

“Assert Myself To Eliminate The Hurt”:

Black Youth In Urban America

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*Insert the power cord so my energy will work
Pure energy spurts, sporadic, automatic
mathematic, melodramatic -- acrobatic
Diplomatic, charismatic
Even my static, Asiatic
Microphone fanatic 'Alone
Blown in, in the whirlwind
Eye of the storm, make the energy transform
and convert, introvert turn extrovert
Assert myself to eliminate the hurt*

If one takes more than a cursory glance at rap music, it is clear that the lyrics from some of hip hop's most talented writers and performers are much more than the visceral cries of betrayed and discarded youth. The words and rhymes of hip hop identify what has arguably become the one cultural institution that urban youth rely on for honesty (*keeping it real*) and leadership. In 1996, there were 19 million young people aged 10-14 years old and 18.4 million aged 15-19 years old living in the US (1996 U.S. Census Bureau). According to a national Gallup poll of adolescents aged 13-17 (Bezilla 1993) since 1992, rap music has become the preferred music of youth (26%), followed closely by rock (25%). Though hip hop artists often rap about the range of adolescent confusion, desire and angst, at hip hop's core is the commitment and vision of youth who are agitated, motivated and willing to confront complex and powerful institutions and practices to improve their

world. With the introduction of the hip hop salutation “Word!” and “Word Up!”, the hip hop nation has emerged as a cultural, social and political force constituted and instantiated through language style, often foregrounded in the rap itself. As ‘old school’ rapper Big Daddy Kane (1988) demonstrates:

I'll damage ya, I'm not an amateur
But a professional, unquestionable, without a doubt superb
So full of action, my name should be a verb

In hip hop, the action is the WORD. The musical and verbal forms of rap and hip hop have often been described and critiqued in terms of how the construction and interpretation of young, urban African American life and/or truth represents and affects youthful audiences (e.g. Lipsitz 1990, Rose 1994, Gilroy 1993a). Through both commercial and underground media, the music and words of hip hop transcend language, neighborhoods, cities and national boundaries resulting in international varieties, where marginalized groups and political parties appropriate hip hop as a symbol of resistance (e.g. Italy, Spain, Japan). Irrespective of its popularity, and whether one is introduced to rap through radio, dance clubs, videos, cassette tapes, compact discs, news reports, congressional hearings, documentaries or talk shows, hip hop artists must constantly work to maintain the notion that they are real and true to the streets. Hip hop notions of reality are mediated by a representation of African American culture, language, history and social, economic and political life. Thus, urban African American life is not simply represented in relation to in-group intersubjectivities, but the significance of cultural symbols and sounds,

especially linguistic symbols, which signify membership, role and status so that, as Rossi-Landi (1983) argues, "...words, expressions, messages circulate as commodities (p.49)". In this respect, the WORD in hip hop is at once the realization of Foucault's Discourse on Language, Bakhtin's Dialogic Imagination and Labov's Language in the Inner City. Unlike the music, rhythm and sounds of hip hop, the WORD is the one aspect which, by definition remains particularly urban African American.¹ It is the core of the hip hop nation, the power, trope, message and market all in one.

This paper explores urban youth culture's construction and critique of racism, hypocrisy and injustice through the examination of the social organizations, values, norms, beliefs and practices which both constitute and mediate the hip hop community/nation. Previously, the African American community was characterized by cultural and linguistic homogeneity (e.g. Labov 1972, Smitherman 1977, Baugh 1983) that was resistant to most political, social, historical and geographical divisions and policies that normally lead to significant change toward the dominant culture. The introduction of hip hop cultural beliefs and values has resulted in a significant reclamation or restructuring of African American cultural and social practices by youth who have, for the first time in urban African American communities, intentionally highlighted and re-constructed regional and local urban social and language norms. These norms essentially partition the urban community, thereby constantly marking people - young African Americans -

as cultural insiders or outsiders based on knowledge of local African American urban experience rather than social class. At the same time, the analysis of racism and resistance to it and other forms of injustice are often placed within complex local disputes and critiques that require knowledge of hip hop lexicon and popular culture references. This emergence of a new black urban cultural ideology relies on the use of African American English (AAE) linguistic features and black adolescent social and cultural values. Though evidence of this shift has been discussed since the late 1970s (Toop 1984), hip hop culture did not have far sweeping consequences until the middle 1980s when technology shifted and intimate friendship networks or “crews” and “squads”, based on hip hop artists became prominent outside of the east coast. The drive to distinguish and articulate linguistic and geographical characteristics that identify major cities and neighborhoods on the east and west coasts often results in the marginalization of the south and the “Eastwest” or middle regions (e.g. Chicago, Detroit). ² It has also resulted in an awareness among urban Black youth that there are many who share and resist attacks on Black youth.

This report is based on an ongoing study of 10 years of ethnographic research. This study includes observations of young people in underground venues, open mike sessions, concerts and rap contests as well as ethnographic interviews and analyses of conversations, letters and interviews in hip hop magazines and rap sheets, radio and video call-in shows and play lists.

