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*East Tennessee State University*

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“Don’t Believe The Hype”:  
The Construction and Export of African American  
Images in Hip-Hop Culture

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Communication  
East Tennessee State University

in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Professional Communication

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by  
John Ike Sewell, Jr.  
May 2006

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Amber Kinser, Ph.D., Chair  
Primus Tillman, Ph.D.  
John Morefield, Ph.D.

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Keywords: Hip-hop, Rap Music, Imagery, Blackness, Archetype

## ABSTRACT

“Don’t Believe the Hype:”

The Construction and Export of African American  
Images in Hip-Hop Culture

by

John Ike Sewell, Jr.

This study examines recurring motifs and personas in hip-hop.

Interviews with influential hip-hop scholars, writers and music industry personnel were conducted and analyzed using qualitative methods. Interview subjects were selected based on their insider knowledge as music critics, hip-hop scholars, ethnomusicologists, publicists, and music industry positions.

The vast majority of constructed imagery in hip-hop is based on a single persona, the gangsta. This qualitative analysis reveals why gangsta personas and motifs have become the de facto imagery of hip-hop. Gangsta imagery is repeatedly presented because it sells, it is the most readily-available role, and because of music industry pressures.

This study is significant because gangsta imagery impacts African American social knowledge and the generalized perception of blackness. Gangsta imagery has also served to alienate black culture and has caused rifts in the African American community.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Hip-hop, a catch-all term for the urban, primarily African American-related pop culture that encompasses rap music, break dancing, graffiti, poetry, and fashion, provides outside observers a portal into black experience. Since hip-hop's inception as an identifiable genre in the late 1970s, it has become a pervasive international force, affecting all strata of contemporary culture. The form's amalgamation of diverse artistic and musical styles into a single, broad-based genre has created a new cultural milieu, one that continually offers observers and participants keen insight into the changing face of race relations in America and in the world.

The most prevalent facet of hip-hop is rap music. The foremost prong of hip-hop's artistic triad of rap, graffiti, and break dancing, rap has become synonymous with hip-hop: When describing this particular form of music, the terms rap and hip-hop have become interchangeable. In the last 25 years, rap has evolved from an underground, largely urban phenomenon into the largest-selling musical genre, both in America and on the international scene. While numerous demographic studies have been conducted to determine exactly who is buying this music, results have been inconclusive (For example, see Rivera, 2003; Spiegler, 1996; Watts, 2004). At the current levels of popularity of the form, hip-hop's target audience is the widely ranging youth market. The general consensus in the hip-hop community and in the commercial music world is that the largest segment of the hip-hop audience is white (Kitwana, 2005a). Simply put, rap music is a genre created by African Americans that is consumed by a primarily white audience.

Because rap music is, at present, a primary conduit through which “blackness” is transmitted to a worldwide, primarily non-black audience (Perry, 2004, p. 125), an examination of how blackness is packaged and commodified through the marketing of commercial hip-hop music and music videos will provide clues as to how black culture is perceived by the general public. Lyrical content in particular provides clues about to how hip-hop artists want to present themselves. In its purest form, vocal performances in rap music generally eschew melody in favor of extended expositions of rhyme and verbal dexterity. Rap lyrics largely avoid repeated choruses in favor of a linear storytelling style. Stories told in the form of hip-hop rhymes are rarely excessively metaphoric or opaque – the narratives of rap music are normally blunt and to the point, allowing for relatively pointed interpretation. The combination of music and visual elements in music videos also provides impetus for examination. Because videos are a marketing tool, motifs and stereotypes are repeated in the video format in an effort to recreate past commercial successes. In short, images of blackness are, through the use of repetition and basic, codified imagery, distilled into relatively simple, easily definable characteristics in the video form. Such imagery is ripe for analysis with a keen eye toward how African American experiences and identities are presented.

### Overview of Study

This study is a qualitative analysis of the generalized perceptions of blackness communicated through hip-hop imagery. As the hip-hop world is often viewed as a kind of petri dish for intercultural study, copious information on the subject is available in the form of books, articles, and studies. Since the early 1990s, the study of hip-hop has received much focus from cultural studies scholars, ethnomusicologists, sociologists, and folklorists (Keyes, 2004, p. XIII).

In addition to the analysis of preexisting literature on the subject, this study includes interactive, discussion formatted interviews that I have conducted with hip-hop insiders on my own. In my professional life as a music journalist, I have gained access to an array of resources and personal acquaintances that I have drawn on for this study. These professional associations have provided an entree to the hip-hop community that includes relatively easy access to some influential figures of the rap world, in the music industry itself, and respected, high-profile analysts and scholars the genre.

The findings from the review of literature in Chapter 2 lead to the research questions of Chapter 3. The questions address the gaps in the literature, specifically addressing the impact of hip-hop imagery on African American social knowledge, the function of the gangsta role for hip-hop artists, and emergent, non-gangsta imagery in hip-hop. Chapter 4 addresses the methodology of the research and data management. The findings of the study are discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 completes the study by providing the conclusions of the research.

### Importance of the Study

Since the mid-1980s, hip-hop has become Black America's primary cultural export (Lusane, 2004, p. 353). The distribution of hip-hop as a cultural product brings several market forces into play, most notably in a cultural and sociological sense, the factor of image shaping. Commercial hip-hop is indeed a product, and the money-generating capability of the form has certainly influenced how the imagery and archetypes delivered in the genre are shaped and manipulated to achieve maximum market impact and a bottom-line result of mass sales. With this study, I seek to gain an understanding of the essential images and stereotypes of blackness purveyed through modern hip-hop music, the reasons that these images in particular have been

commodified and perpetuated, and what impact the dissemination of these images might have on the culture at large. As hip-hop is at present one of the primary vehicles of expression and identity for African Americans (Roach, 2004; Smiles, 2004), the messages conveyed by the genre impact black consciousness and the ideas and stereotypes held by society as a whole. Hip-hop is a powerful genre that influences the perception of blackness for the entire world. With that cultural power in mind, it is useful to petition influential scholars, analysts, and promoters of hip-hop for their views on how and why the constructed imagery of hip-hop impacts the generalized perception of blackness.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### The Evolution of a Genre: History and Demographics

While there is no definable instant when hip-hop began as a form, there are musicians whose work can be interpreted as providing antecedents for the beginnings of hip-hop as a defined genre. On a lyrical level, jazz artists such as Billie Holiday and Nina Simone were among the first black artists to deliver widely-distributed expressions of explicit protest via their respective songs, “Strange Fruit” and “Mississippi God-Damn” (Slawecki, 2006). The fact that both of the aforementioned performers predated hip-hop notwithstanding, their unabashed expressions of rage certainly set the stage for the more aggressive expression of protest and anger to follow in rap music. More obvious precursors for hip-hop came when The Last Poets and Gil Scot-Heron combined black consciousness poetry with rhythmic soundtracks in their early 1970s recordings (Ramsey, 2003; Veenbaas, 2006). Although hip-hop was not an established genre during this period, music historians have retrospectively labeled The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron as progenitors of the hip-hop form (Chang, 2005). Bearing in mind the multiplicity of influences and antecedents to hip-hop, it is impossible to define an exact point where the genre began. For the purposes of this study, hip-hop’s history will be traced from the point at which the genre became identified as a separate, musico-cultural form.

Although a minority of the most popular, commercially successful and culturally visible rappers have been Caucasian (e.g. Eminem, Bubba Sparxx, Vanilla Ice, et al.), rap

music is considered to be primarily the domain of African Americans, and rightly so. Emerging as a defined form from a wellspring of music and DJ styles that began in the Bronx ghettos in the early 1970s, rap music and hip-hop culture was an almost wholly black phenomenon as the form became more readily identifiable as a specified genre (Chang, 2005). While there were some Hispanic and mixed race artists involved in the first wave of hip-hop, these persons were immersed in a neighborhood-specific style that would eventually become a global commodity. Simply put, the originators of hip-hop were black: And the few who were not black were persons of color (primarily Puerto Rican) and were summarily classified as black by music consumers.

As with any form of mass marketed entertainment, hip-hop quickly became a product that was marketed to the largest number of potential buyers. The initial dissemination of hip-hop into mainstream entertainment culture began in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As the seminal hip-hop recordings were written, performed by, and released for commercial sale by a predominantly African American creative pool in the South Bronx, a pattern was set: African Americans create the product and then “export” it to white buyers. Hip-hop music was sold through the same distribution channels that R&B, blues, and rock’n’roll music (and all popular music) had been before. And, as with the preceding black-rooted genres, the concept of blackness became inextricably linked with hip-hop. Once rap became a known musical commodity, the notion of the blackness, both for the performers and the genre itself, was used as a signifier of authenticity and, thereby, a selling point (Keyes, 2004). Black slang, musical style, and fashion were integral to the entirety of hip-hop and became a *de facto* ingredient in the hip-hop product. As hip-hop became increasingly popular, the style

began to be appropriated by whites and other ethnic groups (Kitwana, 2003, p. 2), and thus began the stereotyping of black character that then was codified, replicated, and transacted via the mass marketing of the genre.

As hip-hop coalesced into a more easily definable music/style niche in the mid-1980s, themes began to emerge in rap music. In hip-hop's infancy, the form was dominated by DJs whose primary goal was to produce seamless sets of music that would induce dancing (Keyes, 2004, p. 43). The dance and party focus of early hip-hop originated from this source, as did the first raps, which were usually recited by MCs to incite dancing. When the focus of hip-hop switched from the DJs to the rappers themselves, the dance and party emphasis continued as a *raison d'être* for the rhymes (George, 2004a). Dance and party themes, strong structural elements of hip-hop lyrics to this day, reached their height of popularity as the genre was first making its presence on the pop charts. Early hits such as The Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" and even Blondie's "Rapture" (an early example of how white appropriation of hip-hop could result in huge sales) were characteristic of the dance/party approach during the burgeoning popularity of rap.

#### Angry Voices: Rap as a Forum of Protest and Dissent

Considering its ghetto roots, revolutionary musical technology, and primarily African American origin, hip-hop seems the ideal format for socially conscious, politicized content. Rap music, which is relatively easy to create in its most stripped-down form, requires comparatively inexpensive musical equipment and does not demand a full band for its production. Hip-hop artists can quickly create their backing tracks with

minimal, comparatively portable gear. After mastering the technology, a single person can create and perform hip-hop music entirely on her/his own (Diggs, 2005). The speed of production and total independence afforded by the form allows artists to make artistic statements at lightning speed.

Beginning as purely party music, rap did not include street-level, protest content until a few years after the form's first commercial breakthroughs (Keyes, 2004, p. 162-163). The first socially conscious rap recording to gain mainstream attention was Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five's "The Message," released in 1982. As a ghetto take on existentialist lament, "The Message" set the template for myriad protest style recordings to follow (Richardson, 2005). By the mid 1980s, protest lyrics and angry exhortations became common in rap (Neal, 2003). Reaching its first and perhaps most potent climax with the overtly politicized rap diatribes of Public Enemy and the more philosophical musings of Eric B. & Rakim in the late 1980s, the political and protest oriented subset of rap became a ghetto-bred correlative to the punk subgenre of rock'n'roll music.

The angry, sociopolitical content of Public Enemy, et al. led to an even more incendiary hip-hop form known as gangsta rap that emerged in the late 1980s. Spearheaded by Los Angeles' N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitude), gangsta rap is known for its glorification of street violence and drug crime, fierce anti-police rhetoric, and overt misogyny. The hostile outlook of gangsta rap became problematic, not only for police groups and the P.M.R.C. (Parent's Music Resource Center, the group responsible for parental guidance markings on recordings with "obscene" or adult content), but also for members of the hip-hop community seeking to promote rap music as a viable, artistically

relevant medium of African American expression (Chang, 2005). The conspicuous and oftentimes scattershot rage of the gangsta rappers in songs such as N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police" or the Geto Boys' "Mind of a Lunatic" was perhaps antithetical to the focused, channeled anger of the preceding sociopolitical rappers. Gangsta rappers reveled in the spoils of organized crime, presenting a retrogressive and oftentimes frightening portrait of street-level, black masculinity.

### "Born Bad": The Cult of the Antihero

In order to examine the imagery and personas of gangsta rap in light of popular culture at large, one must first have a general understanding and appreciation of the antihero as a recurring motif in popular culture since the 1950s. While the progenitors of the antihero persona in mainstream entertainment were white, their emergence set the stage for appealingly surly and antisocial characters of all ethnic orientations to follow. Actor James Dean's portrayal of the troubled Jim Stark in the 1955 film, *Rebel Without a Cause* is perhaps the foremost archetype of the antihero construction. Dean's androgynous good looks, turbulent personal life, and early death served to solidify his iconic status. Dead heroes are static; they never age or sully their reputations through involvement with artistic projects of questionable worth (Erikson, 2006). James Dean's *Rebel*, along with Marlon Brando's 1953 performance as a swaggering motorcycle tough in *The Wild One*, established a fashion sense, attitude, and overall demeanor that became *de rigueur* for rock'n'rollers and actors hoping to create a sense of dark allure that has continued through the punk rock era and is firmly entrenched in American iconography to this day (Farren, 1985; Savage, 1992.). Cousins of the aforementioned rebellious

cultural contingents, America's Beat Generation and its English counterpart, the Angry Young Men, delivered antagonistic, nonconformist protagonists in fiction at around the same time period (Feldman & Gartenburg, 1987). A similar phenomenon occurred in black literature as outcast protagonists appeared in the noir novels of Donald Goines, Chester Himes, Robert Deane Pharr, and others at around the same period (Gerald & Blumenfeld, 1998, p. 7). The protagonists of the Beat Generation (and the writers who created these characters) challenged conventional notions of morality, stretching the boundaries of sexual and behavioral propriety as they followed errant paths in quests for enlightenment and oblivion. The beat muse was appropriated by subsequent music-related youth movements to follow.

As the beat generation dissipated, a succession of youth movements employing antihero imagery followed suit. By the mid-1960s, rock'n'roll had dethroned jazz and folk, the musical styles preferred by the beats and their immediate heirs, as the preferred sonic style of the youth. Once the Beatles-spearheaded British Invasion sound gave way to the drug-induced musical meanderings of acid rock, the hippie era was in full swing (Kent, 1995). While the hippies were a gentle lot who espoused peace and love, their long hair and peasant garb was considered such an affront to middle class America that they were still perceived as threatening. In the late 1970s, the hippies were supplanted by the punks (Savage, 1992), a group whose entire existence seemed focus in provoking antiheroic outrage. And by 1979 when the first strains of rap music found commercial radio airplay, youth culture had become synonymous with counterculture.

