VIACOM AS A FIREARM?
PROGRESSIVE HIP-HOP LYRICS, THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS,
AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

By

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To the idea that music . . . may be more than "just music"

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It does not require a Ph.D. in sociology to recognize that my completion of this milestone would have been impossible without the love, support, and guidance of some very, very special people. I hope that my successes, achievements, and progression to this pinnacle of my educational career stand as tributes to those who have inspired and assisted me along my journey. I would like to use this space to mention some of these people.

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PROGRESSIVE HIP-HOP LYRICS, THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS,
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By

Steven M. Jacobs

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Chair: Monika Ardelt
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This project considers potential implications of the culture industry on critical

representations of social life in the lyrics of contemporary progressive hip-hop songs.

Taking seriously the premise that hip-hop lyrics may act as a site of social problems

claims-making activity, I explore the relationship between the culture industry and

claims-making by conducting a comparative analysis on how social problems are

represented in the lyrics of music produced by both independent recording companies

and the "Big Four" consolidated corporate music groups that control the vast majority of

popular music in the United States.

In both groups of lyrics, a largely analogous conflict theory-esque "us against

them" account of social life emerges. However, a close analysis of the representations

of this narrative reveals that the most specific, nuanced, and overtly subversive claims

tend to be characteristic of the independent analysis group whereas claims of the

corporate analysis group tend to be more general, vague, and ambiguous. I found that

despite evidence of select instances of filtering of subversive and inflammatory

messages from lyrics of the corporate analysis group, critical messages are generally

not so much filtered from the corporately-produced music, but rather the harshest points of these messages are subdued.

Although claims of the corporate analysis group are presented as legitimate critique, my analysis reveals that these claims suggest an acceptably palatable form of critique conducive to mainstream consumption. This conclusion empirically supports Marcuse's assertion that the commodification of critical thought in contemporary society offers merely the illusion of genuine critique. I conclude by weighing the benefits of social problems claims-making in the corporate analysis group, which should be understood as a limited form of critique but one that is more likely to reach the masses and claims of the independent analysis group, which are able to be more fully represented as authentic, legitimate, and artistically free.

CHAPTER 1
REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATIVE

Purpose of this Project

Before I locate this work within the literature, I will first briefly describe how and why I came to choose to pursue this particular project. In hindsight, it is clear to me that long before I had ever heard of the field of sociology, I was always attracted to music characterized by lyrics that were embedded with sociological ideas. Via the voices throughout such music, I became aware of issues affecting the life experiences within various scenes and subcultures.

I was first exposed to hip-hop music in the late 1980's and early 1990's through commercial radio stations and music video channels, and I paid it cursory attention. Then I heard Tupac. The music of Tupac Shakur shattered the invisible, white upper-middle class bubble of ignorance that I was living comfortably within. In their lyrics, Tupac and others offered me profound sociologically flavored arguments and critiques of contemporary society while describing experiences of poverty, violence, racism, and police brutality which I had neither experienced nor previously learned about. Looking back, rappers' voices were initial catalysts for the development of my sociological imagination, and their lyrics planted seeds in my mind that eventually grew into trees of a greater and more nuanced understanding of social life.

I chose to focus on contemporary progressive hip-hop music in this project because it represents an, if not *the*, ideal site to explore a topic of great interest to me: the relationship between resistant popular music and the culture industries. The

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Note: The title of this dissertation is a direct reference to the lyric "I use Viacom as my firearm" from a Nas song ("Sly Fox," 2008) which addresses a central question of this project.

question at the heart of this project considers the implications that being produced by increasingly consolidated, multi-national music conglomerates has on how social problems are represented in the lyrics of this music. This question is of particular relevance to hip-hop music—music that, as has been extensively noted, has undergone radical shifts in imagery, themes, and lyrics paralleling its cooption by the major music groups.