Besides the researcher, those participating in fieldwork and/or contributing to this analysis include groups of 12-16 year olds and groups in their late teens to early twenties. The US cities include Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and Atlanta. Researchers also work in other parts of the Southern US, including Mobile, Alabama and parts of Mississippi.

Urban Black Culture: New Rules for A New Century

Referring to hip hop as a black urban cultural institution may seem an overstatement, but its role in addressing modern issues of morality, injustice, representation and responsibility cannot be denied. Though Black youth's involvement in hip hop has been considered nihilistic (West 1993, De Genova 1995) and perhaps a modernist glitch on the cultural landscape (e.g. Gilroy 1993 a, b), these views do not reflect the majority of youth who look to hip hop for leadership. Many social scientists have overlooked urban youth's formation and participation in their own institutions. As a result, most of the critical discussion has focused on hip hop productions and artists rather than the interaction between hip hop and urban youth communities. When one considers that hip hop is represented by radio and video programs, thousands of web sites, several national magazines, underground clubs, neighborhood record stores, concerts, newsletters and community organizations, it is obvious that there are complex organizational structures and activities that support the philosophy of rap culture. It is the preferred music for 67% of black and

55% of all non-white youth and is steadily becoming a staple of rock performances and recordings. In the process, what has taken place is a new form of youth socialization that explicitly addresses racism, sexism, capitalism and morality in ways that simultaneously expose, exploit and critique these practices.

Hip hop emerged and flourished in opposition to the political ideology of the Reagan-Bush era which promoted the social and civic abandon of urban communities in the US. It lends words and voices to the multiple realities of young, urban African Americans whether in the “hood” or of it. For most of its members this community is not “imagined” in that every police department in every municipality in the country, draws its physical boundaries and hunts its members. Left to fend for itself, defined as underclass and underprivileged, the hip hop community has transformed Black urban youth into a force that must be reckoned with. When disenfranchised, urban, youth were invisible, suburbia felt protected. Through the reclamation of urban Black culture, the hip hop nation drew itself back into the political, artistic and social landscape (Bum rushin’ the show!) with plenty of attitude, “kickin’ ass and takin’ names”. Petulant, raw, and screaming with vibrant and violent messages and images to the world, the hip hop nation represents young people who are angry that the power apparatus tried to bury it alive. Not only were the rumors of its death greatly exaggerated, but urban centers, in the form of hip hop are back with nothing to lose. When, on his release Amerikka’s Most Wanted, hard-core

rapper Ice Cube (1990) was asked for his last words before his fantasized state execution ordered by those who want to silence hip hop's harsh honesty, he said:

Yeah, yeah, I got some last words -
Fuck all y'all!

The hip hop nation is constructed around an ideology that representations and references (signs and symbols) are indexical and create institutional practices. Thus norms and values are communicated through symbols and specific and often ritualized practices rather than through explicit institutions. In a sense, these Black urban communities are built around the exploitation of the following tenets: (1) sounds and objects have specific meanings in culture, (2) all languages have system; (3) a society's reference system or indexicality is often political; (4) meaning is co-constructed (co-authored).

The first tenet refers to the importance of signifiers or indices of Black urban life. These may include references to neighborhood streets, police stations and prisons that youth must deal with. These signifiers also encompass racist figures and public figures both nationally and locally perceived to be enemies of urban youth (e.g. Darryl Gates in Los Angeles, Delores Tucker). Signifiers may also include Black nationalists and leaders considered supporters of Black youth. The notion that all languages have system is central to urban youth ideology since the creation and use of

vocabulary and spelling that is similar to, but different from standard words signals resistance and the identity of the movement. The third point refers to the nature of indexicality as a means to exploit and subvert symbols. Writers and rappers must index public culture symbols, products, television programs and terms that are used to describe urban America. For example, indirect critiques of racism and stereotypes in song titles like Public Enemy's "Fear of a Black Planet" and Naughty by Nature's "Ghetto Bastard" reveals bitterness toward the system for its betrayal of Black youth. The fourth and final point is that rather than the artist being the core of hip hop, it is the artist's ties to the audience and urban youth that determine success. An artist represents his or her audience and the audience determines whether the artist can assume that role.

The hip hop world is largely an adolescent one, where roles and status are constantly being explored and where participants are convinced that everything is at stake and everything is about them. Thus it can be excessive in its focus on the individual especially where sex and bravado are concerned. Moreover, because the hip hop nation is constructed in terms of its frank honesty and realism, virtually any activity or view that exists can be reflected and/or critiqued. It is not unusual for an individual artist to fashion a persona for several recordings that embodies negative representations and stereotypes of African Americans. Within this system, silencing is an unacceptable practice since ideological censorship is viewed as the work of

hegemonic forces attempting to co-opt and corrupt hip hop. Rather, urban youth regulate themselves through critiques of hip hop in numerous discussion groups, actual recordings, on radio call-in programs and in letters in hip hop publications.

There are a variety of hip hop styles including old school, Hard Core, gangster, social and political consciousness, smooth and others. The choice of style is associated with how the artist constructs him or her self or the type of message in the rap. Both men and women use all styles, though some artists are strongly associated with one type of rap. I will briefly review these styles and then discuss how black youth incorporate these styles and values in their attitudes toward racism.