Interestingly, the counterculture became co-opted by "the establishment," as marketers sought to imbue their products with rebel style. By the 1990s, it had become a

standard practice for commercial brands that were courting the youth market to present their products as having some kind of subcultural affiliation. In short, a product had to be perceived as being “cool” in order to sell, and being cool meant being associated with youth subculture. Journalist Klein (2000) describes the must-have value of coolness in marketing:

Cool, it seems, is the make-or break quality of 1990s branding. It is the ironic sneer-track of ABC sitcoms and late-night talk shows; it is what sells psychedelic internet servers, extreme sports gear, ironic watches, mind-blowing fruit juices, kitsch-laden jeans, postmodern sneakers and post-gender colognes (p. 70).

While coolness is a much sought-after quality in the commercial world, it is a necessity for those in the creative sector, especially for supposedly underground artists whose work is oriented toward young audiences. Ergo, because hip-hop is perceived as an art form emanating from the deepest recesses of the ghetto, it is of pivotal importance for rappers who want to “make it big” to radiate cool. And, for gangsta rappers, this sense of cool is inextricably intertwined with the antihero persona.

#### “Dollah Bill, Y’all”: Commercial Appropriation of Rap

As the antihero motif became standardized in rap, a simultaneous phenomenon occurred; hip-hop was assimilated into consumerist culture and the images of blackness used as signifiers of rap authenticity were annexed for use in advertising and marketing. As marketers realized the advantage of products and brand names being perceived as “cool,” shrewd image manipulators embarked on a ghetto-bound scramble to somehow associate their wares with rappers and members of the much-touted hip-hop generation in

hopes of imbuing their products with cool-by-proxy (Klein, 2000, p. 73). The hip-hop/marketing linkage seemed perfect, as rappers were already name-checking brands in their lyrics. In an early, standard-setting example of the hip-hop/marketing alliance, Run-D.M.C., probably the first rap group to achieve mainstream crossover into rock and pop radio and heavy MTV rotation, inked a multimillion dollar endorsement deal with Adidas which was spurred by their hit song, “My Adidas” (George, 2004b). George (2004b) explains the synchronous, commercial relationship of Run-D.M.C. and Adidas in the following passage:

This match of a leisure-wear clothing manufacturer and a rap act illustrates how interconnected hip hop style and brand consciousness are... But then the theme of Run-D.M.C.’s career from the start has been the institutionalization of hip hop as a commercial and cultural force. This is just another step on that journey for the band and the culture (p. 133).

With the Adidas deal, Run-D.M.C. set the template for what would become a hip-hop tradition: The use of brand names in rap lyrics became a new form of product placement. Two decades later, brand mentions are so prevalent in hip-hop that they are tracked from *Billboard* magazine’s Top 20 and summarily ranked on the *Agenda, Inc.* Website list called “American Brandstand” (Stanley, 2004, p. 2). At present, name-checking by rap artists often signifies more than personal wealth and status. Musicians are positioning products in their lyrics as an entree into what has become known as a “back-end deal.” With a back-end deal, a brand mention in a rap song causes a spur in sales for the product, resulting in a profitable endorsement deals and sponsorships for the rappers (Kiley, 2005, p. 1). While early rappers decried the use of hip-hop songs in commercials

as a sellout, many of today's acts view advertising contracts as assets, actively seeking out commercial deals as a way of further exposing their music and establishing credibility as big-time, big-money players. Although product placement and back-end deals are generally regarded positively in the hip-hop community, sometimes the product-flogging can be too overt. A recent offer from fast food giant McDonalds offering to pay rappers a royalty of around \$5 for each time one of their songs incorporating the name "Big-Mac" was aired on radio, was met with outrage from the hip-hop community (Kaufman, 2005). A McDonalds spokesman said that the proposal was an attempt to add "cultural relevance" to their product, but the scheme backfired and was quickly jettisoned by the fast food giant.

Sponsorships, endorsements, and product placements are not the only ways that hip-hop is linked with brands. Instead of affiliating a product or brand with a particular rap artist or group, a proven strategy is for brands to promote the idea of their products as being somehow synonymous with hip-hop culture in general. Clothing companies such as the aforementioned Adidas, Nike, and, most pronouncedly, Tommy Hilfiger, have gone to great lengths to enable inner-city (e.g. black) youths to wear their products, thereby establishing the distinguishing aura of hip-hop coolness which is subsequently "exported" to the suburban malls for purchase by affluent (e.g., white) buyers (Klein, 2000, p. 75). In a practice known in industry parlance as "bro-ing down," representatives of sportswear and clothing companies go to impoverished, inner-city locations where they approach teenagers, offering free shoes and clothing items with the provision that they be worn in public (Andom, 2003). By "bro-ing down," companies receive feedback about their products and circulate the products for easy visibility in black neighborhoods.

Once catering almost exclusively to the country club set, designer brand Tommy Hilfiger became a staple clothing brand of the hip-hop community in the 1990s through rap-related marketing. Hilfiger managed the switch to an urban focus by giving away clothing to high profile gangsta rappers such as Biggie Smalls (Spiegler, 1996). Hilfiger clothing became de rigueur for the inner city youth seeking to emulate their gangsta heroes such as Smalls, and then the clothing was re-adopted by young white consumers who were seeking the rebellious, antihero pose of hip-hoppers. On the hip-hop based marketing strategy, Klein describes the Hilfiger tactic as, “selling white youth on their fetishization of black style, and black youth on their fetishization of white wealth” (p. 76). Through rap-based sales promotions, products are imbued with the qualities of rebellion and materialism, seemingly contradictory attributes that easily coexist within the hip-hop ethos.

### Keepin’ it Real?: Authenticity Issues in Hip-Hop

Through their lyrical imagery, gangsta rappers distilled ghetto life to a simplistic, “us-versus-them” struggle, where pimps and drug dealers became the heroes while police and traditional authority figures were the villains. As gangsta rap gained popularity, having a street-tough image became a prerequisite for any rapper whose lyrical content dealt with subject matter other than partying and seduction. “Keepin’ it real” became an unspoken requirement for hip-hop artists, most pointedly for male rappers (Reese, 2004). At the genesis of the gangsta form, image construction was not practiced. Gangsta rappers were, quite simply, drug dealers, gang members, and street toughs whose raps depicted the day-to-day struggles of the ‘hood. While the gangsta

image began as realistic iconography spouting from the wellspring of the ghetto, the popularity of the gangsta style stimulated a copycat phenomenon. Successful and highly visible rappers such as Kool G Rap, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, DMX, and Young Buck perpetuated the gangsta style, complete with prefabricated and oftentimes misleading personal histories that included drug dealing, gang memberships, and jail time. Paradoxically, hip-hop artists with previously clean records such as Li'l Kim and Slick Rick have served time in jail because of their involvement in shootings linked to "beefs" among rappers.

The faux gangsta syndrome reached highest visibility with the emergence of Tupac Shakur, a Los Angeles rapper and, later, film star who went so far as to tattoo "Thug Life" on his stomach when he, in fact, had experienced a middle class, suburban upbringing (Coates, 2005, p. 145). Ironically, as Shakur ascended to fame, his carefully constructed thug life facade became reality: Shakur was gunned down in Las Vegas as a result of an East Coast Vs. West Coast feud with Biggie Smalls (Oshun, 2002). The murders of Tupac Shakur and, subsequently, Biggie Smalls exemplified how prefabricated thug images could become reality. The ensuing publicity also served to focus a media spotlight on the linkage between hip-hop's upper tier music industry moguls such as Death Row Records' Suge Knight and multimillionaire rapper/producer/svengali Sean "Puffy" Combs with organized crime. Now serving jail time for racketeering, Suge Knight was rap's most notorious gangsta/executive. In the 1990s, Knight was investigated simultaneously by the FBI, ATF, DEA, and the IRS in order to establish a connection between Knight and the M.O.B. Piru Blood gang located in Compton, California (Ro, 1998, p. 7-8). Thus began a vicious circle: rappers without

gang affiliation became involved in the gang world vis-a-vis their participation in the hip-hop music scene. Thug life became, in many cases, synonymous with gang life. Violent lifestyles that were often fictitiously dramatized in rap videos became business as usual in the sector of the entertainment industry that produced and distributed hip-hop. The overly simplified, hypermasculine imagery of gangsta rap was easily replicated, producing some regrettable, unsavory stereotypes as a result. In spite of, or because of, its questionable artistic and social merit, the gangsta style continues to achieve huge sales to this day (Dimitradis, 2004).

#### “Yo! MTV Raps”: Recurring Themes in Lyrics and Videos

Music videos are the primary means of marketing for hip-hop recordings. Through the use of visual elements, simplistic plot scenarios and body language, archetypal images, and stereotypes are created, duplicated, and eventually stamped into the gray matter of American and worldwide cultural consciousness (Watkins, 1998). Rap videos generally follow three themes that are easily intermingled. The primary themes are partying (often coupled with sex), materialism (“bling,” conspicuous consumption and high-dollar, designer products), and the glorification of street crime (“thug life”). The intermingling of these three themes seems inevitable: parties are financed by money obtained through rapping or street crime, rappers garner sexual favors through fame and money, rappers are wont to proclaim former or present street gang affiliations, and rap music executives often have underworld connections, both in the fictionalized video depiction of the rap music business and in real life. While these oft repeated depictions might be somewhat realistic for the comparatively small population of the hip-hop

hierarchy, this imagery certainly presents a skewed view of the reality of African American life. Of course, this romanticized imagery is easily recreated through the imaginary world of music video.

Because mainstream rap videos inevitably present artists on the top tier of the hip-hop spectrum (at least in terms of commercial success and units moved), the imagery of mainstream videos becomes a template for aspiring rappers. The reproduction of gangsta themes and motifs is basically a safe bet: There is an eager audience for violent, sensationalist entertainment. And the early manipulators of the gangsta style made bold and skillful moves which capitalized on the popularity of hardcore imagery (Watkins, 1998, p. 185-187). With more hip-hop artists recreating popular, commercially proven image constructions in a quest for pop success, the unrealistic, wild west motif proliferates, and is often perceived as a realistic depiction of black life by media consumers (Jones, 2005).

Through the use of bold imagery, insistent repetition and prominent placement in mainstream media, rap music videos have come to represent both the hip-hop community and black life in general to mainstream America. With 25 years as an established genre, there are separate generations who have grown up with hip-hop as a constant presence in their lives. For Caucasian consumers, rap videos offer a gateway impression of the African American experience that oftentimes results in skewed perceptions of a race and its culture. Hip-hop scholar Ife Oshun (2001) comments on commercial rap's focus on violence and its repercussions:

While few artists were coming from a place of real experiences, the lion's share of mainstream rap was a glorification of money-making fiction. The result was a

large body of work based almost solely on grossly-exaggerated imagery: Imagery that served, in part, to inflate the stereotype of the African-American male as ultra violent and out of control (Oshun, 2001).

Predictably, the iteration of violence and street crime as glamour in rap lyrics and video resulted in a backlash: Parental groups sought to restrict the airing of the more violent rap videos, a move that served to vilify hip-hop artists and perpetuate a preexisting milieu of stratification where black and white cultures are separated from each other. Pop music in its myriad forms has traditionally been a target for alarmist, pro-censorship factions, and hip-hop (along with heavy metal and industrial/gothic rock, among others) has become yet another scapegoat.

For example, the results of a recent study conducted by Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health published on a popular health website concluded that female subjects ages 14 to 18 who watched at least 14 hours of gangsta rap videos per week, "were far more likely to practice destructive behaviors" (Kirchheimer, 2003). According to the study, subjects who watched the aforementioned amounts of gangsta rap videos were three times more likely to assault a teacher, over twice as likely to get arrested, twice as likely to have multiple sex partners, and one and a half times more likely to have a sexually transmitted disease, use drugs, or drink alcohol (Kirchheimer). The report on the WebMD site, however, did not conclude that the rap videos had in fact caused the bad behavior. While the WebMD article did not declare a causal relationship between exposure to gangsta rap videos and delinquent, regressive behavior, the title and tone of the article did imply that such a relationship indeed exists. The widely-distributed article illustrates the conclusion that the repetition of the gangsta motif in rap videos has

perpetuated negative stereotypes of African Americans and contributed to America's divisive racial milieu as a result.

### "The Message": Politics in Hip-Hop

Even though rap music has proven an apt vehicle for the spread of socially conscious, overtly politicized messages, both in the form of vague "black power" rhetoric and specific, focused lyrical content dealing with racial inequality, the genre has, as a whole, remained in the apolitical realm. Of course, it is difficult to ascertain a dividing line between the personal and the political, as feminist researchers and activists have argued for decades, especially when considering a musical form that is essentially a race-specific creation. Nevertheless, the majority of popular hip-hop lyrics are focused on non-political topics. Paradoxically, rappers are known for expressing outspoken views in interviews and public conversation which are often critical of government and authority figures. For example, a recent statement made by rapper Kanye West at a Hurricane Katrina benefit that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" was the cause of both outrage and vociferous agreement from the public (Moraes, 2005). Curiously, West's music and the bulk of the most popular rap singles nevertheless veer away from outright dissent, instead focusing on familiar themes of partying and romance.

Interestingly, many newer hip-hop acts such as The Perceptionists, Cage, and P.O.S. that deal in overtly political messages about black issues are developing audiences that are almost exclusively Caucasian (Kitwana, 2005a). One might conclude that white audiences find protest oriented hip-hop appealing because of the rebel factor: Increasingly jaded white kids are drawn to rap acts with black-consciousness themes

because the angry, politicized lyrics delivered by members of an oppressed class (African Americans) represent the last true voices of dissent in a music scene where packaged rebellion is a time-proven, and, most often, prefabricated and clichéd, selling point. Protest hip-hop, which is generally distributed through independent labels at present, finds a ready made audience in the form of post collegiate, white liberals, just as the bebop variant of jazz found a primarily collegiate audience in the 1950s. Although politically oriented hip-hop finds a rapt audience in the form of upwardly mobile, well educated, and primarily left-leaning whites, the messages conveyed through the music do little to instigate any real revolutionary action (Lusane, 2004). The consumers of the political/protest niche are predisposed to agree with the anti-war, anti-sexist, pro-tolerance tenets of the rhymes; therefore the artists are essentially preaching to a pre-converted (white) elite group, perhaps inadvertently bypassing the black audience that can truly relate to and act upon the ideas expressed in the lyrics. Speaking of these independent, politically-minded rap artists, hip-hop scholar Bakiri Kitwana notes the striking color gap between the artists and the audience. “Although to date there’s been no attempt to track concert demographic data, fans, promoters and independent MCs who play live more than half the year give estimates of 85 to 95 percent [white audience population]” (Kitwana, 2005a, p. 3).

