue to prevent women from achieving freedom. The following were among the chief reservations:

   1. The Black woman is already liberated.
   2. Racism is the primary (or only) oppression Black women have to confront.
   3. Feminism is synonymous to man-hating.
   4. Women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns; people of color need to deal with the "larger struggle."
   5. Feminists are nothing but lesbians


9. Corona Brezina, Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I A Woman?” Speech: A Primary Source of Investigation (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2004). During her speech “Ain’t I a Woman” (1851), Truth attempted to persuade the audience of her physical and mental competence by baring her breasts and her muscular frame. In that one move, she herself equated brute physical strength with womanhood, and further, used them to justify her liberation.


12. In some respects, their theories also parallel what I argue in Chapter Three about the ominous task Black men face as they attempt to negotiate their manhood, blackness, and their economic status.


See Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (New York: Civitas Book Publisher, 1999). Here, I am employing Patricia Hill-Collins’s definition of “new racism.” In *Black Sexual Politics*, Hill-Collins says, “new racism reflects sedimented or past-in-present racial formations from prior historical periods...Each racial formation reflects distinctive links among characteristic forms of economic and political exploitation, gender-specific ideologies developed to justify Black exploitation, and African-American men’s and women’s reactions both to the political economy and to one another” (55). While I defer to her definition, I suggest that young black men and women are hyperaware of the ways their cultural productions disrupt dominant cultural, and perhaps transnational, ideologies about African-American gender politics.

Patterson 167.

See Patterson 210. The author says, “Indeed if one must assign blame, the major part must surely be placed on the men.”


*hooks, Salvation* 42.

Several divisive Black male/female relationships in African-American popular culture have significantly influenced hip-hop gender relations - that between Robin Givens and Mike Tyson in the eighties, Oprah Winfrey and Stedman Graham in the nineties, and between Omarosa Manigault and Kwame Jackson in the twenty-first century.


Of course, this notion of gender or sexual performativity substantiates my earlier claims that mainstream rappers are merely acting out characteristics that larger society expects them to.


Rose 150.

Rose 150.

Michael Eric Dyson, Between God and Gangster Rap: Bearing Witness to Rap Culture (Oxford University Press, 1997).

For example, in hip-hop culture, not all women are bitches, and depending on the context of the song, the term “bitch” can even refer to heterosexual men. See Jay-Z, “Bitches and Sisters,” The Blueprint: The Gift and the Curse, Def Jam, 2002.


Rah Digga’s common-law husband is rapper Little Zee; the two have a child together.


Run DMC, “Dumb Girl!” Raising Hell, Def Jam, 1988. Run-DMC challenges women whose behavior is destructive to themselves and to the culture. Run typifies the “dumb girl” as a retarded (“slow”), promiscuous (“fast,” or “giving every guy a try”), and a drug user (“sniffin’”).

LL Cool J, “Big Ole Butt,” Walk With A Panther, Def Jam, 1989 pokes fun at immature black men who, driven by their lust, are unfaithful to their women.
To date, Jay Z’s Rocafella and Sean Combs’s Bad Boy are among the many record labels that have signed and that that feature female acts. Nevertheless, owning or heading a record label and producing music for female artists is not the same thing as being a member of a performing group that includes a woman. Jay Z and Sean Combs are both solo artists who do record songs for and with females, but neither of them has a crew, per se.

Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes, dir. Byron Hurt, perf. Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Busta Rhymes, God Bless the Child Productions, 2005. Film provides an interesting discussion about homoeroticism in the genre. Several featured critics, such as cultural critic, Michael Eric Dyson and former editor of Vibe Magazine, Emile Wilbekin, suggest how homosocial bonds between black males hip-hoppers border on the homoerotic.

Of course, there have been a few exceptions to this standard practice. For example, when she was a member of J.U.N.I.O.R Mafia, Lil’ Kim and Notorious B.I.G. had a relationship. Similarly, Amil and Jay-Z had a romantic partnership for a short while.

There exists a prevailing skepticism about women’s ability to protect themselves from mainstream America. This cynicism stems from a larger cultural perception that white men, in particular, have historically victimized black females while black men helplessly watched. Gloria J. Browne-Marshall calls this phenomenon “the ‘secret’ of slavery.” See “Gloria J. Browne-Marshall,” The Realities of Enslaved Female Africans in America, ed. Vernellia Randall, The University of Dayton Law School, 29 Dec. 2005 <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/05intersection/Gender/rape.htm>.

In the epigraph to this section, rapper Amil comments to a Source Magazine reporter that she was ousted from the Rocafella family in large part because she wouldn’t “hate on niggas” in her music. Among others, the female trio TLC was a target for this kind industry manipulation in 1999.


The following songs provide good examples of these two ideas: Sole, “Our World,” Skin Deep, Dreamworks, 1993; Queen Penn’s “Ghetto Divorce,” Conversations with the Queen, Motown, 2001; and YoYo’s “Black Pearl,” Black Pearl, Atlantic, 1993.

A number of these women have maintained a presence in hip-hop culture. For example, Pepa has had cameo appearances in several hip-hop films, MC Lyte has a recurring role on the hit show “Half and Half,” and Eve produces Diva, her own hip-hop clothing line, and she stars in her own self-titled sitcom.

Certainly, a majority of female rappers, beginning with the late ‘70s trio, Sequence, used sexuality to sell their records. Moreover, quite a few R&B artists’ lyrics – Adina Howard’s “Freak Like Me,” (1995), for example – are as raunchy as Foxy Brown’s. However, prior to Brown, no female artist had brazenly bared her body or talked so straightforwardly about sex as she.