Hard Core

Hard Core is perhaps the best known example of hip hop style and content. Hard Core artists identify their audiences as people who understand and live a “hard” or “real” urban life. They exclude no one from their audience if the listener “comes correct”. They record for those who can “handle the truth”. Usually accompanied by bass so intense it causes one’s body, car, and house to quiver, Hard Core refers to rhymes which tell the raw and brutal “truth” about Black life in urban centers. Both men and women can be considered Hard Core (e.g. MC Lyte, The Boss). Though frequently misogynist, Hard Core artists focus on racial and social class injustice and

what they believe “survival” under siege is like. This sentiment is also at the core of one of the most popular hip hop groups of the early 1990s, Naughty by Nature. From the production house of Latifah’s Flavor Unit, Naughty by Nature’s 1991 hit “Ghetto Bastard”, with lead rapper Treach, delivered classic street rhymes that depicted their notion of home as they kept their finger, machetes, guns, and screams directed at their version of the “real deal” in urban life. Their words are unforgiving unromantic, un-sentimental - hardcore.

A ghetto bastard born next to the projects
Livin’ in the slums wit bums askin’ now why, Treach
Do I have to be like this?
Mama said I’m priceless
So why am I worthless? Starvin’ is just what being nice gets
Sometimes I wish I could afford a pistol then though
To stop the hell I would’ve ended things a while ago
I ain’t have jack but a black hat and knapsack
War scars, stolen cars and a black jack
Drop that and now you want me to rap and give
Say something positive, well positive ain’t where I live
I live right around the corner from West Hell
Two blocks from South Shit and once in a jail cell
The sun never shined on my side of the street see
And only once or twice a week I would speak
I walked alone, My state of mind was home sweet home
I couldn’t keep a girl they wanted kids wit cars and chrome
Some life if you ain’t wear gold, your style old
And you got more juice and dough for every bottle sold
Hell NO! I say there’s gotta be a better way
But hey, never gamble in a game that you can’t play
I’m showin’ and flowin’ and goin’ and owin’ no one and not now
How will I do it? How will I make it?
I won’t. That’s how. (WHY ME? huh)

Chorus:
Everything’s gonna be all right (all right)

Everything's gonna be all right (all right)

Gangsta' Style

While Hard Core often includes misogyny, it is gangsta' style that is most closely associated with this tendency. Hard Core can be and is often socially conscious. Gangsta', on the other hand, rests solidly in the American tradition of mobsters and outlaws (cf. De Genova 1995, Gilroy 1993b). It is constructed through toasts, a form of African American male rhythmic story telling originally based on "bad ass" male folk heroes who feared, loved and belonged to nothing and no one. In its modern hip hop incarnation, these gangsta' raps/toasts deify Hollywood mobster movies and Italian and South American cold-blooded gangster stereotypes (e.g. Scarface, Goodfellas, The Godfather). In toasts, male strength is described in terms of a sociopathic need to dominate and abuse both men and women. Thus gangsta' style is about attacking anyone who looks at you the wrong way, defending turf and daring anyone to even think they don't like it. NWA's 1988 hit "Straight Outta Compton", remains a classic example of this style.

Straight Outta Compton
Crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube
From tha gang called Niggas with Attitudes
When I'm called off
I got a sawed off
Squeeze the trigger
And bodies are hauled off
You too, boy, if you fuck with me
Tha police are gonna have to come and get me
Off your ass

That's how I'm goin' out
But a punk motherfucker that's showing how
Niggers fuck 'em up
They wanna rumble
Makes a man cook 'em in a pot like gumbo
Goin' off on a motherfucker like that
With a gat that's pointed at your ass
So give it up smooth
Ain't no telling when I'm down for a jack move
Here's a murder rap to keep you dancin'
With a crime record like Charles Manson
AK-47 is the tool
Don't make me act the motherfuckin' fool
Me and you could go toe-to-toe, no maybe
I'm knockin' niggers out the box daily
Yo, weekly, monthly, yearly
Until then, dumb motherfuckers see clearly
That I'm down with the capital C-P-T
Boy you can't fuck with me
So when I'm in your neighborhood
Ya better duck
Cause Ice Cube is crazy as fuck
As I leave, believe I'm stompin'
When I come back boy
I'm comin' Straight Outta Compton

Socially Conscious

Socially conscious groups consistently critique racism and social and political injustice in America. They do not fall into neat categories and many artists and members relate to various forms of social conscious raps. Of the 500 rap groups listed under OOHOLA group headings, 10% have socially conscious themes on at least one song in every collection. These themes generally fall into five categories: Black nationalist, the Nation of Islam (NOI), Unity, and political.

X-Clan, nationalist rappers, believe that the hip hop community must know its African history in order to understand the conditions under which they live, but they consider their function to be much more than education. "In order to fight the war, we have to be able to meet those standards. The misinterpretation when it comes to us [X-Clan] is we are not trying to teach you a history lesson. We are trying to prepare you to do battle (Professor X 1991:193 in Eure and Spady)." As part of their history lesson they often include an indirect call to arms.