One clue to the scarcity of politicized material in hip-hop music might be the market-driven focus of the music industry. As with all businesses, the focus of the music industry is moving units and reaping sales, not fomenting revolution or even fostering a climate that is conducive to sociopolitical discussion. Although the music industry attempts to perpetuate the image of being a hotbed of artistic expression, its primary goal

is, in fact, to reap maximum sales from the most minimal investment (“Music Biz,” 1998, p. 3). Instead of cultivating artists for long term, steady sales, the music industry is oriented toward hype, saturation, and synchronicity: The ideal artist for the music business reaps huge sales, perhaps in a large part by recreating previous, proven pop archetypes such as the seemingly interchangeable teen pop divas saturating the pop marketplace at present (Britney Spears, Ashlee Simpson, and Christina Aguilera are illustrative), or by latching on to transient fads such as “skatepunk” and “snap” music. Targeted toward a fickle and seemingly politically ambivalent teen market, the most preferable (by music industry criteria) hip-hop star has a well-constructed image, simplistic, repetitive music with easily digestible, catchy lyrics, and is presented simultaneously in various media including radio, music video, movies, and television. Simply put, controversial subject matter that is not in the realm of the sensational (i.e. politicized, protest-oriented content) is not a selling-point for today’s most commercially successful pop music artists. Another perceived cause for the dearth of black-consciousness rap is that the music industry is still primarily a white institution (Ridenhour & Jah, 1997). While the infrastructure of the entire music industry is primarily owned and operated by white executives like David Geffen, Warner Brothers’ Lenny Waronker, Arista Records’ Clive Davis, and BMG’s Andrew Lack, the preponderance of powerful, business, production, and management oriented figureheads of the hip-hop world are African Americans such as Sean “Puffy” Combs, Jay-Z, Terry Lewis, and Babyface, for example. In summary, the music market dictates which kinds of creative material are aggressively promoted: Socially conscious rap music is not wildly popular; therefore, the style is not being aggressively promoted by major labels.

### “Who’s The Mack?”: Pawns and Players of Hip-Hop Hierarchy

A vexing twist to the timeworn show business model of black performers being exploited for white profits is the newer strategy of white hip-hop artists being molded and promoted by black managers and career strategists. White hip-hop artists, especially in the early stages of their careers, are well-served by having associations with high profile black artists and producers. With these relationships, white rappers can foster their street credibility by association. Most notably, archetypal white rapper Eminem focused media attention on his association with former N.W.A. member, Dr. Dre, early in his career, thereby aligning himself with hip-hop’s gangsta elite of the day. Caucasian rappers Bubba Sparxxx and Paul Wall followed suit with similar associative strategies in subsequent years. Journalist Nana Ekua Brew-Hammond comments on the modus operandi of the white artists/black credibility tactic: “Though there are no guarantees of success, these mixed-race power-couple pairings are worth their weight in potential platinum [one million record sales] or gold” (Brew-Hammond, 2005). Paradoxically, while the cachet of associative cool must come from a black artist or producer, the white artists who receive this by-proxy street credibility are more likely to obtain lucrative, major label record contracts than the black artists that they both emulate and seek creative collaborations with. While hip-hop is still dominated by black artists, the tide of white artists such as the Insane Clown Posse, Twiztid, Sage Francis, Kid Rock, Buck 65, and others is rising. Rap has also been absorbed into the overwhelmingly white, “nu metal” subgenre by popular groups such as Linkin Park, Limp Bizkit, and Staind, all of which feature MCs in their lineups, along with the standard rock instrumentation. In both of the aforementioned cases, African American music, style, and mode of dress is being

appropriated by Caucasians, who then repackage the style in a more commercially plausible, e.g. whiter, mass-market-friendly form, reaping huge sales in the process. Surely this process of cultural absorption and repackaging is not fueled by an avowedly racist corporate dictum, but the effect is the same: Minority (black) culture is annexed by the prevailing (white) group, who then quite profitably repackages the culture in their own image.

The appropriation and repackaging of black sounds and styles by white artists is perhaps the result of a music industry incentive to increase the genre's sales potential. The deluge of suburban-friendly hip-hop artists like Will Smith, MC Hammer, and Vanilla Ice in the mid-1980s resulted from an industry push for homogenized, easily accessible rap acts that would sell in the hinterlands (Kitwana, 2005b, 47-48). Once these acts had established a foothold, hip-hop became mainstream entertainment. Although Caucasian artists like Eminem and Bubba Sparxxx have assumed street personas and reaped huge sales, cross-cultural appropriation can be a precarious move if not handled deftly. For example, when Vanilla Ice's story of a ghetto upbringing was proven false, the rapper immediately lost all credibility and was instantly reviled by the hip-hop community. Author George (2004b) explains that Vanilla Ice's prefabricated narrative, a ruse that might have been foisted on him by his management, "speaks to a shift in pop aesthetics such that even white boys seek identification with the black underclass" (p. 204). And when such identification with the black underclass is successfully achieved by white artists, huge sales are sure to follow.

### “Am I Right Fellas?”: Misogyny in Hip-Hop

As with all forms of pop music, especially those forms that use music video as a marketing tool, sexuality is a pivotal selling point of hip-hop (Jones, 2005). The very nature of musical performance lends itself to the expression of sensuality, and the inherent sexuality of the performers is magnified to its utmost by music marketers. With the erotic content pushed to the forefront of hip-hop video imagery, the disturbingly misogynist aura exuded by many rappers was brought into glaring focus. Of course, the presentation of female bodies as decorative imagery has been a staple of music video imagery since the form's inception. And flagrant sexism seemed to be a prerequisite for male dominated rock'n'roll music, especially among the groups like KISS, Poison, Faster Pussycat, and Motley Crue that were part of the heavy metal subgenre of rock. But after the initial rush of party-oriented hip-hop releases, many rappers took sexism to a new level, flagrantly expressing the same misogynist ideas that have long since been an integral part of the rock'n'roll package. Rap artists like the Geto Boys, 2 Live Crew and Ice-T did not mince words, bandying about offensive terms like bitch and “ho” (whore) with alarming frequency. Hip-hop scholar Perry (2004) comments on the recurring presentations of women in rap videos:

Too often, hip hop portrays women as gold diggers seeking only to take advantage of men, as disease carriers and self-hating, hypersexualized animals who shake their stuff for the camera, and as symbols of capitalist acquisition (p. 128, 2004).

The appearance of such sexist, oppressive and exploitative themes presented alongside those that rail against the oppression and exploitation of their race by white America

seems inherently contradictory. Black feminist scholars such as hooks, Keyes, and Oshun have also critiqued this contradiction in their work. For many rappers, the assertion of power by black women is seen as contrary to the goals of the street hustler or player (Baldwin, 2004). Social science scholar Anderson (1999) explains how males with a “street” perspective often view relationships with women as adversarial:

To the young man the woman becomes, in the most profound sense, a sexual object. Her body and mind are the object of a sexual game, to be won for his personal aggrandizement. Status goes to the winner, and sex is prized as a testament not of love, but of control over another human being (p. 150).

Following a similar tack that white patriarchs have used for centuries, black proponents of patriarchic structure often equate violent acts and the subjugation of women with masculinity.

The theme of acquisition of women as sexual property is nothing new in the world of pop music, but this motif is particularly pronounced in the hip-hop genre (Rose, 2004). Often delivering easily decoded messages about female subjugation by pimps and playas, the three minute video format reduces multifaceted personality types to one dimensional caricatures. Rose avers that, based on the iconography of the hip-hop flaunted in mainstream media, an outsider to the genre, “would (beside betraying limited critical instincts about popular culture) probably perceive rap to reflect the violent, brutally sexist reality of a pack of wilding “little Willie Hortons”” (p. 291). In the video format, the popular and easily reproduced badman presentation rears its head once again: And, this time around, the oft repeated depiction of the black man as a pimp is used. Feminist hip-hop scholar, Perry (2004), claims that the masculine power of the pimp, “lies in both the

acquisition of wealth and female bodies” (p. 132). An early antecedent to the hip-hop pimp persona, writer Iceberg Slim (a.k.a. Robert Beck) has served as a role model for many of today’s prominent rappers via his infamous books, *Pimp*, *Trick Baby* and *Mama Black Widow*, all of which were originally published in the 1960s (Keyes, 2004). For Iceberg Slim, becoming a pimp was a process of empowerment. Through pimping, the exploited black man gained power through the exploitation of black women. In *Pimp*, Iceberg Slim discusses the unwritten rulebook of pimping:

You won’t find it in the square-Nigger or White-history books. The truth is that book was written in the skulls of proud slick Niggers freed from slavery. They wasn’t lazy. They was puking sick of picking white man’s cotton and kissing his nasty ass. The slave days stuck in they skulls. They went to the city. They got hip fast (as cited in Beck, 1969, p. 194).

Popular rapper Ice-T later claimed Iceberg Slim as one of the principal inspirations for his personal narrative and pimp persona. Several other prominent hip-hop artists such as Snoop Doggy Dog, Trick Daddy, and Skinny Pimp followed suit, also creating carefully constructed pimp images.

Arising from an underground, African American phenomenon, the hip-hop form had been an ideal conduit for the expression of black rage and the assertion of black power. And even though hip-hop has a number of talented, high visibility female artists like Queen Latifah, Beyonce, Li’l Kim, and MC Lyte, the form is overwhelmingly populated by males. Therefore, the genre, like rock’n’roll, country music, and picaresque literature before it, is predominantly perceived as a male form (Perry, 2004). A long marginalized group occupying one of the lower tiers of America’s economic and cultural

caste structure, black males made practical use of the forum accorded to them via hip-hop. And from this platform, black males oftentimes expressed their power (and rage) in ways that were threatening to the status quo: as gangstas, drug dealers, pimps, and as rampant plunderers of female bodies. Aggression toward women was, as viewed through the skewed lens of poverty and oppression, a means of asserting black male power in response to institutionalized white male authority (Dyson, 2004; Lusane, 2004). Social critic bell hooks (2004) asserts that, through the expression of misogyny in hip-hop, rappers have essentially rearticulated the patriarchal form of protest first asserted in the 1960s by the Black Power movement (p. 150). And because the use of sexist terminology has become a staple of rap lyrics, offensive ghetto-speak like “bitch” and “ho” is replicated ad infinitum by aspiring rappers in hopes of “walking the walk” and establishing street credibility.

The presentation of misogynistic ideas and jargon in rap music has proven a winning formula for aspiring artists seeking to gain a name for themselves through provoking outrage. The use of shock value in entertainment is a longstanding tradition, and popular rap recordings certainly use this tack. The repetition of sexist terminology in hip-hop has resulted in certain words that once were relegated to ghetto language becoming ingrained in the general vocabulary: Terms such as “strawberry” (Slang for a cocaine-addicted prostitute), and “chickenhead,” along with the ubiquitous “bitch” and “ho” have become commonplace in the conversations of suburban, middle-class Americans. Of course, sexism in hip-hop has also resulted in a backlash from within the black community (Jones, 2001), from feminist factions (hooks, 1994; Perry, 2004), and from conservative groups advocating the censoring of supposedly obscene language in

rap music (Chang, 2005). This negative response to sexist terminology and depictions of women in hip-hop has stimulated much discourse within the hip-hop community in regards to the supposed inherent sexism of the genre, the impact of role modeling in rap music, and on black males' attitudes toward women in general (Rose, 2004). And predictably, some of this backlash also served to solidify the notion of gangsta rap as truly rebellious, street-level, outlaw music.

#### “Prophets of Rage”: Violence and Prefabricated Shock Value

Women are among several recipients of verbal aggression in hip-hop, especially from the gangsta rap sector. Police are a frequent targets, which is predictable because of the antagonistic relationship between law enforcement and the criminal underground, *and* because police are often perceived as being the militia of an oppressive (e.g. white) government. N.W.A.'s “Fuck Tha Police” and a song by Ice-T's heavy metal/rap group, Body Count, entitled “Cop Killer” became the focal points of a public outcry to ban gansta rap in the early 1990s (Keyes, 2004; Chang, 2005; Watts, 2004). Once the press spotlight was focused on gangsta rappers because of the controversial, incendiary lyrics of the aforementioned songs and the subsequent counterattack by the FBI and police organizations, cultural conservative groups and even the NRA jumped into the fray, creating a media frenzy. While the furor concerning “Cop Killer” and “Fuck Tha Police” provided excellent grist for tabloid journalists and cultural scholars alike, the lyrics of each song were little more than violent fantasy set to music, with the police in the role of the “bad guys.” And it is doubtful that an increase in anti-police violence resulted from the distribution of the songs (Driver, 1999).

While sexism seems to be the most pernicious strain of blight currently plaguing hip-hop and other pop-music styles, other biases have found means of expression through the genre. While the free speech forum provided by rap music is certainly key to the genre's strength, on occasion this autonomy of expression devolves into a free-for-all situation where fallacious, biased, and illogical ideas are expressed without restraint. And some unscrupulous or irresponsible rappers have used the hip-hop as a means to air homophobic and racist ideas. Gay men have borne the brunt of the verbal ire of some rappers. A predominantly male genre, hip-hop has provided a perfect storm scenario for the perpetuation of a brand of machismo that includes misogyny and homophobia. Somehow, anti-gay sentiment has become the "dirty little secret" of the hip-hop community; a community that, as Widner (2005) argues, uses seemingly little restraint in expressing outrage at other forms of discrimination yet still casts a blind eye to the homophobic rhetoric that is repeatedly spewed amongst its ranks. For many male rappers, delivering put-downs of homosexuals and, in particular, gay culture is a way to assert an angry form of machismo, as if their heterosexual male identity is somehow reinforced by an antagonistic view of the LGBT community (Swedenburg, 2004). Slang terms such as "faggot" are commonplace in hip-hop music, used both as verbal barbs against homosexuals and as all-purpose derogatory language (Aaron, 2005).