Other prominent Southern female rappers are Shawna – Atlanta; Mia X – New Orleans; Antoinette – Miami; and Gangsta Boo – Memphis. Some hip-hop fans may consider LeftEye a rapper; however, because she was a member of an all-female R&B group, I am not including her on this list. Additionally, some critics may want to include Da Brat in this group, but while she was discovered in Atlanta, she hails from Cleveland, so I consider her a Mid-Western rapper.

I briefly discuss rappers’ artistic freedom in music videos in Chapter Two.


This song appears on Foxy Brown’s album, so technically it is a part of her larger narrative.

By “hip-hop racialized politics” I mean the intraracial discussion about good-hair vs. bad-hair or light vs. dark skin etc.

To be sure, classic Westerns, such as “The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly” (1967), gangsta movies like “Scarface” (1984) and “Casino” (1995), and action films like “The Terminator” (1984) inform black youth consciousness. However, not all films that contribute to hip-hop consciousness can or should be classified as hip-hop film. I define hip-hop films as those that not only contain subject matter relevant to Black urban life, but those also written and/or directed by African Americans.


Halberstam 228.
EPILOGUE

Emancipation is long over due/ So overcome procrastination/ Because
freedom is within you/ For some reason we think we're free/ So we'll never
be/ Because we haven't recognized slavery…

KRS-One

We don't live for Hip-Hop… It lives for us…

Talib Kweli

Historians, cultural studies scholars, and nonacademic writers have provided a
critical and interpretive framework in which to view hip-hop culture in general and rap music
specifically. In their respective analyses, some scholars have advanced the critique of sexist
and misogynistic language in the music.\(^3\) In addition to the sexual politics involving rap
music, scholars as well as magazine and newspaper writers, community activists, and rappers
themselves have also focused on the social, cultural, religious, and economic influences on
the music.\(^4\)

To date, African American cultural critics lead the way in contemporary
understanding and critiques of hip-hop culture and music. Scholars such as Tricia Rose,
Michael Eric Dyson, bell hooks, Todd Boyd, Houston Baker, and Cornel West have
intellectualized the discussion of rap music and hip-hop culture within and outside the walls
of the academy. It is safe to say that while most scholars would agree with Rose’s definition
of rap music as a “rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based
music,” many others would also recognize, as Rose does, that rap is “a Black cultural
expression that prioritizes Black voices from the margins of urban America.”\(^5\)
Unfortunately, fewer scholars perceive the myriad ways that "hip-hop" as a culture is co-constructed by young African Americans co-construct via music, language, dress, and movement to create spaces of resistance to oppression, racism, and poverty while living their lives in the margins of society. However, despite scholars' earnest attempts to carefully critique hip-hop music and culture, glaringly absent from too many of their discussions is the idea that in the same way other forms of music (gospel, jazz, be-bop, blues) hold an important place in the history and survival of African Americans, the rhetorical presence and power of rap music registers the contemporary Black youth experience of liberation.

To be sure, the rhetorical power of Black American authors and orators throughout history should not be forgotten or dismissed. However, the music and other cultural markers of hip-hop suggests that urban youth, oftentimes for want of exposure, turn to other rhetorical formats for entertainment and, most importantly, for education and direction. Again, too often, critics of hip-hop music perceive that it is these relatively new formats which drive the culture. Perhaps more true is the fact that, for youth, hip-hop is a vehicle through which they express their understandings about culture. It is as rapper Talib Kweli says, "[urban youth] don't live for hip-hop; it lives for [them];" urban youth themselves drive what mainstream society has forced "underground" – the insurgent, liberationist bent of hip-hop culture.

The myriad cultural aspects that shape hip-hop music can mystify those who attempt to analyze it. As Rose points out, "The dynamic tensions and contradictions shaping hip-hop culture can confound efforts at interpretation by even the most skilled critics and observers." Nevertheless, analysis of hip-hop culture is possible when conducted in a manner that takes into consideration the role Black history and experiences have in shaping this particular genre of music. For that reason, throughout this project, I carefully consider
and explain various aspects of African American youth culture. Such attention to the subtleties of language, dress, and resistance contradicts the assertion that generations of hip-hop youth are unredeemable, disposable, and otherwise unfit to integrate with members of dominant culture as productive, contributing citizens.

If the work of hip-hop artists is any indication, the future of African American discourse is bright indeed. The young men and women who shape the culture have merely picked up where Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Marcus Garvey left off by creating their own contemporary resistance rhetoric. While the faces and the methods employed by hip-hoppers may have changed, the message certainly has not. It is one of Black uplift, strength, and survival. In many ways, hip-hop is the modern slave song, expressing urban youths’ dismay with daily oppression, yet offering hope and sharing with other “captives” the plan for stealing away from the subjugation that still often accompanies race.

Identifying some of the ways Black-authored nineteenth-century slave narratives translate into performative techniques in contemporary hip-hop cultural forms is but one point of departure from which subsequent scholars can produce more redemptive analyses of contemporary rap and urban film texts. Ultimately, discovering and uncovering other positive representations of Black cultural history, communal solidarity, race, and gender constitute the educational project of rap music itself. This popular cultural form, like its antecedents, transcends its position as just another genre of music and has become a mouthpiece for an entire generation.
Notes to Epilogue


5 Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) 2.

6 Rose 21.