Out of the darkness in panther skins comes doctors.
Bearing the remedy of your existence.
Yes, it gets blacker, with a Nat Turner lick.
Martin, Adam, Malcolm, Huey,
There's a party at the crossroads!" ("Funkin' Lesson")

Some rappers gain their political perspective through the teachings of the Nation of Islam (NOI). The NOI appear at virtually every rap function

and use every opportunity to interact with and organize Black youth. The NOI's critique of American society as unjust and racist as well as their positive reputation for organizing men in prison, allows them all around respect and support in the rap community. The NOI focuses on responsibility, pride and the importance of the black male. The Five Percent Nation is a group of men, generally out of the NOI, who say they represent the 5% of the population of planet earth who truly understand what is going on in the world. Their purpose is to teach the 85% who are uninformed. The other 10% have knowledge, but use it against the rest of the world (Source, Sp. 91). Unity rappers are those who focus on keeping the hip hop community united at all costs. They may defend themselves in a feud, but they generally believe that all forms of rap are necessary to reflect the realities of the hip hop community.

Political rappers like KRS-One and Public Enemy focus on capitalism as a corrupt system and analyze African American's position within that system. However, they do not intend to overthrow capitalism. Rather, they want their audience to understand the nature of injustice, the role racism plays in it, and the organization necessary in order to achieve success within it. They expose racist beliefs and critique urban youth who perpetuate stereotypes and are unaware. Whether the industrial North or rural/slave South, life is clearly brutal in the hands of the oppressor.

Political rappers also focus on education and empowerment of Black youth. KRS One has a WEB site and organization called The Temple where

he uses various academic and popular articles and interviews to educate urban youth about African American, Latino and hip hop history. In addition, Yo Yo, founded the Intelligent Black Women's Coalition (IBWC) to address women's issues in the hip hop community.

Women, Feminism and the Hip hop Nation

Women in hip hop are often among the most influential artists in terms of social consciousness and arguing for women's rights. Hip hop enjoys working class feminism rather than scholarly and middle class forms of feminism. Hip hop feminism includes arguing for respect and the rights of women, mothers and families. They also argue for their protection as well as protection for their children and for and from their men. In *Black Noise*, Rose (1994) reports that women rappers are often viewed as sexually aggressive anti-sexist voices. However, as she suggests, these are social class differences rather than contradictory positions. Unlike male rappers who uncritically adapt popular culture personas (e.g. gangster, pimp), women do not simply adapt the roll of the gangster's moll or prostitute. They invariably introduce the notion of choice and respect within these constructs. The rapper Lil Kim is one clear example of the working class woman rapper. Her web page includes the following description:

The lieutenant of the Junior M.A.F.I.A. the mother - sister figure. She provides the all too rare view of ghetto life from a young -female-teenagers -perspective caught amid the insanity around her.

Lil' Kim then greets her fans:

“I’m the Big Momma. I represent all the females and I keep the boys in check! These guys would be out of hand if I weren’t there as a mother figure. We are all from the streets and we have all been through the struggle. I want the ladies to relate what I’m talking about.

All female rappers and urban youth deal with a world that is regularly dominated by a misogynist construction of male desire where any woman who does not support a man is by definition dishonest, scheming, unfaithful, etc. This is exacerbated by the conflicts and excesses that result from negotiating adolescent desire (and rejection), emerging and conflicting gender identities and roles, and racism in a society that avoids and silences public discourse on subjugation, sex and sexuality. It is within this fully charged context that women in hip hop forge an identity and presence which is consistently working class, feminist, racially aware and sexual.

On one of Lil' Kim's earliest major releases with Notorious B.I.G., she represented the gangster's moll who betrays her lover in what initially appears to be a simple case of betrayal. Yet the betrayal is the result of physical abuse and disrespect. Lil' Kim explains to Biggie and her audience that she is justified in her actions.

You get vex and start swingin everywhere!
What me shiftee?
Now you wanna pistol whip me?
Pull out your 9 - while I cock on mine

And what nigga - I aint got time for this
So what nigga -I'm not tryin to hear that shit
Now you wanna buy me diamonds and Armani suits
Age of the Adini and Chanel Nine boots
Things to make up for all the games and the lies
Hallmark cards, sayin I apologize
Is you with me, how could you ever deceive me
But paybacks a bitch motherfucker,
Believe me No!
I aint gay this aint no lesbo flow
Jus a lil' somethin' to let you motherfuckers know
(Get Money)

Most women employ numerous rap styles though three are often highlighted when critiquing women rappers: Hard Core, sexually aware and the African Queen. Irrespective of the theme, all women identify their hip hop realism as reflecting a woman's experience and not unilaterally critical of men. Consequently, it is common for women to say that they support their men and at the same time want to be respected and in control of their bodies. Supporting a man does not mean that the man leads, rather irrespective of who's leading, women and men support the relationship and respect each other.