While expressions of outrage against racism are far more common in hip-hop, the genre also has provided a forum for the expression of some racist views regarding non-African American minority groups. Racist ideas are rarely expressed in hip-hop, but the use of racist rhetoric by two of rap's high profile progenitors fostered much discussion of anti-Jewish and anti-Korean bias expressed in the genre (Chang, 2005). The discussion

of anti-Semitism in rap music reached its apex in the late 1980s when Professor Griff, the “minister of information” for popular political agitprop rap group Public Enemy, made several “offhand comments” about Jews, leading to a subsequent high profile interview in *Newsweek* magazine where Griff essentially proved his detractors correct with a barrage of anti-Semitic comments (Christgau, 1989). This incident was followed in 1991 by a public outcry regarding a song on Ice Cube’s *Death Certificate* album which reiterated negative rhetoric against Jews. The *Death Certificate* album also included a track entitled “Black Korea,” that expressed resentment of Korean shop owners in Los Angeles to such an exaggerated degree that *Billboard*, a music industry magazine that almost always shies away from controversy in its pages, went so far as to request that record stores not carry the album (Chang ). Public Enemy and Ice Cube both eventually recanted the racist polemics of their respective albums, but the media fuss had already focused attention on racist ideas in rap music, proving that these high profile examples were but the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

As with most forms of pop music created since the emergence of electronic sound reproduction, hip-hop has been criticized for its recurrent drug references. Rock’n’roll music, for example, has a proliferation of songs (Steppenwolf’s “Goddamn The Pusher Man,” James Brown’s “King Heroin” and countless others) that condemn drug pushers, at least those who sell the more addictive, harder drugs such as heroin and cocaine. While there are certainly differing views about drug culture expressed among the canon of hip-hop, the popularity of gangsta styles seems to have led to a common, if perhaps mistakenly held conception that hip-hop is a pro-drug genre. And unlike the practitioners of earlier pop music forms, hip-hop artists are more likely to deliver lyrics that not only

promote drug use but also glorify the sellers and distributors of drugs themselves (Neal, 2004). The repetition of drug imagery and the positive depictions of drug dealers in rap music can be attributed to the realities of inner city living conditions (Kitwana, 2003; Neal, 2004). With few employment opportunities for those (such as the majority of housing project residents with limited education) that actually deliver a living wage, the notion of drug dealing as a realistic form of employment takes hold among inner-city dwellers. Therefore, the sympathetic and sometimes even heroic portrayals of drug dealers in hip-hop lyrics can be seen as accurately reflecting truths of the ghetto existence, at least for the percentage of its population that involve themselves in the drug trade. Furthermore, the use of drug dealing themes in rap can be interpreted as metaphoric: Rappers who relay tales of their own drug dealing misadventures are, in effect, asserting their influence and authority within the 'hood (Perry, 2004, p. 104-105). Boasting about criminal prowess in rap, much like boasting about sexual prowess in a blue-collar saloon, is oftentimes pure braggadocio. And even though a majority of the general public may find these depictions distasteful, there is a certain *je ne sais quoi* or romantic allure to the imagery. The reiteration of drug dealing characters also can be understood as an easily employed creative device employed when portraying the 'hood as a contemporary dystopia. And contrary to popular belief, the elevation of criminal activity to a heroic status has a long history in popular song: the bluegrass anthem, "Rockytop," glorifies moonshiners, Jim Stafford's "Wildwood Flower" humorously advocates growing marijuana, The Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" openly promotes pill popping and LSD use, as well as an entire genre of Mexican folk music called Narcorridos which extols the virtues of narcotics smugglers (Stevenson, 2005).

### “Fear of a Black Planet”: The Criminalization of Hip-Hop

With the plethora of negative traits associated with hip-hop, the form has become an obvious target of criticism. The backlash against rap music, which is often described as obscene or promoting violence, promiscuity, and drug use, mirrors the furor against rock’n’roll music that occurred in the late 1950s as that genre, and Elvis Presley in particular gained national popularity (Guralnick, 1994). The early, adverse reaction to rock’n’roll was propelled by fear; white fear that through rock’n’roll’s appropriation and mimicry of black musical and performance styles, the boundaries of segregation between the races would break down (Davis, 1989). A commonly held belief is that the backlash against hip-hop music is fueled by a similar, racially charged fear, thus fueling institutionalized racism, both from within and outside the music industry. In an analysis of the imagery of the “badman,” a timeworn characterization of African Americans that plays on Caucasian anxieties by emphasizing exaggerated and oversimplified qualities attributed to blacks (primarily males), hip-hop scholar Imani Perry (2004) explains how negative reactions to rap music from the white sector are often based on infantile, primordial white fears:

The badman plays on all of white America’s fears about the ‘big black dick’ and most frighteningly (for the mainstream) is imagined as individually triumphant in the battle with white America rather than falling victim to lynching or castration (p. 129).

Gangstas, thugs, pimps, and playas are the present embodiments of the badman persona, and the replication and glorification of these characters through the medium of hip-hop

has led to the vilification of the genre by parent's groups, cultural conservatives, and the like.

Hip-hop, the very genre that has served as an enabler of financial success and as a means of expression for inner-city denizens, is also exploited by conservative factions as a signifier of a black culture gone awry. In the eyes of certain conservative groups, especially those with little exposure to hip-hop or black culture, anything associated with the genre is a red flag that denotes an aura of criminal intent (Neal, 2004, p. 378). Of course, this wholesale demonization of hip-hop culture cannot be blamed entirely on its rightist, primarily white critics. By willfully perpetuating the personas of "badman" and "crazy nigga," many hip-hop artists themselves have contributed to the negative perceptions of the genre. Samuels (2004) refers to this type of pandering and image mongering as "ghettocentrism," a style-conscious form of prefabricated blackness that exploits negative imagery and crude stereotypes to promote street credibility and create hype.

Racism is reduced to a fashion, by the rappers who use it and by the white audiences to whom such images appeal. What's significant here are not so much the intentions of audience and artist as a dynamic in which anti-Semitic slurs and black criminality correspond to 'authenticity,' and authenticity sells records (p. 152).

Several rappers with savvy publicists such as 50 Cent, Slick Rick, Mystikal, and Tupac Shakur have drawn media attention to their criminal histories, gang involvements, and even bullet wounds (50 Cent) as proof positive of their ghettocentric status. In the late 1980s, Primordial gangsta rappers N.W.A.'s label, Ruthless Records, went so far as to

publicize a letter written by Milt Aelrich of the FBI's public relations department which accused the group of promoting violence against police officers (Ro, 1998). While such representative strategies have certainly resulted in intense publicity and ensuing sales for the artists that used them, the resulting negative stereotypes have served to mark hip-hop culture with an unfortunate stigma. Outrage against popular music, however, is nothing new. Popular music with controversial content that targets youth markets seems to have become a chronic cultural boogeyman for government officials. Since 1954, Congress has held over 30 hearings regarding content of youth oriented entertainment and the supposed outbreaks of "youth violence" that have resulted (Grier, 2001).

The underground, "outlaw music" quality of hip-hop has proven to be a double-edged sword for the genre. The street-level outlook of rap music and its wellspring from the depths of America's urban ghettos has accorded a sense of reality, urgency, and immediacy to the form that was heretofore unimaginable in pop music. Conflict is an essential component of any narrative form of expression; and the extreme depictions of rap's lyrical narratives are employed in order to provoke excitement, catharsis, and even revelation for the sensation-seeking consumers of the genre. The strong lyrical and visual imagery relied upon by hip-hop artists to provoke excitement also can produce negative reactions among listeners who are not predisposed to appreciate the genre. Interestingly, rap's fixation on violent themes is correlative with the America's wholesale fetishization of violence as entertainment. Richardson and Scott (2002) posit that the strain of lyrical violence delivered through gangsta rap is not a new development particular to the genre, but is merely a continuation of America's preexisting culture of violence (p. 175). Following the economic model of supply and demand, gangsta rappers have realized an

appreciation and demand for a violent entertainment content, which is mass produced for sale and consumption. In order to sell this popular product with violent content, rappers are called upon to maintain their street credibility, producing a vicious cycle. As violence and profanity are commodified, rappers must continually ratchet up the levels of shock value in order to maintain the “realness” that is required by fans (Watts, 2004).

Performers often feel the need to embody their street level personas in real life, providing detractors with easy targets for criticism in the process. In conclusion, the very factors that give rap music its vibrancy and allure are also construed as negative traits by critics of the genre.

#### “Black Dialogue”: African American Stereotypes Delivered From the Hip-Hop Dais

Despite, or because of, the myriad negative qualities associated with hip-hop and its practitioners and fans, one is compelled to step back from the shallow representations of the genre delivered via music videos and top 40 radio, looking instead at the entirety of the genre and its practitioners. Driven by profit motivations, mass market entertainment tends to emphasize simplistic attributes, both positive and negative, distilling artistic movements down to the lowest common denominator. Strinati asserts that, at its core, the commercial production of pop music is dictated by two strategies, standardization and pseudo-individualization (Strinati, 1995, p. 65). Rap is certainly a variant of pop, and the aforementioned strategies are used by its creators: Rap songs almost always follow a similar musical blueprint and, by affixing the “street” qualities traditionally associated with hip-hop, the core musical similarities are obfuscated by personality elements contributed by the individual performers. And because the “street” quality of hip-hop is

often a pose, the individualizing factors are faux and the traits of the performers offer only the slightest variation on the basic motif. The visage of hip-hop presented to the world via the commercial entertainment monolith relies on oversimplified stereotypes that are intended to provoke the kneejerk reaction of sales. These simplistic representative strategies create an impression that every hip-hop artist looks the same, sounds the same, comes from a similar background, and shares similar ideas and perspectives with his or her counterparts within the genre. Consequently, the general public has little idea of the vast range of expression and ideology within the hip-hop world.

The proliferation of negative and oftentimes deceptive imagery (especially of young black males) in hip-hop has achieved devastating results, not only to hip-hop culture itself but to the entire body of representative imagery depicting the black population in general. As hip-hop has become an integral part of the mainstream entertainment industry, the revolutionary and transformative role models created during the genesis of the genre have been jettisoned in favor of trivialized and excessively simplistic stereotypes that serve to reinforce racist preconceptions of African Americans (Queely, 2003). While gangsta imagery might indeed be a clear reflection of real life conditions in America's ghettos, the resulting depictions nonetheless fulfill preexisting stereotypes of blacks (again predominantly males) as dangerous predators existing, at best, on the periphery of the mainstream. Through the process of distilling rap to easily repeatable motifs, the notion of blackness that is being communicated becomes as integral to the entire commodity (hip-hop) as the music itself. And the characteristics that are magnified in hopes of establishing credibility (blackness) and thereby selling the

rap music product essentially become a new form of blackface, which is exuberantly reiterated by the music industry whose true intent is not to create art or foment social change, but merely to generate sales and subsequent profits.

Analysts of hip-hop (Pinksker, 2003; Queely, 2003) have asserted the idea that gangsta rap is, in fact, a new form of minstrelism that plays on white fears and white guilt. From this perspective, the gangsta portrayal of black life is not a reflection of actual conditions, but a distortion of reality that is constructed to reinscribe counterproductive imagery of African Americans as amoral, hypersexualized, and violent criminals. Queely asserts that, through the insistence on proving ghetto authenticity in gangsta rap, the notion of “realness” has been skewed in a way that implies, for African Americans the only true reality is the reality of the “hood” (Queely, p. 5). For those who equate gangsta rap with minstrelism, gangsta rappers themselves are merely actors who recreate genre-specific roles. “Black performers have always been pressured to perform the blackness of the white imagination, and that blackness is most often in the service of white supremacy” (Queely, p. 4). With the notion of gangsta rap as a postmodern form of blackface, one can conclude that gangsta rappers are participants in their own subjugation. Following this path of logic further, Pinksker avers that through the repetition of gangster themes in hip-hop, young media consumers are receiving retrogressive behavioral instruction (Pinksker). In essence, gangsta rap songs and music videos provide how-to instruction for wanna-be thugs. The notion of hip-hop as a kind of neo-blackface works in harmony with the feminist concept of hegemony, meaning, in this case, that the performance of gangsta rap as blackface reinforces America’s white, male

dominated power structure by recreating negative imagery of blackness through mainstream media, which is a domain of the dominating class.

The notion of hip-hop music as a new form of blackface -- if not in its execution, at least in terms of its perception and in terms of the overly simplistic stereotypes that are often trafficked by its practitioners -- implies harsh judgments on the genre and on popular culture as a whole. Are hip-hop musicians creating viable art that is truly representative of their circumstances and experiences, or are they merely pandering to the lowest common denominator? Is the imagery of blackness perpetuated via hip-hop reflective of its performers, or is it just a set of preconceived attributes applied in disorderly haste to performers and entertainment product for the sole purpose of sales? Lastly, does the use of oversimplified black imagery imply a lack of artistic quality? Hudson (2005) posits that, in many cases, blackness and the imagery of black revolt has been reduced to a series of simplistic, disembodied tchotkes used to promote rampant, unabashed consumerism.

Signs of blackness seem connotatively ambiguous, ripped from their contextual moldings, floating freely in an amorphous ocean of revitalized symbols with only tenuous links to any previous meanings. Blackness is now an empty signifier, a shell without populist, insurgent meaning (p. 2).

As per Hudson's (2005) claims, the signifiers of blackness used to sell everything from hip-hop CDs to Nike sneakers have lost whatever connection to black culture they might have had, evolving into vapidness as a result of their appropriation by America's consumerist culture. In accordance with this line of logic, the notion of authenticity in hip-hop once again comes into question. Ergo, if the blackness has been reduced to no

more than a pose through its repeated use in mediated imagery, the requisite “keepin’ it real” that is essential to the hip-hop ethos is also a faux construction.

One must bear in mind that while much of today’s hip-hop culture is synonymous with consumerist culture, that the genre was originally conceived as pure, street-level artistic expression. Early rappers were not burdened with proving their authenticity because the genre had not been adopted and appropriated into the mass market. As hip-hop gained national acceptance, however, rappers were called upon to prove their status as gang-bangers, pimps and “hoodrats.” And once proving genuine ghetto roots became a *de facto* requirement for rappers, “authenticity” became hype (Judy, 1994, p. 230). Determining “nigga authenticity” has become, according to Judy, an ontological quandary which can be debated infinitely:

The status of being at once rooted in experience and available for appropriation marks nigga as the function by which diverse quotidian experiences and expressions are ‘authenticated’ as a viable resistance to the dominant forms of power (p. 229).

In summary, hip-hop has not lost its African American identity through the commodification of blackness but has become a function of the black experience itself. By virtue of its permeation of several intermingling permutations of culture; music, visual art, sports, fashion, cinema, etc., hip-hop is not only an expression of the African American experience – it has, for many, become the channel through which black culture is communicated to the world at large.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While much of the literature on hip-hop leads to the conclusion that the genre is essentially a commodification of blackness conveyed through the forms of music, dance, fashion, and visual art (i.e. Chang, 2004; George, 2004; Keyes, 2004; Kitwana, 2003, 2005b; Perry, 2004) there is little discussion of how perceptions of the personas and motifs repeated in the genre impact African Americans. The interview questions are designed to focus on the gaps in the literature with the intent of discovering emergent trends, novel approaches to the contemplation and criticism of hip-hop, and first-hand, personalized information. Through in-depth dialogue with scholars, music industry professionals and learned observers and critics of hip-hop, this study seeks to answer some of the questions omitted by the literature. The major areas of focus for this study are hip-hop images that are perceived as being intrinsically black, the impact of this imagery's repetition on the generalized perception of blackness, reasons for the proliferation of gangsta imagery in hip-hop, and how the replication of these themes and images function. The research questions for this study are:

1. How does the gangsta role function for the hip-hop artist's public persona?
2. What are the implications of gangsta imagery for African American social knowledge?
3. What images or representations are evident or emergent that extend beyond gangsta imagery?