I approach hip-hop music and culture as an outsider. Whereas in a sense I am actively participating in hip-hop by the very nature of this project, I do not identify as a part of hip-hop culture, the Hip-Hop Nation, or the Hip-Hop Generation. By locating this work in a historical context, I recognize the somewhat dangerous ground that I am walking by "studying hip-hop." Let me state at the outset that in this project, I humbly and respectfully engage the contested terrain that is hip-hop with the interests of adding to the conversations of hip-hop scholarship, promoting the perceived legitimacy of hip-hop as a form of cultural expression employed by a historically marginalized social group, and providing a forum to consider their oft-unheard voices and invisible experiences.

The Social Construction of Social Problems

Introduction

Some recent work in the study of social problems argues for a paradigm shift from an objectivist to a constructionist approach (Ibarra and Kitsuse, 1993) with respect to social problems. Spector and Kitsuse (1977)'s seminal work critiques normative, objectivist uses of the term "social problems" as an analytic category. Rather than beginning with the assumption that social problems are universally agreed-upon "bad" social phenomena with objectively defined criteria that well trained sociologists can

learn to recognize and uncover (the field of social problems), Spector and Kitsuse's perspective pushes us to consider how and why a particular set of conditions comes to be recognized as a social problem. Thus, constructionists who study social problems offer not "a rival explanation for a commonly defined subject matter" but rather "argue for a different subject matter for the sociology of social problems" (Ibarra and Kitsuse, 1993, p. 39).

Constructionists argue that normative definitions of social problems and the examples of social problems that constitute the chapters of most social problems textbooks beg the questions of how and why particular social problems such as racism, stratification, and sexism come to be recognized and institutionalized within sociology as social problems. Thus, the constructionist perspective posits that as a field, social problems is not about objectively reflecting society but rather about how this mirror is subjectively constructed. Social problems "should not be viewed as a type of social condition, but as a process of responding to social conditions" (Best, 2008). Constructionist work focuses on how particular people from various social contexts react to and frame particular sets of social conditions as social problems. It is in this reaction to social conditions by particular actors that we may study the process of construction. The project that Spector and Kitsuse push us towards may be better described as the sociology of social problems rather than the mere study of social problems.

Social problems from the constructionist perspective explores "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievance and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977, p. 75). Tantamount to the study of the

construction of social problems is this process of asserting grievances and claims, or claims-making, in which actors attempt to raise awareness about a particular situation by promoting it as an important issue that needs to be addressed and framing it as a social problem. Claims-makers have been typically understood as activists who make arguments about particular problems that need to be addressed (Best, 2008). These people attempt to persuade a particular audience that a particular situation is a social problem and how to think about this issue.

Some scholars (Ibarra and Kitsuse, 1993) in their reactions against functionalism argue for a strict constructionism that focuses attention solely on the discursive claims-making process divorced from the objective conditions of their respective social worlds. Others (Best, 1995; Weinberg, 2009) argue that it is both limiting and impossible to consider claims-making activities outside of our knowledge about the social contexts from which they emerge and call for a contextual constructionism. Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) push us to consider what they call "claims-making styles" and explore the diversity of these styles as a research agenda to expand our understanding of what counts as claims-making activity.

"Claims-Making from the Underside"

Consideration of the diversity of claims-making styles has become particularly important for sociologists of social problems to explore with respect to marginalized social groups. Scholars have recently begun to focus on institutionally unrepresented groups of people whose understandings of social life have been marginalized and how these groups attempt to make their claims visible in light of hegemonic discourse (Miller, 1993). Scholars recognize that talking about social problems can be done in a number of ways and that various communities of people use different avenues to express their

takes on social problems. Yet, through the processes by which some techniques of claims-making are considered to be normative and thus legitimate, others are discounted and thus silenced (Miller, 1993). Thus, social problems scholars from the constructionist perspective raise the very important question of what counts as a claim and "proper" claims-making activity while considering that failure to acknowledge the legitimacy of certain techniques of claims-making among groups with little social power results in the continued marginalization of these groups' voices.