The Hard Core woman rapper (e.g. Boss, MC Lyte) describes urban life from a "woman's" perspective and views men as objects of desire who may lie, cheat, steal, etc. She may also introduce herself as a scheming woman, unsympathetic to male desires for loyalty, especially when he has not been loyal to her. The man she respects is the man who respects her. She consistently argues that irrespective of society's racism, she does not tolerate

abuse. The sexually aware rapper (e.g. Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, Salt & Peppa), recognizes that she is often the object of desire and consider men to be worthy of similar attention. They enjoy their bodies as well as men's bodies and often dress provocatively. Though they tease and talk about sexual pleasure, they are intolerant of abusive men and focus on sexual responsibility.

The African Queen respects herself and "edutains" the community. While she also describes urban life, her purpose, like socially conscious groups, is to improve the quality of life. While they encourage men as protectors, they see protection as a physical necessity against other men or "the evil that men do". Moreover, she often promotes an image of men protecting and supporting the community along with women rather than focusing solely on men's physical protection of women.

Sex Rappers

Though many artists rap about having sex, there have been a few (e.g. Geto Boys, 2 Live Crew and Luther Campbell, Too Short) who are known for explicit sexual lyrics. These artists construct elaborate fictions regarding their sexual prowess and recite misogynist refrains about lying, cheating, stealing, black woman. For these men, women exist for sex and to provide domestic and clerical support for the men. They focus on men's and women's sexual organs as though they are attached to life support systems rather than sentient, social and cultural human beings. Though sex and pimp hip hop artists are often lumped with gangsta' style, their focus is exclusively sexual prowess and frequent and meaningless sex. Within the hip hop community, these artists are often seen as playing to a suburban audience because they enjoy crossover record sales and their sexual bragging is not based in reality. Though this style may appear monotonous and predictable, Todd Shaw (1991) a.k.a Too Short insists that significant differences exist within style or motivation regarding sex rappers:

I'd like to say, 2 Live Crew, they have their market. And they sell a lot of records, they, you know it's all cool with me. But it's really a sex thing with them. With Too Short it's not necessarily a sex thing. It's really a pimp thing and, you know with NWA it's really a gangsta' thing .

The Hip Hop Audience/Artist

From its b-boy origins as part music, writing (graffiti), break dancing, dress style and rapping, hip hop now focuses almost exclusively on rapping and music. Other than the mandate that it represent the social reality of urban life, the hip hop community is not bound by conventional attempts to codify and standardize its value system and language codes. Rather, artists must reflect a frenetic energy that mirrors the unpredictable nature and uncertainty of black urban youth culture. They do this by introducing their listeners to their social reality: experiences, neighborhoods, childhood, problems, personal flaws, strengths, dreams and conflicts

Artistic success in hip-hop is often defined in terms of its relevance to the urban community and its concomitant lack of popularity with the non-African American community. Consequently, performers always run the risk of appearing outdated and being “bum rushed” - removed from the public sphere- by more vibrant and realist rappers. Membership in the community is instantiated and mediated through audience corroboration and collaboration (cf. Duranti and Brenneis 1986). The right to represent the hip hop nation is substantiated by members’ (1) purchase of recordings, (2) memorization of rap lyrics, (3) practice and free style performance and (4) loyalty to crews and/or individuals and recently, publication of lyrics on rap lyric web sites. The core of the hip hop nation is adolescent males and females between 12 and 17 years old who exclusively listen to and memorize and write raps (cf. Wheeler 1992),

dress the current hip hop style, keep up with the current dances, and often tag or at least practice writing. This younger group also practices freestyle (spontaneous) rapping and compete with each other over the best rap, delivery, style, etc.

While the core, who purchase the most records, are essential to hip hop's stability as an artistic form, the most influential segment of the hip hop nation are in their late teens to middle-20s. These long term (LT) members also practice freestyle, participate in local and underground open mike performances and competitions, and identify with particular rap genres or crews. This segment of hip hop often writes letters of praise or complaint to various hip hop publications or rap sheets to give *props* (respect) to artists. They are often interested in promoting both hip hop style and political and social issues relevant to urban youth. They also disclose which performer is *wack* (outdated or unacceptable) or who *drops phat tracks* (very good recordings). Long term members also serve as nation builders and often offer political and historical commentary and context to current hip hop styles and artists. They have the power to influence artists because they can attend most hip hop venues at clubs and concerts and monitor the authenticity of the audience and artist. If LT members designate that an artist has sold out, that person generally cannot safely appear as an artist anywhere that hip hop members congregate in the African American community. Most members of the hip hop nation argue that there are at least two versions to every hip hop

record released in a record store: (1) the one that goes to all audiences, (2) the 'real' version that is sold at concerts, clubs and on the street.

Achievement in hip hop is related to creative and relevant writing, style and delivery. How one gains financial success is not a serious issue, unless the community perceives that success results from a conscious attempt to ignore the core hip hop audience. Few artists can manage the pressure of a crossover hit since this form of success results in intense scrutiny for urban authenticity by the LTs. It may signify that the artist is a "perpetrator", a term which is the equivalent of a spy and the antithesis of what hip hop symbolizes. In this regard, Adler's (1991:xv) famous quotation that hip hop "...is adored by millions in the streets and reviled by hundreds in the suites." is at best a limited view of the real relationship between the streets and suites. Clearly, youth outside of urban areas are attracted to hip hop for the same reason as its primary audience. Thus, if the core audience rejects the artist because the words, referents, experiences and symbols-evoked do not reflect the reality of the streets, suburbia also rejects him or her.