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

#### Advantages of a Qualitative Approach

Evaluating the ideas, characteristics, archetypes, and postures displayed, expressed, and transmitted via a sprawling genre like hip-hop is a daunting task. In fact, defining hip-hop itself is virtually impossible, primarily because of the oftentimes indiscernible and ever-expanding parameters of the form. In a metaphoric sense, hip-hop is a hydra-headed creature that evolves and mutates at light speed. And predictably, the examination of such a living and free-flowing form from an entirely clinical perspective would produce coldly detached results with few real insights about the complex ideas and motivations that propel the genre. One simply cannot break hip-hop culture down to its elemental building blocks; obtain numerical, statistical data about these fragmented elements; and then reconstruct these elements into a solid body of knowledge. A purely scientific approach to examining a diverse sociocultural movement such as hip-hop would be limited by its clinical nature. Any work of artistic expression that could be classified as hip-hop, be it a rap song, graffiti art, poetry, film, etc., somehow (oftentimes unbeknownst to its creator) integrates an array of expressions of culture, attitude, and emotion. Ethnomusicologist Keyes (2004) explains the wide range of cultural strands that are interwoven through the genre: “In hip-hop, artists bring to their performances a street culture sensibility or ‘attitude’ and a persona that undergirds the aesthetics of style” (p. 6). Each piece of hip-hop art is a cultural amalgam, and hip-hop itself is more than art. Hip-hop is a form of music, a style, a way of being, a political orientation, and an

identity. Taking into account the amorphous, fluid nature of hip-hop culture, a qualitative approach to this research is preferable. Allowing for the myriad influences and sociocultural factors in the hip-hop orbit, dealing with such a diverse and culturally laden genre in a more complimentary and organically evolving sense seems more appropriate.

While qualitative methods are certainly more flexible than their more regimented quantitative counterparts, the use of a qualitative approach can also allow for more focused inquiry. As hip-hop permeates our culture in music, style, advertising, film, and more, almost everyone has some perceptions and ideas about the genre. The use of in-depth interviews in the study will provide a means of gathering experiential knowledge from persons who are keenly attuned to the intricacies of the subject matter (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). Therefore, for this study, I have interviewed a small group of people who are either involved in the rap music industry or the study and analysis of hip-hop itself. For the study, I conducted open-ended, discussion-oriented interviews with persons affiliated with management, publicity, and experts on ethnomusicology, sociology, and music journalism who offered insights from a scholarly, analytical vantage point. The group is ideally suited for the project because of the analytical abilities, knowledge of black culture and history, and hip-hop insider status of all of the participants. Because all of the research participants regularly analyze the issues concerning hip-hop culture and its progress as a form, each subject delivered unique, enlightened, and multifaceted perspectives on the nuances of the subject that were clearly articulated.

### Creation and Collection of Data

Each interview subject was asked several questions relating to the imagery of blackness in hip-hop culture designed to uncover the ways in which certain black imagery became archetypal, how these archetypes were reproduced and eventually led to stereotyping, the demographics of the hip-hop audience, emergent hip-hop personas and motifs, and the reasons for the popularity of the genre. While each of the interviews followed a similar theme, the questions were individually adjusted to match the expertise and experience of each interviewee. The interview questions were designed to provoke discussion and to serve as an impetus for the revelation of further ideas. Following a discussion format is preferable to a traditional question and answer style of interview because it helps to ensure that researcher preconceptions or leading questions do not dictate the directions the conversations might go (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 371).

Through the use of the discussion format, I was able, as the interviewer, to provide focus and set the tone of the discussion while still allowing the conversation to unfold naturally, following any interesting and unexpected conversational paths that were instigated by the interviewee (Keyton, 2001, p. 68). With the discussion format, the interviewees were better able to lead the conversation as they saw fit, thereby introducing their own concepts and ideally veering away from any agenda setting function that might have been implied through the wording of the initial questions.

Because the subjects are scattered throughout the country, the interviews were conducted over the telephone. All of the phone conversations were recorded on audio tape and then transcribed. For verification purposes and to avoid any potential liability, the audio tapes and the text transcriptions of the interviews will be kept on file for a

minimum of 10 years. A pre-interview script was prepared and was read to all subjects before the interviews were conducted (See Appendix A.). The script explained the nature of the research, potential risks and benefits to the interview subjects that might arise from their participation, how confidentiality would be protected, and how the interviews would be recorded. Interview subjects were informed that they could refuse to answer any particular question, and that they were free to end the interview at any time with no penalty of any kind. Subjects were given my phone number and the number of the thesis chair. The subjects were also informed of the possibility of being asked further questions at a later date.

During the process of the interviews, none of the interviewees were identified by name. The anonymity of the interview subjects, therefore, was assured during the taping. While excerpts from the interview transcriptions have been used in the thesis, the quotes were attributed so that the subjects are not identifiable. Each interview participant was assigned a pseudonym that does not have the same initial letter as each real name. In order to accord gravity and focus to the quotations, the subjects were described in a way that explained their position as a participant or observer of hip-hop culture while simultaneously obfuscating their true identity.

With qualitative approaches, the collection and interpretation of data occurs and evolves concurrently. As the interviewer, I approached the telephone conversations with an eye toward my research questions, and with understandings shaped by both the literature review and my own experiences as a journalist and music critic, and personal observations. As Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggest, I went into the interview situation with preexisting notions that I then focused and reshaped through conversation

and interaction with the interview subjects (p. 151). In the discussion format, the division between interviewer and interviewee becomes somewhat blurred as the interviewer, through discussion and interaction, takes on the role of a participant-observer (Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2003). In other words, as the interviewer, I acted both as a participant and as an observer. Follow-up inquiries came from the ebb and flow of conversational collaboration that emerged from interviewee responses to the initial questions, in accordance with the interactive, participant-observer model.

While I conducted the interviews, I did my best to maintain a necessary sense of decorum, bearing in mind the potentially controversial nature of the questions, particularly in light of my Caucasian privilege. In fact, almost all of the questions had the potential to offend if not handled with tact, dignity, and utmost respect for the sensitivities of the research participants. The matters of race, class, and privilege that I discussed in the interviews were all potentially explosive subjects. With that in mind, I made a conscious effort to use language that was sensitive to privilege and difference, language that some might call “politically correct,” and avoided the use of slang. The most provocative interview situations were the occasions when I, as a white male, was interviewing a person of color about racial matters. As discussed earlier, the power dynamic of those interview situations was laden with implications. With that in mind, I did my best to keep the interviews as relaxed and congenial as possible. Research participants were treated with utmost courtesy and tact.

In order to avoid posing blunt questions, particularly in the cases of questions dealing with race, I began the interviews with general inquiries before focusing in on more specific and potentially controversial areas. I had emailed all of the interview

participants a list of questions in advance, in hopes that the participants would peruse the questions and thereby enter into the interview situation with an inclination of what kinds of subjects would be discussed. Thankfully, I never sensed that the conversations delved into subject matter that made the research participants feel uncomfortable. As I had hoped, the participants led the discussions toward the more delicate areas of questioning without provocation, probably because the questions had been sent in advance. Lastly, I was ever mindful of my social status as a white male. With that knowledge firmly in place, I was able to discuss difficult subject matter with the participants in a way that I believe was not offensive and produced meaningful dialogue.

### Data Analysis

Audiotapes of the telephone interviews were transcribed upon their completion. The very act of transcription lends itself to the reexamination of the interviews, allowing for the creation of categories and a coding scheme as themes and recurring terminology emerge. Keyton (2001) refers to this development of concurrent themes as “mutual, simultaneous shaping” (p. 64). As the data were examined after the interviews, categories were defined as they emerged upon sorting and examination. Once all of the interviews had been transcribed, the transcripts were examined intently in order to establish recurrent terminology, patterns of speech, themes and similar ideas across transcripts. For comparison purposes, the transcripts were then coded. The coding process began with “open coding,” i.e. making notes, highlights and memos in the process of creating categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 216). From these initial notes and memos, I then created a more meticulous form of notation for the coding. With the

interviews transcribed and subsequently coded, the data were managed for easy retrieval and comparison. In summary, data analysis consisted of a three-step procedure that included data management, data reduction, and eventual concept development. Some of the subjects were approached for follow-up interviews after new lines of questioning had emerged from the concept development stage.

While hip-hop is a creative form, the implicitly and explicitly race-specific iconography of the genre lends itself to analysis from a cultural perspective. And with a qualitative approach, presentation and interpretation of the data is a non-formulaic art (Denzin, 1994). Selected, pertinent excerpts from the interviews will be interspersed within the text in order to add depth, liveliness, and humanity as well as to illuminate the findings of the study. Denzin states that, “a vital text is not boring” (p. 504). Instead, it engages the reader and provokes personal contemplation through the use of illustrative techniques such as storytelling and quotations. For in-depth interviews, the act of interpretation involves deciding which parts of the interviews are to be written about, which excerpts will be included, and how these excerpts will be presented within the text. Following this tack, a sensible conclusion to the data analysis was formulated by means of analytic induction (Atkinson et al., 2003, p. 143-144). The ultimate goal of these interwoven logical and rhetorical strategies was to produce a body of work that not only provided sensible information but was also made more vivid and involving by a creative text-management strategy.

### “Pretty Fly For a White Guy”: Identity Issues

The use of a qualitative perspective allows for a degree of immersion in the subject matter. Janesick (2000) posits that, within the qualitative paradigm, the researcher becomes an inextricable participant whose complete involvement in the entire process reintroduces elements of humanity and passion that are normally excluded through the use of a comparatively staid, purely scientific approach (p. 71). Furthermore, it would be folly to expect true objectivity from any researcher (Atkinson et al., 2003, p. 190). Therefore, the disclosure of personal information about the author can be seen as a way of empowering the reader’s interpretation of the report.

As hip-hop is essentially a race specific art form, one must take into account the diverse sociocultural factors that influence the genre at every turn. When evaluating qualitative research, one should situate the researcher in order to determine how personal factors might influence the execution of the research and its conclusions. The experiences, background, and preconceptions of the researcher certainly have bearing on the research, especially when one considers the racial dynamic that will inevitably come into play during interviews concerning a race-oriented genre that are conducted by a white male. It is necessary for me to establish a sense of voice or location within the text so that the reader is enabled to consider these factors, and their influence throughout this research project (Atkinson et al., 2003, p. 109).

In order to enable the reader to reasonably judge and interpret this project, it is important that my status as an educated, white male from a middle-class background is clearly stated. Bearing in mind the explicit and implicit privileges accorded white men in this culture, readers must be reminded of my own status so that they can ascribe meaning

and value to this research in light of the social, economic, and political factors that have influenced my point of view. Simply put, my whiteness has a seismic impact on this entire work. Therefore, it is vitally important that the reader take my whiteness into account while evaluating this project. Aware of the distinctions between myself as a white male and the hip-hop culture I am examining, which is perceived as black, the reader is forearmed to analyze the material in light of this dynamic. While I fully intended to analyze the conversations of the interviews objectively, it is possible that, because of social and cultural differences between myself and the interviewees, I might have misunderstood culturally-specific terms or paralinguistic implications in the conversations, for example.

The very design of the interview process implies a skewed power dynamic in which the interviewer is accorded the upper hand. As an interviewer, I set the parameters of the conversation, asking a series of questions that were engineered to lead to certain desirable research outcomes. The power dynamic was skewed moreover by race issues, particularly in this research. Stanfield (1994) asserts that ethnic differences between the researcher and research subjects must be addressed in qualitative research because of the ascribed status of both parties influence the meaning and interpretation of subjective experiences – in this case, the interviews I conducted and the observations I made as a cultural outsider. Stanfield explains how social research has begun to attend to such issues.

Although the rule has been that it is possible for researchers of traditional dominant status (meaning white, usually male) to develop value-free methodological procedures to study outsider persons, recently such traditional

outsiders with professional credentials have begun to challenge that sacred presumption (p. 176).

The reality that I entered into the interviews as a Caucasian, interviewing persons of color about an art form that is essentially race-specific, is burdened with relational inequalities. With ethnic issues come an obvious and instantaneous divide: As a white person, my role in the interview dynamic is that of an outsider. Fine (1994) asserts that, prior to the consideration of researcher identity and outsider/other status in qualitative research projects, researchers, almost always white males, occluded revelations of their outsider status, thereby “burying the contradictions” inherent in research conducted from an outsider perspective (p. 70). Congruent with this thread of logic, it would, therefore, be a folly to not consider my own status as a white male in this research. It is possible that, as a person living with gender, race, and educational privilege, my conclusions will be tainted by my social position. Therefore, I will do everything in my power to ascribe the utmost respect to the research participants, and to the musician, artists, and audience who are addressed in this treatise.

Bearing in mind the racial and cultural factors that will surely be considered when evaluating the validity of this project, the necessity of divulging some of my personal history seems a given. As an observer/participant in the research process, my own history is certainly a factor that could potentially affect the eventual outcome to some degree. And because this study is an evaluation of hip-hop, the multiplicity of sociocultural factors that led to its emergence as a form, and the messages emitted by the form through aural and visual representations, it follows that my experiences and

background should be discussed in order that readers can consider what effects my personal circumstances might have on the practice of the research and on its conclusions.

When engaged in qualitative research, one can approach the in-depth interview from separate vantage points, sometimes simultaneously. Qualitative research with in-depth interviews can be seen as a kind of fieldwork, with the interview transcripts as field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). In a sense, interviews are a recording of the subject's oral history: The ideas and impressions related in an interview are linked to and influenced by the personal experiences of the interviewee. Likewise, the interrelation of the interviewer and the subject comes under scrutiny.

Questions of telling, that is, of the research account, come down to matters of autobiographical presence and the significance of this presence for the text and for the field. Matters of signature and voice are important (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 418).

In other words, because I am a participant in the interview process, it becomes necessary to establish a "voice" for myself.

For the exegesis of this project, my disclosure of personal information is one of many critical elements. Such disclosures can be employed to give focus to the sense of "self/other" inherent in the examination of a separate culture from an outsider perspective (Fine, 1994, p. 72). Primary to the discussion of how blackness is constructed and exported through hip-hop is the consideration of how the signifiers of blackness perpetuated in the form are perceived by other races. And when examining blackness, the contrasting notion of whiteness also comes into question (Atkinson et al., 2003, p.

78). Once again, this black/white dichotomy necessitates mention of my own history in the report.