Channeling Foucault's recommendation to consider the voice of the other (Foucault, 2006) Miller pushes us to "reinstate these inaudible speakers as claimants" (1993, p. 156) and consider poststructuralist insights concerning power which highlight focusing on "ways of saying and knowing that have been silenced or discredited by dominant discourses and practices" (p. 156). Miller pushes us to recognize that the dismissal of an assertion of some sort as not being a legitimate form of claims-making is performed from a privileged position within a dominant discourse, and she hopes to expand our understandings of what constitutes legitimate claims-making.
It is interesting to consider hip-hop song lyrics in terms of what Miller calls claims-making from the underside.

However, Best (2008) argues that presentations of social problems in popular culture are limited because 1) the presentation of social problems must conform to the conventions expected by the audience of a particular genre and 2) the presentation of a social problem tends to highlight the struggles of particular individuals rather than widespread, systemic problems. I would argue that these general critiques of the construction of social problems in popular culture are not as relevant for hip-hop music.

For Best's first point, I would argue that socio-political critique and claims-making activity is a convention of (some, particularly "conscious" varieties of) hip-hop music. For Best's second point, I turn to scholars of hip-hop music and culture such as Perry (2004) who argue that hip-hop is characterized by a celebration of Me and We, not You, and rappers seeming depictions of their own personal, isolated experiences (Me) often stand in for the experience of a community (We).

Furthermore, the importance of critical song lyrics tends to be generally downplayed by sociologists of music (Weinstein, 2006; Frith, 1996; Frith, 2007). Indeed, there is no shortage of critique among sociologists of music with regard to focusing on song lyrics as an object of empirical analysis. These critiques highlight numerous potentially problematic implications of analyzing song lyrics. Consider some of the primary such critiques: (1) An audience often pays little attention to lyrics because the accompanying music is more important and takes precedence (Weinstein, 2006; Frith, 1996); (2) It is not the particular words an artist vocalizes that are important, but rather it is the passion, emotion, and feeling that characterize the way in which the words are vocalized (Frith, 2007; Frith, 1997b); (3) The meaning of lyrics of a particular piece of music is fundamentally intertwined with—and thus cannot be decontextualized from—the accompanying music (Weinstein, 2006); (4) Lyrics are heard as disjointed phrases and not full texts, and as such lyrics represent slogans not arguments (Frith, 1997b); (5) Song lyrics are notorious for mondegreens, or unintentional, incorrect hearings of lyrics (Weinstein, 2006); and (6) There is no guarantee that lyrics will be interpreted in accordance with an artist's intentions—song lyrics are often misunderstood and reappropriated (Weinstein, 2006).

For such critiques relating to taking the lyrics of popular music songs too seriously, I argue that these points are overly general and not as relevant to socially conscious hip-hop lyrics. These lyrics, rooted in the historical tradition of black protest music, should be considered differently than rock and other genres of popular music. The lyrics of (some) hip-hop songs are of critical importance, and the purpose of these lyrics is to be heard (Ellison, 1989).

Of the aforementioned issues, meaning is the most problematic. To ask what is the meaning of a song is to ask a profoundly complicated and relative question. Consider the words of Radiohead's Thom Yorke: "I think that's the nature of good art, it should be interpreted and misinterpreted" (as cited in Weinstein, 2006, p.12). While there is always a subjective and interpretative engagement when a person listens to music, meaning is relative, and different audiences engage music differently (a fascinating area of study though beyond the scope of the current project) neither Yorke, Weinstein, or Frith are speaking about hip-hop music. I argue that socially conscious hip-hop lyrics, unlike some genres of music that feature more abstract, sometimes irrelevant lyrics that are meant to be subjectively interpreted and perhaps misunderstood, are unique in that they are characterized by more overt messages that are the focus of the art and are meant to be heard and understood in the black protest tradition.

Furthermore, it follows from Miller's insights that if we dismissively fail to consider hip-hop lyrics as a legitimate site of claims-making for institutionally underrepresented lower class inner-city black males, then we further marginalize and silence their perspectives. The voice of the other would remain inaudible. However, by following the

suggestion of Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) we can expand our understanding of the claims-making process by considering the lyrics of hip-hop songs along these lines.