One example of how youth analyze an artist's skills while confronting racism is a recent discussion on Davey D's hip hop web page on white rappers in hip hop. Following is an excerpt from Davey D's column.

Folks may wanna check for this artist-Eminem.. He's a white kid outta of Detroit who used to go by the name of Slim Shady. He's signed to Dr Dre's Aftermath label.. and thus far he's creating quite a buzz.. Everyone I spoken to who's heard his material is really hyped

about this kid.. All I keep hearing is that he has skillz.. My question/concern is are we hyped about Eminem because he's a white rap artist or because he's got mad skillz? Nowadays there are a lot of white kids who can get busy.. but are we within hip hop still fascinated with a white kid who got skillz because he's a minority?

Do white rappers get undue credit from the media? Back in The early 80s I recall Blondie getting mad props for INVENTING' rap.. I remember how pissed kids from around the way felt when the Daily News in NY came out and made that statement. Just the other day MTV went on and on about how the Beastie Boys were responsible for innovating rap.. I recall brothers mixing rap and rock long before the Beasties hit the scene.. Why play up the Beasties and downplay Run DMC or even the Cold Crush Brothers who did the song 'Punk Rock Rap'?

The other day I was choppin' it up with fellow writer Adissa who happens to be a big Beastie Boy fan and he remarked how it was cool for the Beasties back in the days to do msygonistic things like have women dancing damn near naked on stage in cages.. and how they could get crazy stupid drunk and tell everyone to 'fight for their right to party'..etc When the script was flipped and Black rap acts did similar things the penalties were severe and swift. I recall how Run DMC back in the days were considered hardcore rappers who invited trouble while the Beasties were classified as fun loving, wild and zanny. Why was that? Was it white privilege or just a whole other vibe that they brought to the table? This is not meant to dis the Beastie Boys .. but they are the most glaring example of what I'm speaking about- a double standard. Have things changed or are they still the same? Will a white rapper doing a drive by in a song be seen as a gangsta rapper or just a 'rebel' with a cause?

The response to the column was swift. Over twenty-five letters were listed that discussed racism in the media and the importance of focusing on skills and

relevance rather than race. When skill and relevance to his region and his audience was considered, Eminem proved to be a novelty act who has rapping skills and may in time become a true artist.

One Nation Crossing a Groove

In many respects, hip hop has done more to crystallize a young, urban African American identity than any other historic and political change. While the civil rights and Black Power struggles of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s may have introduced the promise of a united, culturally, politically and linguistically homogeneous African American community, hip hop members boldly and brazenly argue for the “real” in relation to regional and local identities. In its early stages, hip hop lyrics were largely related to the beat, sound and rhythm generated by DJs. As MCs became more of a focus, hip hop began to identify local membership, describing and naming neighborhoods, public transportation systems, highways, etc. Since The East coast (or East Side) was the birth place of hip hop, its urban terrain became common knowledge among hip hop members and the center of African American urban culture. Not only did members learn about the Bronx, Bedford Stuyvesant (Bedstuy) and Harlem, but also Hollis, New Jersey, Jamaica, Queens and avenues and streets like Houston, etc. Through hip hop artistry, the local descriptions of East Coast areas were like a demographer’s and cartographer’s dream. But on the West Side of the U.S., signs of simmering hip hop artists’

desire for recognition as major contributors and innovators began to penetrate the hip hop community. While the 1987 release of Ice T's debut album *Rhyme Pays* introduced hip hop audiences to Los Angeles' youth gang world view, it only hinted at things to come. After all Los Angeles, having unseated Chicago and been crowned the second most populated U.S. city by the 1990 census, was also experiencing an unprecedented black exodus to suburbs and other parts of the U.S..

In a city where cultural variation and bilingualism are mainstays of working class communities, the construction and foregrounding of Los Angeles symbols and metaphors guaranteed an ebullient, and sometimes menacing, youthful African American presence. The ultimate emergence of the West as not simply imitators and students of East Coast hip hop introduced a new development in hip hop culture. The nature and extent of the change was not fully clear until 1989, when N.W.A. introduced their album *Straight Outta Compton*, effectively placing California and Southern California in particular, on the hip hop map. Suddenly, cities like Los Angeles, Compton, Inglewood, Longbeach, , El Segundo, Oakland and streets such as Slauson, Roscrans and Crenshaw established the West Coast as distinct from the East in terms of geography and social and cultural influences. For the first time, the hip hop community had to consciously address whether the emergence of different regional styles, constituted a split in the hip hop nation. As both coasts asserted their right to define hip hop,

distinct identities and performance style shifts began to emerge which further instantiated regional differences. These shifts included music sampling (cf. Rose 1994) and conscious language style choices. Yet instead of becoming more vulnerable in the midst of rap battles and negative media hype, the hip hop world became stronger through the dominance of family and crew affiliation.