I am a Caucasian male, age 42. I come from an upper middle-class background in East Tennessee. Both of my parents hold graduate degrees and, before retiring, taught and held administrative positions at a large, state university. I am also college educated. I have focused the bulk of my adult life on artistic pursuits, primarily playing music. Because of my economic privilege, I have been able to live a bohemian lifestyle with little regard to conventions such as stable employment. Being single and having no children has also allowed me great freedom. For the last 10 years, I have supported myself as a freelance writer for several newspapers and music magazines. During this period, I was also a touring musician, traveling extensively in the United States. In my adult life, I have lived in Knoxville, Tennessee, New York City, Chicago, and Johnson City, Tennessee. All of these life experiences and privileges have shaped who I am, and should, therefore, be taken into account while analyzing the conclusions of this work.

### Descriptions of Research Participants

For anonymity purposes, the names and specific identities of the interview subjects will not be revealed. It is necessary, however, to present general descriptions of the research participants in order to add gravitas to their accounts and to allow for the readers' assessment of their knowledge, position, and social status.

Brief descriptions of each research participant will follow. All of the names are pseudonyms.

- “Sean” is a music reporter, pop culture critic, and editor for one of America’s most respected newspapers located in a large city on the East Coast. A Caucasian, he is around 40 years old. Prior to his current employment, Sean was the executive editor of an alternative newspaper.
- “Michael” is the owner of a public relations firm that handles major label and independent label rappers. Michael also owns an independent hip-hop label whose artists sell around 40,000 units per release. In addition, Michael is manager for two hip-hop artists. An African American, he is in his mid-30s.
- “Isaac” is a professor of Social Sciences and African American Studies at a major university on the East Coast. He has published critically-lauded books about inner-city life and written several articles published in scholarly journals and major newspapers. Isaac, an African American, is in his mid-50s.
- “Grant” is a music and arts editor for an alternative newspaper in a major East Coast city. He has written for several alternative newspapers in his 20 year career as a journalist. A Caucasian, Grant is in his early 40s.
- “Julien” is a publicist for one of America’s top hip-hop publicity firms located in a major Midwestern city. Julien’s clients include major and independent label hip-hop artists. An African American, he is in his mid-30s.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents a qualitative analysis of the information gathered through five interviews with prominent hip-hop scholars, writers and persons who operate hip-hop related businesses. Provocative and pertinent excerpts from the interview transcriptions will be interspersed among the findings to add focus, depth, and a humanizing viewpoint. While arranging this chapter, I sought to establish clearly discernable, separate categories. Due to the broad and sometimes amorphous subject matter of the interviews, however, there are instances where certain ideas are iterated in more than one category.

In the following chapter, I explore three themes that emerged from the interview data. The chapter is arranged into three related subheadings. The first section, entitled “Wankstas or Gangstas?”: Issues of Authenticity and Constructed Imagery in Hip-hop Iconography, examines hip-hop’s perception as a black form, the messages about blackness communicated through the genre, and the authenticity of hip-hop personas. The next section, “Hip-Hop Monster”: The Accelerated Spiral of Thug and Gangsta Imagery in Hip-Hop, examines the impact of market forces on the proliferation of gangsta stereotypes, the focus on criminal behavior for hype purposes, and the cyclical intensifying of violent content in hip-hop. At the chapter’s close, “Representing”: The Impact of Hip-hop Imagery on Generalized Perceptions of Blackness, investigates how recurring hip-hop images influence the overall perceptions of blackness and African Americans. Each of these sections features a discussion of its respective subject in light

of the emergent themes found through comparison and coding of the interview transcripts.

“Wankstas or Gangstas?”: Issues of Authenticity and Constructed Imagery in  
Hip-Hop Iconography

In this section’s discussion of authenticity, I examine hip-hop’s perception as a black form, its focus on street representations as “realism,” and the way white hip-hop artists focus attention on their interaction with black performers, producers, and managers in order to attain by-proxy street credibility. The first objective of the interviews was to explore the messages about blackness that are conveyed through the repeating, identifiable motifs and personas of hip-hop. Hip-hop is a sprawling and tightly interwoven, catch-all form of pop culture that encompasses several art forms, styles, and modes of expression. While there are several prominent practitioners of the form belonging to other ethnic groups, the preponderance of hip-hop artists are African American. The primarily black orientation of the genre has led to a generalized perception of hip-hop as an innately black form (Chang, 2005, p. 2). The similar notion that hip-hop is perceived by the general public to be a primarily black form was shared by all of the interviewees in this project, although the assignment of a racial orientation to the genre was usually slow coming and begrudgingly given. Interestingly, while all of the interviewees eventually conceded, without any provocation from the interviewer, that hip-hop was indeed perceived en masse as a black form, neither Julien, Grant, Sean, Michael, nor Isaac immediately identified the genre’s perception as black-oriented. Instead, these interview subjects carefully considered their responses, first qualifying

their answers with statements about the polycultural nature of the genre and its practitioners.

Sean, a Caucasian journalist who writes about music and pop culture for a large, urban newspaper, explained his perception of hip-hop's ethnic attribution of blackness from an outsider perspective that offers interesting clues about the appeal of the genre for whites:

*It [hip-hop] seemed interesting because it was sort of like these transmissions from a part of the culture that I was just not connected to in any way. And I guess that made it seem alien too. You kind of felt like you didn't really understand what was going on, what people were saying. But it was accessible enough that you could at least try to get a handle on it.*

Although Sean's description of hip-hop's appeal for whites was the most sharply accented description of a sense of cultural division, the terms "exotic" and "alien" were also used to describe how whites perceived rap music numerous times by Grant, Julien, and Michael during the course of the interviews. Congruent with the assertions of Perry (2004), the use of such terminology leads to a sense that whiteness and blackness are understood as separate and opposing ways of being where blacks are sometimes criminalized, or at least stigmatized as being "the other" (p. 47).

Throughout the interviews, subjects tended to agree that the thug/gangsta persona is the most prevalent archetype assumed by today's most commercially successful, high-profile rap acts. Again, following suit with some of the ideas found in the review of literature (Perry, 2004; Queely, 2003), rap music, and thereby the imagery of blackness in general, is representationally criminalized in the public opinion forum. A provocative

emergent theme in the interviews was the notion that that gangsta personas were more likely to be perceived as authentic for black performers; while white rappers adopting the gangsta persona are more likely to be regarded as posers, fakers, or “wankstas,” a derisive term for white, wannabe gangstas. While these assessments of white rappers as being inauthentic lead to a negative conclusion about their assumed artistic worth, these assertions also point to more severe implications about class and race: The idea that gangsta representations are deemed to be more “real” for black performers suggests that African Americans, males in particular, are more likely to be assumed as criminal.

As asserted earlier in the text, the imagery delivered as “realness” in hip-hop is often faked, or at least exaggerated. The term “hyper-realistic” refers to these trumped-up image constructions that are created to maximize impact and excitation transfer and presented as authentic. Asked to offer an explanation for the glut of violent and criminal imagery in hip-hop, Grant, Michael, Julien, and Isaac all likened these hyper-realistic gangsta personas to the portrayals of fictionalized characters in wild-west and mafia films. “Everything kind of depends on your street cred [credibility],” explained Elijah. “You’ve got to demonstrate that you’re tough. This is really not different from what was going on in cowboy movies.” Interviewee comments that compared hip-hop’s street personas with the villains of action, mafia, and cowboy films mirrored similar comparisons (Jones, 2001; Richardson & Scott, 2002; Watkins, 1998) discussed in the review of literature. And following a similar logical tack, the exaggerated imagery of hip-hop was compared to cartoons and described as fantasy several times within the interviews. “It’s this totally hedonistic fantasy, which is really not that different from the

fantasy that, say, Led Zeppelin selling,” said Sean. All of these comparisons indicate that the research subjects perceived hyper-realistic imagery to be fictitious in these cases.

While all of the interviewees decried the repetition of oversimplified, hyperviolent imagery as being a detriment to the progress of hip-hop’s acceptance as a valid genre of artistic expression, Grant, Sean, Michael, and Isaac also alluded to the seductive appeal of assuming such a role. “There’s a larger than life aspect to it,” explained Grant. “Some rappers want to be seen as the guy with the big gun, or the big criminal who is more reckless than an average guy.” Sean describes the seductive allure of assuming the gangsta persona in the following passage:

*I think that if you’re young and black and poor, this idea that you can project yourself as somebody who has a lot of power and can get the better of the system, I think that it must be really appealing. It [the gangsta persona] has become this very distorted, cartoony idea, not even of blackness, but an idea of black achievement that revolves around material wealth and this lifestyle of riding in expensive SUV’s and carrying guns, going to clubs and drinking expensive champagne. It’s basically this street pimp fantasy that I don’t think even exists anywhere except in rap videos. It’s a kind of grotesque vision of what black success would look like.*

Michael, Julien, Sean, and Grant all commented on how white rappers have appropriated hip-hop sounds, imagery, and motifs for bigger sales than their black counterparts, and how white artists cultivate allegiances with powerful black artists, managers, and producers in order to establish an aura of street credibility. Following suit with the assertions of Brew-Hammond (2005) in the literature, an emerging theme of the

interviews was the notion that white performers exploit linkages with credible black artists for their own promotion in the public eye. Michael, an African American who has several Caucasian artists among his publicity clients, claimed that, for white rappers hoping to attract a street-oriented audience, forming an alliance with a credible black performer is practically an unspoken prerequisite. Michael further described how white performers who are considered authentic can oftentimes eclipse their black counterparts in terms of sales, a phenomenon that is rife with implications about class, privilege, and the buying power of hip-hop's white audience:

*Eminem, he did align himself with a famous black producer. But it just boils down to money. If there's a white artist, then they can sell 20 million records like Eminem. And they're [major labels] really going to get behind those [white] artists.*

Throughout the interviews, Julien, Sean, Michael, and Grant commented on a comparatively new mutation of hip-hop's timeworn gangsta, thug, and pimp personas, the gangsta/entrepreneur. Personified by high-profile rap producer/moguls like Shaun "Puffy" Combs, Jay-Z, Dr. Dre, and many others, the gangsta/entrepreneur is a person, almost always a black male, who rose from a street background, gained fame as a rapper, and eventually moved into the upper echelons of the hip-hop industry as a record producer, record label executive, promoter, or a mixture of the three. For the gangsta/entrepreneur, immersion in the business end of the hip-hop world is not necessarily seen as a means of rejecting life as a street thug, but rather as a new, more profitable hustle. Gangsta/entrepreneurs still flaunt past street histories as a means of reasserting their credibility. Sean commented that, "the most successful of these guys

[gangsta entrepreneurs] have really created a new model of achievement.” As the gangsta/entrepreneur role becomes more apparent, newer artists have emulated the progenitors of the persona.

Grant, a Caucasian music and arts editor for an alternative newspaper in a large, East Coast city, describes the rise of the gangsta/entrepreneur as a hip-hop archetype:

*You have people like Jay-Z who is obviously a super shrewd businessman, and even more impressively has managed to kind of transition himself out of the kind of situation he came up in. He’s an executive now. One of the things that’s been interesting to watch is these guys like Jay-Z that come out and say, well, this [hip-hop] is another business; not to get out of drug dealing, but to diversify. That’s a weird wrinkle that’s popped up recently.*

Michael, Julien, Grant, and Sean all mentioned another emerging hip-hop representation that, unlike the gangsta/entrepreneur persona, has not evolved from gangsta imagery but is instead a separate hip-hop subgenre that is still in its infancy. Persons adopting this persona, whom the interviewees described as “backpackers” because of their loose affiliation with indie rockers (jargon for post-punk, collegiate rock fans) who often wear book-bags, are creating music that purposely avoids the use of gangsta clichés. The backpacker approach is artistically based, expressing political/black-consciousness ideology and more playful ideas from a suburban perspective. Interestingly, while most of the rappers belonging to the backpacker contingent such as MF Doom, P.O.S., el-P, Mr. Lif, and Dizzee Rascal are indeed black, the audience for this subset of hip-hop is primarily white.

Describing the sounds of the backpacker group as “more soulful, more educated music,” Michael claims that the emergent subgroup is helping to bridge the gap between black and white audiences. The backpack contingent, with the exception of its most popular artists such as Kanye West and Common, is generally relegated to independent labels. Even Public Enemy, the forbearers of the overtly politicized, black-power approach to hip-hop whose most popular recordings moved millions of units for a major label in the late 1980s, are now signed to an independent label and, therefore, considered by many to belong to the backpacker group at present. “Independent records are the vehicles that politically-minded hip-hop artists have found to put out their material,” explains Julien, an African American hip-hop publicist who promotes major and independent label artists. Label affiliation may offer a clue as to why politically-oriented material has a primarily white audience at present. Independent label recordings are more difficult to find in stores and are rarely played on radio. “So MF Doom and el-P [prominent members of the backpacker group] are not vying for the same audience as, say, 50 Cent,” Julien explained.

With the newly emergent backpacker and gangsta/entrepreneur personas becoming available in hip-hop, aspiring rap artists are allowed a modicum of leeway when creating a public image. As these nascent roles and motifs become more readily-available, continued image variations that extend far beyond gangsta imagery will ensue. Like the gangsta persona, both the backpacker and the gangsta/executive roles were based on actual hip-hop performers. As these personas become more firmly established, aspiring rappers will certainly assume these roles more often. And once these images become popular and commercially successful, a copycat phenomenon will surely occur.

Ironically, at that point, the backpacker and gangsta/entrepreneur roles will have become constructed imagery. Nevertheless, the emergence of these new archetypes indicates that hip-hop imagery is not permanently connected to the gangsta motif.

“Hip-Hop Monster”: The Accelerating Spiral of Thug Imagery in Hip-Hop.

Much of the literature came to a conclusion that the primary reason for the proliferation of hyper-realistic, gangsta depictions in hip-hop is quite simple: People like it and, therefore, it sells (for example, Hudson, 2005; Oshun, 2001). Intent on turning over quick profits, the mainstream music industry’s modus operandi is to turn a quick profit, oftentimes by replicating previously successful marketing strategies. So it is certainly no surprise that major record labels will continue to crank out gangsta rappers, as long as there is a receptive audience. Throughout the interviews, the subjects concurred with this assertion without hesitating. Phrases like “boils down to money,” “it sells,” “what people want” and “people like it” recurred in several of the interviews, all of which came to similar conclusions with few qualifications from the interview subjects.