The legitimacy of consideration of hip-hop music as a basis for academic research is buttressed by the legacy of British Cultural Studies and scholars who critique and reject the inherently pacifying and uncritical mass culture hypothesis of Adorno in favor of Gramscian hegemony theory, which not only leaves the door open for a space for resistance through cultural forms but actively focuses on resistance through culture. Using the insights of Williams, Hall, and others, scholars such as Mark Anthony Neal (2003b) note that like legendary figures in the history of black music such as Bob Marley and Fela Kuti many rappers can be conceptualized in terms of Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual. Neal argues that "[d]espite intense commodification, hip-hop culture has produced its own tradition of insurgent and organic intellectuals, who have used the ghetto pulpit—now firmly situated in the mainstream—as a means to speak the essence of a 'postworld' (postmodern, postsoul, post-civil rights, postindustrial, take your pick)" (2003a, p. xiii). Hip-hop stands as an emergent cultural form which challenges the dominant culture (Forman, 2004b).

Hip-Hop Music

Background

Hip-hop music, the contemporary manifestation of black popular music, is currently at an interesting point along its evolution from an organically emerging mix of party beats and "verbal gymnastics" (McQuillar, 2007, p. 5) of the ghettos of the South Bronx to a commodity produced and distributed by multinational media conglomerates. Despite its humble beginnings, hip-hop is considered by some (Kortaba & Vannini, 2009) to be the primary form of popular music not just within black youth culture but in

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the larger context of American popular culture. It is insightful to locate hip-hop music in

the historical tradition of American black popular music. There is a long history of social

commentary, critique, and resistance in various forms of music of the West African

diaspora in the Western Hemisphere. In the words of William McClendon, former

director of black studies at Reed College:

> Black music is a lasting symbol of sanity for black people . . . closely related
> to the spirit of resistance and struggle. . . . It is one of the effective modes
> of communication for conveying the messages of black abhorrence and
> resistance to the repressive living arrangements created for black people.
> Black music is an amalgam of black life . . . an indigenous expression of
> collective black experience (as cited in Ellison, 1989, p. 146).

What is generally termed black music, speaking to the enduring legacies of

slavery, colonialism, exploitation, and racism, is historically considered to have been a

voice of discontentment and vehicle of inspiration among marginalized cultures

descended from West Africa (Ellison, 1989). Ellison argues that "[b]lack music has

been a collective cry of discontent for as long as there have been situations and

conditions in need of change" (Ellison, 1989, p. 145). Rose adds that "Black music has

played an extraordinary role in the history of black people and in the world" and "has

helped black people to protect, nourish, and empower themselves, and to resist forces

operating against their freedoms" (2008, p. 264). McQuillar (2007) agrees that music

has always been used by African-Americans to voice opposition and adds that their

messages of resistance and defiance became more coded or more overt depending on

the particulars of the political climate.

A racial group that has been historically systematically excluded from

institutionalized socio-political discourse, black Americans have often turned to other

areas of social life to express themselves, such as music. In fact, Ellison (1989) argues

that music, not politics, has historically provided the real voice of black America. Love (2006) agrees that African-American music is political and that both African-American protest and celebration can be heard in the music. In fact, African-American protest and African-American music are so intertwined that she questions a clearly defined music/politics separation and argues for a more expansive definition of politics that includes rhetorical and musical expression. African-Americans use music to "supplant speech, sustain tradition, and reclaim body and soul from an oppression that refutes categorization as political, economic, or cultural, a system in which they—their people— were quite 'literally' property" (Love, 2006, p. 92).

A key feature of hip-hop music over the years is that, embodying the black music tradition handed down from West Africa, the music acts in some ways as the communal voice of an oppressed people (Ellison, 1989). We may trace the evolution of a historical conversation from the blues to jazz to R&B/soul to funk to hip-hop (Ellison, 1989). Accordingly, hip-hop's roots are music that was politically engaged and socially critical.