The Hip Hop Crew

The hip hop world is comprised of a range of artists who are often grouped according to performance style, crew or house affiliation (e.g. Flavor Unit, Da Lench Mob, Wu Tang Clan), and by whether they reside on the East or West coast of the US. Style in hip hop may refer to the content of the rap, how the message is delivered (speed, quality of pitch or tone across syllables and phrases, etc.) and the audience for whom the message is intended. Until recently, the music sampled as background to raps was used without permission or credit on hip hop recordings (Rose 1994, Wheeler 1992). In contrast, sanctions have always been placed on performers who use raps or phrases, without recognizing or acknowledging the author. Consequently, artists usually mention other performers and those who influence them in their raps. The recognition of influences: ***giving props , representin' , recognizin'***, as well as exposing artists who do not acknowledge the source of their materials, is accomplished by directly stating the name of a person or group during a rap and/or using another artists words or phrases who belong

to the same crew. This often includes the use of simile and metaphor, which requires “local” hip hop knowledge in order to be understood. Local knowledge includes lived experiences as well as familiarity with popular culture. For instance, the use of the word “CREAM” indicates both respect for the group who originated the term (the Wu Tang Clan) and its meaning (Cash Rules Everything Around Me). DeBerry (1995) suggests three functions accomplished through simile in props. First, it indexes an artist as a member of the urban community and/or a crew. Secondly, it serves as a mechanism to display rapper’s wit and/or lyrical ability, especially used in freestyle sessions. Finally, it can be used to exhibit levels of pedantic knowledge unparalleled by competitors (DeBerry 1995). All artistic styles are influenced by the distinction between the East and West coasts or “sides” of the country and are constructed within a basic language ideology that can be loosely described as: (1) regularize dominant American English features, (2) highlight AAE and working class regional features and (3) cast lexical havoc.

The solidification of the hip hop crew as a family/business unit ushered in an era of artistic and cultural stability in the hip hop community. It includes an African American cultural system based on fictive kinship ties and loyalties that are economical, emotional and social. Within urban youth culture, many of its practices are based on black extended family roles and relationships where family members rely on elders for knowledge, wisdom and emotional and economic support. In the case of hip hop, the artists are

expected to represent his or her crew and audience on all occasions. If there is a failure to do so, there is a crisis in the 'family' that must be resolved by many members. Many artistic crews have neighborhood crews and friendship who emulate them. These crews operate as close social networks, offering support that is based on loyalty and respect.

An artist's membership in a crew enables audiences to quickly understand the artist's role and status within hip hop culture. The artistic head of most crews are influential artists and/or producers in hip hop (e.g. Dr. Dre, Jermain Dupree, Queen Latifah, Puffy). The head of the crew assists and protects new artists who join the crew and ensures that all members of the crew are employed. Crews also offer artists support in terms of production and protection from unscrupulous record companies and other crews who compete within the same market. Members are expected to be loyal to their crew and protect and "represent" each other (cf. DeBerry 1995).

Originally, crews were identified by the types of music and sounds they sampled, dress and rap styles. They were often based on childhood or family ties (e.g. Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, Flavor Unit). When NWA introduced Westcoast gangsta' rap, membership was based solely on a notion of street gang loyalty to the group. Any failure to *represent* was seen as an attack on the group. This trend was reversed or at least marginalized with the overall impact of the success of the Wu Tang Clan and the Shaolin family (Table 1).

Though other groups were allowing members to perform with other artists who were not in the immediate crew or family, Wu Tang members fought for the right to have control over their own group as well as the right to perform outside of the group without being disowned. Besides focusing on performance skills and loyalty, Wu Tang members were very concerned with profit. Their philosophy meant that The Wu could succeed as individuals and as members. Urban youth who looked to the hip hop community for leadership began emulating a family that supported members and encouraged individual goals. New groups like The Fugees, the Goodie Mob and the aging of rappers like LL Cool J supported the new definition of the hip hop community. Thus the notion of a family and squad evolved and new members were introduced as a guest on artist's recordings with the expectation that the crew would help with a solo career.

Table 1
SHAOLIN FAMILY

GROUPS

MEMBERS:

Wu-Tang Clan

Prince Rakeem "The Rza"
The Method Man
U-God
Rebel Ins
Shallah Raekwon
Ghost Face Killer
Ol' Dirty Bastard
The Genius "Tha Gza"
Inspectah Deck

N-Tyce

N-Tyce

Shyheim

Shyheim

Gravediggaz

Prince Paul
Prince Rakeem "The Rza"
Frukwan
Poetic

Method Man

The Method Man

The Genius

The Genius "Tha Gza"

Ol Dirty Bastard

Ol' Dirty Bastard

King Just

King Just

Genius/Gza

The Genius "Tha Gza"

Raekwon

Shallah Raekwon
Ghost Face Killer

Ghostface Killer:

Ghost Face Killer

Cappadonna

Cappadonna

Confronting Racism in the Hip Hop Nation

Many artists are known for their political honesty and confronting racism and social injustice. These include KRS-One, Tupac, Tribe Called Quest, Yo Yo, MC Lyte, Queen Latifah and Ice Cube. In general, reference to racial discrimination and injustice are embedded in raps of poverty (e.g. “Ghetto Bastard” above) and economic injustice, police harassment, and adult bigotry. Descriptions of injustice and resistance exist on local and national levels. Though his recordings vary in theme, Ice Cube represents many of contradictions faced by artists who must display writing, oral style and skill while promoting ideologies that are often contradictory. On the one hand, Ice Cube explains the condition of African American urban youth and the toll relentless casual attacks take on them:

It’s hard to be black in America. Look at all the images that run across us, from television, school, just everything in general. It’s hard. You got to fight to love yourself. They put everybody in such a bad light... It’s mainly their fault, our self-hate. We got to fight to really love ourselves. (hooks 1994)

Yet this viewpoint seldom appears in rap lyrics as a linear, moralistic tale. Rather, injustice and hypocrisy are constructed as absolute truths within the portrayal of a character, whether a menace to society or not. For example, Ice Cube’s (1990) concept album that features an urban gangster on a rampage, *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, includes several episodes of a heartless,

violent gangster wrecking havoc on Black urban America while occasionally providing a scathing critique of sexism, racism and injustice.

I think back when I was robbin' my own kind
The police didn't pay it no mind
But when I start robbin' the white folks
Now I'm in the pen with the soap-on-a-rope
I said it before and I'll still taunt it
Every motherfucker with a color is most wanted
("AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted")

You wanna sweep a nigga like me up under the rug
Kicking shit called street knowledge
Why more niggas in the pen than in college?
Now cause of that line I might be your cellmate
That's from the nigga ya love to hate
("The Nigga Ya Love to Hate")

In 1991, Ice Cube dispensed with attempts to politicize racial injustice and in his release Death Certificate exploited local racial conflicts between Korean grocers and Black youth through explicit stereotypical language and symbols.

So don't follow me, up and down your market
Or your little chop suey ass'll be a target
Of the nationwide boycott
Juice with the people, that's what the boy got
So pay respect to the black fist
Or we'll burn your store, right down to a crisp
And then we'll see ya!
Cause you can't turn the ghetto - into Black Korea
(Black Korea)

While Ice Cube, African American community representatives and Korean merchants lobbed charges of censorship and bigotry, only a few Asian Americans in the hip hop audience protested or participated in the resolution

of the conflict (c.f. Chang, Jeff 1993). Within months of the song's release, Ice Cube issued an apology to avert a boycott of products he promoted by Korean storeowners who control convenience stores in South Central Los Angeles.

Conclusion

African American youth in urban centers rely on the hip hop community for representation and education. In this respect, the new Black urban community is both a "normal" community and an exceptional one. The hip hop community represents one of the most innovative and significant cultural developments of this millennium. It has these distinctions for several reasons. First, in terms of "local culture", the hip hop community effectively developed in self-defense to fend off a dominant culture which had at once abandoned and rejected the urban poor while blaming all of the problems of youth on youth themselves. Young African Americans responded by turning to each other and establishing institutions and adopting a code of behavior, developing a product, marketing it and thereby symbolically rejecting dominant society in the process. That is, their response was a capitalist one. Hip hop became the way for numerous young men and women to have financial success while remaining relevant to and involved in their communities. Yet the verbal expression used for hip hop's form of capitalism: "getting paid" and "making dollars" transforms typical descriptions of advanced capitalism - since how one gets paid determines whether a pay day

exists at all. A hip hop artist's economic success is directly related to representing the portion of American society temporarily or permanently outside of the privileges and rights of the capitalist society. It is therefore not surprising that the hip hop community becomes fratricidal whenever artists and other members cease in their representation of urban African American life. It is this ethic of representin' and recognizin' the realities of urban African American experience which drives hip hop's international appeal. As a truth serum, it is an elixir to youth and the marginalized throughout the world because the introduction of rhythmic talk over various beats, especially when those beats and sounds are themselves iconic, signals that the message is either a political, counter-cultural or veracious one.

Hip hop's second distinction involves the use of language and the body to mediate and construct a present which considers the social and historicized moment as both a transitory and stable place. It is this particular energy which attracts new generations of youth who study the history of hip hop and 'recognize' by interpreting and giving props and through crew affiliations, the use of metaphors, etc. The constant re-working of language style and body 'gear' provides a canvass on which youth can experiment with each new generation of members. Due to its own self-statement as "real" in urban America, hip hop is also a forum where young women can 'represent' and wage their version of feminist battles exploring the edges and center of the power, marginalization, objectification and desire. Thus, unlike much of American

throw-away popular culture, hip hop celebrates both memory and the moment. In so doing, it offers a political and social analysis which, though too often simplistic, maintains a youth consciousness that cries out to dominant society and the world.

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¹ By this I mean African American linguistic ideology which assumes that each locality establishes its own system of word logic (semantic and morphophonemic) and reference to represent particular localities

² This can create problems of representation. Youth in these regions often feel as though they are ignored. During times when all regions are represented, social and political leadership often emerges from the Southern U.S.