As record labels continually promote artists who adopt the gangsta persona in hopes of replicating past sales patterns, gangsta imagery has taken on a life of its own, serving to damage hip-hop from within. All of the interviewees referred to repeated instances where hip-hop artists and their publicity-hungry managers, agents, and publicists sought to focus press attention on criminal behavior for hype purposes, and to imbue the artists with an aura of gangsta authenticity. Michael, Sean, Grant, and Julien all referenced shootings while discussing staged publicity for gangsta rappers. In fact, the terms “shoot,” “get shot,” “gun(s),” and “shootings” were among the most-used

verbiage in all of the interview transcriptions. Michael explains how having a criminal history can be exploited from within the industry:

*There are real hardcore dudes in this game. And obviously it's working to their advantage, 'cause, you know, people celebrate that [having a criminal reputation]. It's a thing that you talk about from a publicity standpoint. Suge Knight, because he's a hardcore dude, he gets the cover of Vibe or XXL [two popular hip-hop magazines]. So, from a publicity standpoint, it's great because it's an easy angle. People like to hear about the bad guy.*

*That's why [laughter] there's so many cookie-cutter artists in hip-hop these days. There's only so many different ways you can kill somebody [laughter].*

While gangsta iconography has become ubiquitous in hip-hop, the imagery is still regarded as threateningly provocative by mainstream audiences. The gangsta vision of black masculinity plays on white, racist fears and reinforces retrogressive stereotypes (Oshun, 2001). Most of the interview subjects agreed that violent content is continually ratcheted up in hip-hop as a means of retaining its excitation-seeking audience. There was also a general consensus among the interviewees that the proliferation of gangsta depictions has served as a divisive force from within the genre that nevertheless continues to grow exponentially. This discussion of the negative repercussions of the gangsta style correlates with the notion of gangsta role modeling as a form of neo-minstrelism (Oshun, 2001; Pinksker, 2003, Queely, 2003) described in the literature. Asked if gangsta imagery had become a modernized form of minstrelism, Grant, Michael, Julien, and Isaac all agreed, albeit begrudgingly. As with some of the earlier questions, terms like “difficult,” “complex,” and “complicated” were used often to

qualify the response. Prefacing his discussion of the notion of hip-hop as a modern form of blackface, Julien said, “I think that is a complicated issue because, um... I’m not gonna be an easy interview on that, by the way, John...” Sean’s answer to this question was perhaps most telling:

*It’s not like it [gangsta imagery] was conceived in a Madison Avenue agency and then handed down to the performers. But, for aspiring rappers, that has been one of the primary models that they’ve been presented with. And I think for people who really just want to be a successful rapper, that’s going to be something they gravitate to because they feel that it’s what sells. These stories of being tough and selling drugs, being a pimp and whatever. I think that, to some degree, it’s a trap, especially for young black men. This role of being the hustler and the hard guy, uh, it’s something that is available as a part to play. The number of roles available in the culture still are pretty limited. And what you see, if you’re young and black in 2006, you can be an athlete or you can be this kind of rebel.*

As related earlier in the review of literature (Coates, 2005; Oshun, 2001; Reese, 2004; Ro, 1998) authenticity is perhaps the most sought-after attribute in hip-hop. Curiously, while African American life entails the entire spectrum of class stations and life experiences, the street attitude, also referred to as ghettocentrism (Samuels, 2004), is the outlook that is favored among the constructed images adopted by popular rappers. Paradoxically, while coming from a street background is practically prerequisite for popular hip-hop artists, the gangsta imagery put forth by many popular rappers is oftentimes perceived as a prefabricated pose. Each of the interview subjects reported dichotomous ideas about the veracity of street imagery proffered as “real” in popular hip-

hop: All of the subjects reported that the gangsta image arose from true-to-life circumstances, that many hip-hop artists claiming O.G. (“original gangsta”) status are actually from the ghetto and had lived the street life first-hand, and, conversely, that many of the artists claiming gangsta status are actually middle or upper-class rappers who have adopted the street pose as a means of assimilating into the hip-hop world. “The rappers, a lot of these boys are middle class boys who have this romanticized view of the ghetto,” explained Isaac.

Once again, all of the interview subjects used the terms “difficult” and/or “complicated” when discussing the authenticity issue in hip-hop. Julien explains the complexity, based on surface information and prefabricated publicity narratives, of judging whether the street personas assumed by hip-hop artists are believable:

*It’s hard to say what is real anymore because people have been given this [gangsta] image as a normal image for so long. So, you know, Juelz Santana or 50 Cent or whoever, if they have tattoos across their stomach and they wear a bullet-proof vest, I don’t know if that makes them a thug, or if it just means [laughter] that they were brought up on the stylistic elements of being a thug. I mean, I assume that’s how 50 Cent really is because they say he got shot so many times. But I don’t know that any of them are actual thugs. They could be just people trying to get into the rap industry [laughter].*

In yet another interesting twist, Grant spoke of how hip-hoppers from non-street backgrounds gain authentic gangsta status through public feuds with other rappers or by post-fame criminal behavior:

*People always talked about Biggie [Smalls, also known as Notorious B.I.G.] as being a drug dealer and that was a big part of his persona, too. And then Tupac [Shakur] came out, and he hadn't really had that hard, gritty background like Biggie. He didn't have that hardcore, drug dealing, street background. But by the time they both died, Tupac had a harder rep than Biggie, just because of his mouth. So it is a very fluid thing. It's a very strange construct. I mean, if you can say that you used to sling keys [kilos of cocaine] and that you used to get shot at, it gives you a leg up.*

Adopting a gangsta persona can bear a heavy price for aspiring rappers. Once a gangsta reputation has been established by a hip-hop artist, there is inevitable pressure for conformist behavior: To maintain “cred,” gangsta rappers oftentimes engage in criminal behavior. And feuds between gangsta rappers also perpetuate the cycle of violence. Gangsta imagery seems a self-perpetuating construct, even though the adoption of gangsta personas can be a dangerous and sometimes fatal move for aspiring hip-hop artists.

### “Representing”: The Impact of Hip-Hop Imagery on

#### Generalized Perceptions of Blackness

In the following section, I discuss how the majority of major label hip-hop images are variations of the gangsta motif, how the iteration of gangsta imagery impacts the social knowledge of African Americans, and why hip-hop is oftentimes denigrated as an art form. All of the interview subjects agreed that among high-profile, commercially successful hip-hop artists, image constructions are eerily similar, generally revolving in a

small-scale, street-based orbit. Asked to point out the recurring motifs and personas of hip-hop, interview subjects described a litany of roles, all of which have become standard in hip-hop's approximately 3-decade history as an established genre. For major label rappers, Michael, Julien, Sean, and Grant reported that rap personas and motifs are almost always limited to slight variations on standard identities; the gangsta, the dealer, the high-rolling hedonist, the pimp, the playa, and, for women, the gold-digger, the trophy girlfriend, the single mother, and the ubiquitous, oft-maligned "ho." With rare exceptions, these characterizations are loosely connected to the street/gangsta motif. Asked to explain the reasons for this recurring representative strategy, Michael provided a relatively terse answer. "I just think it's an easy market angle to take these days. And like I said before, it just boils down to money." Presented with the same question, Julien offered a more measured response which began with an uncomfortable silence:

*There are a variety of MC's out there in the world, but it's 50 Cent who sells millions and millions of copies. You know, if Tupac is the ideal, or Notorious B.I.G., then they [major labels] will probably seek out people that imitate the content and style of those people. Since that is what they put out there, that is what is available for realness. It's much like the way most people think that McDonalds and Burger King have really good hamburgers: They think that because that is what is available to them.*

Due to the overabundance of street-based iconography delivered through hip-hop, the gangsta persona has impacted the generalized perception of blackness. As hip-hop is, at present, the most popular form of music worldwide, the implicit and explicit messages of the form serve as influential forces in the shaping of opinions and stereotypes. Bearing

in mind the widespread popularity of the genre and its perception as a black form, it is logical to conclude that the repetitive imagery of the form has, to a degree, affected the public view of African American life. While all of the interview subjects generally agreed that gangsta imagery had impacted the overall perception of blackness negatively, the respondents' assessment of the severity of the negative impact varied. Isaac, an African American professor of social sciences at a major university who has published widely-distributed books about inner-city life, describes the power of street personas, discussing the reasons for the popularity of these roles for hip-hop artists and black citizens alike: "In this [inner-city] community, a lot of people like to confuse the street with blackness." Isaac further explained that negative conceptions of African Americans based on gangsta imagery were based in fear and the instinct for self preservation. He added that this fear was not an exclusively white phenomenon, but that the excesses of street-based imagery in hip-hop had also caused mistrust and fear among African Americans, particularly in the inner cities. "There's a place where these two [street consciousness and constructed gangsta imagery] may come together and overlap. Maybe that's what's going on with hip-hop." Isaac claimed that gangsta imagery, originally a reflection of ghetto life, has served to ratchet up the tensions in inner-city life: Young black males assume the street personas of hip-hop as a self-protective tactic, only to be perceived as thugs and summarily feared by conventional, "straight" citizens from the same communities. In this manner, gangsta imagery has turned on itself. In Isaac's terms:

*The wider conventional culture is probably too quick to associate black people with that orientation, that thuggishness. Because when they do that, it denigrates*

*the black community. There are a lot of people who assign blacks to these roles. They just do it out of ignorance. And they just associate all black people with the street. A lot of people do associate black people with the worst elements of culture.*

The idea that the proliferation of gangsta imagery in hip-hop has caused rifts in the black community and even in the hip-hop world itself is perhaps the most interesting emergent theme of the interviews. Across all of the interviews, there were similar expressions of the idea that the retrogressive stereotypes resulting from the insistent repetition of street characterizations in hip-hop have, in fact, had seismic impact for the world at large, for the black community, and for hip-hop culture. Isaac, for example, spoke of how the conventions of hip-hop iconography such as the gangsta motif had become the *de facto* mode of presentation and demeanor within the genre, and for inner city residents merely seeking to fit in with their surroundings. Isaac described both the street codes expressed in hip-hop and the real street codes of the ghetto as being “in contradiction to the rules and conventions of the wider culture.” In accordance with this assertion, Grant spoke of how hip-hop, especially in the form of the perennially popular, extreme gangsta characterizations, tended to factionalize the general public: “For a lot of people, it [gangsta imagery] is immediately off-putting.” Grant continued by explaining how hip-hop, like most of the preceding permutations of youth-oriented pop music, is still received by some factions as grating musical cacophony. “For a lot of people, hip-hop is ugly and untalented; it’s not musical, it’s a bad thing.” Grant further explained that the brash and oftentimes antisocial verbal effrontery of gangsta rap has only served to magnify preexisting distaste for the form. As Grant continued to explain how the more

extreme forms of hip-hop can alienate people, his discussion took yet another paradoxical turn. Grant posited that the very factors which are perceived as threatening and alienating by some people are key to its allure for others:

*In a way, the uglier and the more kind of backward stuff has an appeal to some people. It's base, it's sexist, it's awful. It's like music that your dad hates, something that is polarizing, and that makes it attractive to some people. That sort of street culture aspect of hip-hop turns off a bunch of people. But taken in the other direction, the more street, the more lowdown and gritty and repellent that it becomes, the more attractive it is for some kinds of people. I think that goes across both white and black culture. There are these spiraling debates about this offensive kind of material; not about if it's good, but about if it's OK to like it.*

This revelation of how prefabricated shock tactics in lyrics had provoked division among hip-hop fans was one of the most stunning ideas expressed in the interviews. Discussions about whether it is acceptable to enjoy hip-hop material that is constructed to arouse shock and outrage is fast becoming a hotly debated topic among hip-hop fans and analysts of the genre alike.

Julien's discussion of the impact of the gangsta image on social knowledge of African Americans followed a more intimate path which gave focus to how the proliferation of negative stereotypes in hip-hop can affect lives on a personal level, most pointedly for African Americans:

*You know, generally, as an adult, I don't have any problem with the gangsta thing. I think that as an older black person myself, I suffer from a little bit of*

*concern over it because I see, like, my nephew or something, someone who is heavily influenced by this kind of [pause] a very heavy attitude and persona that he likes to, you know, ascribe to. And this comes from hip-hop, you know?*

*And I know as an [African American] adult that doesn't smoke, doesn't drink, doesn't do any drugs, I get hassled by the police all the time. And I don't dress that, [pause] well, actually I do wear hooded sweatshirts and knit caps. But, it [gangsta imagery] concerns me because it just keeps projecting this image to the police or to other people outside in the community that, right off the bat, you have all the signifiers of being someone that should be, um, mistrusted. So I think that it's not a particularly good image to, um, foist onto the [black] youth.*

Offering their assessments of the impact of gangsta imagery, both Michael and Sean referred to an excessive analysis of hip-hop that probably occurred because of the race-related implications of the genre. Michael was critical of the alarmist focus of much of this critical scrutiny, noting that, “you don't see this level of analysis for drug abuse, sexism, race, whatever, in movies or television or any other entertainment.” Sean delved into the subject of excessive analysis with more detail, revealing some insightful ideas about sensationalism, race, and privilege in the process:

*In some ways it's definitely had a negative effect. Because I think that one of the primary depictions that you see of black culture is this hedonistic, violent, party all the time until you get shot idea. And, you know, I don't think that that's really healthy in a lot of ways. And obviously I understand why someone like Bill Cosby who's spent his whole career trying to provide a different model of what black*

*achievement can look like, I understand why somebody like him finds it distressing.*

*But I think that I also get a little bit skeptical of some of the worst doom-saying that you see about it. Because most of the stuff is make-believe. And the people that are doing it are entertainers. I guess the real problems afflicting poor, African Americans have a lot more to do with broad political and cultural influences and economic influences that have very deep roots. And I think that thug culture probably isn't helping a whole lot. But I'm not sure that if you were going to list the ten things that most need to be addressed about the life of poor African Americans, it wouldn't even make the list.*

*You know, because it [gangsta imagery] is so visible, I think people have a tendency to focus on it and to say, 'Aha, this is the problem.' But I don't really think it is the problem. I think it's to some degree a symptom. And I also think that it's also a way for people to kind of play dress-up and pretend that they're getting the better of a whole host of things that go way beyond the scope of hip-hop.*

Although it is probably impossible to determine the force of the impact that gangsta imagery has had on generalized perceptions, it is certain that adverse reactions to such imagery can result in divisiveness and fear in all strata of society. And, because of the perception of hip-hop and gangsta imagery as being innately black, the greatest burden of this divisiveness and fear has fallen upon African Americans. The cultural estrangement of African Americans that is produced by gangsta iconography, however, is not *caused* by hip-hop. Instead, the imagery reflects preexisting socioeconomic

inequalities that have plagued African Americans for centuries. Gangsta imagery is, in effect, the harshest conditions of ghetto life personified in the form of rebellious and angry black youth. And until the social problems that created this imagery are somehow resolved, gangsta personas and motifs will persist as a reminder of inequalities that have persisted for centuries.

### Findings and Discussions Summary

The findings of this study lend support to several of the assertions of the previously cited works, also revealing new ideas and patterns of cultural behavior in the process. Close examination and coding of the interviews revealed several emergent themes congruent with those of the review of literature; that hip-hop is generally perceived as a black form, that gangsta imagery is most often associated with blackness, that street-based hip-hop imagery is often constructed and manipulated, and that the impact of gangsta imagery on the overall perception of blackness and African American life has been negative. Qualitative analysis by comparison and coding of the interviews also drew focus on new developments, both from within hip-hop culture itself and in the perceptions of the culture that shape the ideas, attributions, and sometimes stereotypes of “how black people are.” These new, emergent themes and developments include the adoption of gangsta personas as a means of conforming to the available roles in hip-hop, the widening chasms in overall culture, black culture, and hip-hop culture resulting from repeated gangsta imagery, and the emergence of new hip-hop personas (the gangsta/entrepreneur, the backpacker) extending beyond pre-established iconography.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS

In the following, concluding chapter, the results of the study are reasserted and linked with the findings of the literature review. At the chapter's end, I discuss the limitations of the study and implications for further research.

#### Summary

My research concludes that hip-hop is perceived as an innately black form, even though the genre has included artists from several races and backgrounds. The primary reason for this perception is relatively simple: At its inception the genre was created by African Americans, and the genre is dominated by black artists to this day. At this point, the association of blackness with hip-hop begins its spiral into problematic territory. As hip-hop evolved, especially in terms of the highest-profile, biggest-selling acts, the genre's focus narrowed. Once an anomaly, the gangsta image that first arrived on the scene in the mid 1980s has become a *de-facto* persona that is assumed by the vast majority of rappers, almost at the exclusion of any of the other previously available roles. With the ever-present iteration of gangsta imagery via mainstream radio and music video channels, the thug persona became inextricably linked with hip-hop, and, thereby, with blackness itself.

As street-based personas became increasingly popular, rappers assumed the gangsta identity as a means of establishing credibility and recreating proven music marketing strategies. Thug/gangsta imagery, which had up to then, to varying degrees, originated from true life situations, was embraced as a marketing angle by the music

industry. Oftentimes, the persona was constructed, manipulated, and exploited for commercial purposes. As faux gangstas became more common, issues of hip-hop authenticity came to the fore.

Because the gangsta persona has now become a well established, show business archetype, the perception of gangsta rappers has also evolved. While the gangsta motif is considered to be genuine in several cases, the public became aware that the imagery is often adopted by performers seeking to conform to pre-established roles. The persistent popularity of the gangsta persona has also led to a narrowing palate of image constructions to be assumed by rap artists: The gangsta persona is oftentimes adopted because it is perceived to be “how rappers are.”

The proliferation of gangsta imagery spread through mainstream entertainment media has impacted generalized perceptions of African American life. Because of its insistent repetition, gangsta imagery is assumed by many to be an accurate portrayal of blackness. While, of course, these street-based portrayals are representative of only a small portion of the African American population, the iteration of these images has led some media consumers to perceive blacks, especially young males, as threatening. These misconceptions have resulted in cultural polarization, the alienation of black culture from the mainstream, a rift within the African American community, and even a rift within the hip-hop world itself. Furthermore, the recreation of gangsta iconography has fostered a sense of cultural disconnect: Based upon the gangsta imagery of hip-hop, some media consumers come to the illogical conclusion that the thug motif reflects an innate characteristic of blackness, while, in fact, gangsta imagery is a product of social and economic factors that are separate from blackness or hip-hop culture.

These conclusions, however, by no means lead to any notion on the part of the author that hip-hop itself is perceived as being a negative or “bad” genre by the general public. Although many of the authors in the literature review and the interview subjects alike have averred that gangsta iconography has had retrogressive impact on the perception of blackness, the worldwide popularity of rap music and hip-hop culture evinces that, while certain image constructions of the genre are seen as having negative connotations, the form is nonetheless revered and greatly appreciated on a widespread level. The negative traits attributed to hip-hop because of gangsta imagery are direct results of preexisting social, political, and economic conditions affecting African Americans from the inner-city.

Themes emergent from the analysis of the interviews point to new approaches to the examination of the subject matter and to nascent archetypes currently taking shape in hip-hop. While there is abundant information concerning the impetus for the gangsta persona and its continued replication in hip-hop, there was little available information about how the assumption of the gangsta role affects rap artists prior to this study. The function of assuming the gangsta persona for hip-hop artists is essentially a conformist move dictated by a diminishing number of available roles for rappers, and by market forces from within the music industry that favor replication of familiar representational strategies over creativity and individuality, especially that which might break stereotypes and challenge the white privileged status quo. The unabated presentation of gangsta imagery in major label hip-hop music has borne harsh consequences for the black community. Social knowledge of African Americans has been impacted by hip-hop’s street-based imagery, which surfaces on a day-to-day basis for black citizens in the forms

of fear from others, repression, and discrimination. The appearance of new hip-hop archetypes, however, will hopefully serve to widen the scope of available personas and motifs for aspiring hip-hop artists, thereby lessening the repercussions of the gangsta pose that still resound in the generalized perceptions of African Americans to this day.

The findings of this study are correlative with the work of the myriad scholars, critics, and writers who were referenced in the review of literature. The idea that hip-hop is perceived as a black form (Chang, 2005; Oshun, 2001) was echoed in the study, serving as a starting point from which other similar conclusions about the imagery of blackness in hip-hop could be reached. While the idea that hip-hop is perceived as embodying blackness can be argued from several logical perspectives, the importance of the notion is that, because hip-hop is perceived as black, the recurrent motifs and personas of the genre are similarly understood by the general public to be indicative of the nature of African American personalities. Because hip-hop is assumed to be black, the exaggerated, bigger than life role models of the form are received as being reflective of how black people are in reality.

Several scholars, critics, and pop culture analysts have written about the effects of hip-hop imagery on the generalized perceptions of blackness (Chang, 2005; Keyes, 2004; Kitwana, 2005b; Oshun, 2001; Perry, 2004). The continued analysis of the form and its effects on the shaping of social knowledge reflects an ever-present interest in the subject matter from a variety of perspectives. Examination of the extensive available texts on hip-hop show that gangsta imagery has evolved from an upstart phenomenon in the late 1980s to an established archetype that, at present, extends beyond the boundaries of hip-hop. Due to the myriad sociological implications of the form, the future will certainly see

a sustained focus on the genre as hip-hop and its accompanying imagery continues to evolve and permute.

Like all forms of youth-based subculture, hip-hop offers observers keen insights into how young people envision themselves and how existing iconography influences their self-representation to the outside world. My research reveals a continuing effort among scholars of hip-hop and its promoters to evaluate the effects of the genre's imagery in hopes of understanding its impetus, perpetuation, and perception.

### Limitations of Study

The primary limitation of this study, beyond the complexity of my whiteness, is the sample size. Having a larger sample might have allowed for the expression of alternate viewpoints. While the study's focus on scholars and analysts of hip-hop did present a unique research population, expanding the population to include hip-hop artists would have offered some personalized glimpses into the motivations and perceptions of the practitioners of the form. Gaining approval for this study from the university's Institutional Review Board took longer than I anticipated, during which time I lost access to some tentatively planned interviews. I had tentatively arranged for more interviews than I was able to conduct because of the narrowed scheduling time and the time constraints of potential interviewees.

As discussed at length in the methods section, another limitation of the study was my own ethnic orientation. Although I was under the impression that the racial dynamic between myself and the African American research subjects of this study did not cause any kind of friction or inhibit conversation in any way, there is really no way that I could

accurately judge whether my race affected the interaction in these situations. Bearing in mind that issues of race and privilege are indeed powerful factors, my whiteness might have served to weaken my abilities as an interviewer. I prefer to think that I would be able to keep my whiteness from negatively impacting how I interacted with or interpreted or wrote about people of color or a perceived black genre. But I doubt that my being socialized into a white racist culture and my life of white privilege would make that entirely possible. Another important factor missing from this research was a female perspective. Although I had tentatively arranged for interviews with women, those whom I contacted were unfortunately not available due to time constraints during the relatively brief period I had to do my research. The inclusion of women's voices in the research would certainly have offered illuminating ideas, and I regret that I was unable to converse with any female hip-hop insiders. Hip-hop's reputation for misogyny and its limited representation of and imagery of women makes their absence of female voice in this study problematic.

Despite the aforementioned limitations of this study, the results nonetheless led to new areas of inquiry. Findings of the study have revealed new personas and motifs emergent in hip-hop culture that warrant continued evaluation and research. The function of image-shaping in the careers of hip-hop artists is another area which has heretofore received little analysis. Finally, recognizing the ever-present impact of hip-hop culture on generalized perceptions of blackness, continuing analysis of the implications of hip-hop imagery is warranted. Other limits of the study could be addressed by future researchers who explore areas identified in the following section.

### Suggestions for Further Research

In essence, hip-hop is as an amalgamation of artistic, political, and social expression delivered to the general public in the form of a pop product. Laden with multifaceted messages, the genre is ripe for analysis from multiple perspectives. Although previous literature has focused on the perceptions of gangsta archetypes, few studies have examined how the assumption of gangsta roles functions for the hip-hop artist. It would be particularly interesting to conduct a study where gangsta rappers were asked how they created their public image, if this image had, in fact, been constructed, to what extent this imagery was reflective of their personality, and how the adoption of the gangsta persona had affected their career as a hip-hop artist. In contrast, it would also be interesting to study hip-hop artists such as Kanye West, Common, and MF Doom who had studiously avoided any roles that might be perceived as gangsta-related. Similarly, with this study, research subjects would be asked to what extent their non-gangsta image had been constructed and how the assumption of a non-gangsta image had functioned for their career in hip-hop.

Bearing in mind that new personas and variations on timeworn image constructions are perpetually occurring in hip-hop culture, further inquiries regarding these emergent roles would prove interesting and enlightening for researchers. A closer examination of the backpacker phenomenon and its predominately white audience would be interesting from a number of angles. For example, black performers of the backpacker niche could be interviewed about how they perceive their influence while presenting blackness to their primarily white audiences. The gangsta/entrepreneur persona is perhaps an even more interesting development. A survey of adult African Americans

regarding their opinion of the gangsta/entrepreneur as a potential role model for black youth might be an ideal study, for example.

### Concluding Thoughts

Researching, arranging, and preparing this thesis has been an awakening experience, on a number of levels. The execution and analysis of this project has impelled my use of new approaches of inquiry, sometimes begrudgingly. In retrospect, I have come to view the entire task as a pivotal, make-or-break challenge. This endeavor, which has been both exhilarating and soul-crushing at different times, has changed how I perceive the world: Nothing is as it seems, there are no rock-solid answers, and no conclusion is entirely logical. Part of the process of learning is realizing how little you really know about anything.

My initial attraction to hip-hop was almost totally musical. Hip-hop seemed to be the last bastion of the rebel qualities that I had previously found so alluring in rock'n'roll. Although I was well aware of the implicit social and political factors that would fall under consideration when analyzing hip-hop, I really had no concept of the controversy laden and potentially explosive nature of my subject matter. As a white male, I was a neophyte to the genre, a presumptuous outsider pontificating from a position of privilege. Having conducted the study, I still consider myself to be a neophyte, albeit a slightly more informed and inquisitive one. And I am as excited by and infatuated with hip-hop as I was before, perhaps even more.

In a metaphoric sense, I feel as if I have closely examined just a few threads plucked from an intricately woven tapestry with this project. While I have certainly

learned a lot about hip-hop and its impact on American culture as a whole, my true revelation comes with the knowledge that hip-hop is much more than beats and rhymes, more than graffiti, more than break dancing, more than prefabricated imagery. This project was my first experience of what will hopefully become an extended exploration of hip-hop culture.

In summary, conducting this research has helped me to develop new ideas and analytical skills. Ideally, this study will provoke further inquiries into hip-hop related issues, or at least introduce someone to the exciting and ever-evolving world of hip-hop culture. Perhaps this study will help to raise awareness of how prefabricated media images can shape social knowledge. I believe that continued studies of hip-hop iconography can serve to illuminate how race-related imagery impacts us all.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Pre-Interview Script for Thesis Project

Before we begin the interview, I'd like to discuss some issues about your participation in the project. First of all, this interview is for use in my thesis, which concerns the imagery and stereotypes communicated via hip-hop (rap music) culture. I'm going to ask you a series of open-ended, discussion style questions about the imagery of "blackness" in hip-hop. Since this is a qualitative study, the information from this interview will be used to find conclusions about the subject matter. Portions of the transcript may be quoted in the thesis.

Please be advised that the interview is being recorded on audio tape. In order to ensure your anonymity, I will not be addressing you by name while the taping is in progress. I am recording this conversation in a closed room where no one else can hear. If you're concerned about anyone hearing your end of the conversation, you might want to make sure you're alone, in a closed room as well. To assure your anonymity, I will transcribe this tape in an enclosed room also. No one except you and me will ever hear this tape.

The interview will take around 30 minutes. If, for any reason, you feel the need to stop the interview at any point, feel free. You can refuse to answer any particular question or discontinue the interview without any penalty. It is possible that I may ask you some follow-up questions at some point.

Please be aware that you may be quoted anonymously in the thesis, and that, upon its completion, the thesis will be available for public inspection. By participating in the interview, you will be contributing to scholarly research.

If you have any questions or comments after the interview's completion, feel free to contact me, John Sewell, at (423) 741-1474. My supervisor for this project is Dr. Amber E. Kinser, Associate Professor of Communication, East Tennessee State University. Dr. Kinser can be reached at (423) 439-7571.

Thank you very much for your participation in this interview.

(Script updated on February 22, 2006 by John Sewell.)

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions

1. Is hip-hop synonymous with blackness?
2. “Realness” or “ghetto authenticity” seems to be a recurring theme in hip-hop.  
Why is authenticity such a sought-after attribute?
3. What methods do hip-hop artists use to establish an aura of ghettocentric authenticity?
4. Why is the ghettocentric perspective favored in hip-hop?
5. Is hip-hop an exclusively street-based culture?
6. Describe what you perceive as the pervasive themes and archetypes in hip-hop.
7. Gangsta and street personas are popular archetypes in hip-hop. Why do you think these personas are so compelling for middle-class consumers?
8. Does the music industry impose street and gangsta personas on rappers?
9. How has the assimilation of hip-hop into mainstream culture affected the motifs and imagery of the genre?

## VITA

John Ike Sewell, Jr.

Personal Data: Date of Birth: October 5, 1963

Place of Birth: Knoxville, Tennessee

Marital Status: Single

Education: Public Schools, Knoxville, Tennessee

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee;

Communications, B.S., 1997

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;

Professional Communication, M.A., 2006

### Professional

Experience: Contributing Writer, Metro Pulse Magazine, 1997-current

Writer/Editor, Club Dance Magazine (Cinetel Productions), 1998-1999

Columnist and Contributing Writer, Baltimore City Paper, 1999-2001

Contributing Writer, Mean Street Magazine, 2002-current

Contributing Writer, Tri-Cities.com, 2004-current