Socio-Historical Context of Hip-Hop's Emergence

The early years

Much has been written about the emergence and rise of hip-hop culture and music (Dyson, 2004a; Perry, 2004; Keyes, 2002; Rose, 1994). There is a general consensus among scholars that hip-hop music emerged in the 1970's in the South Bronx, NY. The South Bronx in the 1970's was an area that has been described as an "urban wasteland" in which "gangs of New York youth were encased in what could only be described as a war zone" (Henderson, 1996, p. 311). This decaying section of New York City characterized by disillusionment, alienation, and social isolation (Rose, 1994) was adversely affected by postindustrial changes, rising economic inequality which

disproportionately negatively impacted inner-city communities of color, and the creation

of "the ghetto" as a real socio-spacial entity.

A number of structural changes had significant dire consequences on communities

of color in the South Bronx. Changes in educational and housing policies

institutionalized poverty and concentrated the black and Latino underclass into isolated,

urban pockets (Keyes, 2002). Meanwhile, social programs, services, and recreational

spaces were increasingly eliminated. As developers bought up real estate to be

converted into luxury housing (Rose, 1994), public housing began to serve as

permanent homes for the underclass, rather than acting in its initial purpose as a

temporary stay for people while experiencing tough times.

The South Bronx was a site of so-called "white flight" in which more economically

advantaged white communities (and their jobs) began to leave the neglected inner cities

for suburbs, where most federal money allocated to inner-city public housing was

transferred to housing construction, leaving behind an increasingly black and Latino

underclass (Keyes, 2002). The industrial jobs that supported black people in the post-

World War 2 years were increasingly outsourced to populations overseas and in prisons

(Asante, 2008). The deterioration of living conditions in the South Bronx was

exacerbated by so-called "urban renewal" (according to M. K. Asante (2008), referred to

as "nigger removal" behind closed doors) projects that supported the interest of the

upper classes at the expense of the poor (Rose, 1994) as communities of color were

displaced for construction. One defining urban renewal project that changed the face of

Bronx neighborhoods was the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. As soon as

plans to build this major highway through the Bronx were announced, European-

American communities began to vacate this part of the city and were replaced by black and Latino communities. Construction of this highway went directly through communities of color.

The remaining neighborhoods in the South Bronx began to decay, and property values plummeted because of their proximity to the new highway. Landlords neglected upkeep on these apartment buildings, and some even intentionally burned down apartments for insurance money as evidenced by unusually large number of fires in the first half of the 1970s (Keyes, 2002). As conditions in the South Bronx worsened, legitimate means of employment evaporated, poverty grew, and crime and violence escalated. The South Bronx became one of the major hubs of street gang activity, who battled for territory and control of the neighborhoods (Keyes, 2002).

Hip-hop emerged as a cultural movement of youth of color amid this postindustrial urban darkness and chaos. However, before discussing the emergence of hip-hop, it is first important to draw a distinction between the terms "hip-hop" and "rap," note the criticism of those who use the terms interchangeably, and point out the often contested distinction between the two terms (Krims, 2000). Krims and others (Rose, 1994) explain that the primary distinction between the two terms is that hip-hop refers to a broader, marginalized cultural movement of which rap music is but one form of expression. Also within hip-hop culture and preceding rap music in their manifestations were DJing, b-boying (break-dancing), tagging (graffiti), and associated styles of language and dress.

Thus, rap music can be considered a type of music created within (and eventually outside of) hip-hop culture. Presently, the term "rap" is often invoked for music that is commercialized and commodified whereas the term "hip-hop" is held out what is "real"

and maintains authentic ties to historical hip-hop culture (Krims, 2000). In the words of early influential hip-hop DJ Afrika Bambaataa, "Most people today, they can't even define in words, hip-hop. They don't know the whole culture behind it" (George, 2004, p. 46).

So interestingly, we can speak of rap music that is not necessarily hip-hop music, and "hip-hop" rhythm & blues and soul music that is not necessarily rap music (Krims, 2000) insofar as the music is or is not a genuine expression of hip-hop culture. Consider the distinction drawn by influential rapper KRS-One:

> Rap is the verbal expression of an inner-city culture known as Hiphop. Hiphop is an empowering identity, a behavior, an attitude. Hiphop is created when inner-city youth can find no external expression that accurately defines their mentality. Hiphop is the mental activity of oppressed creativity. Hiphop is not a theory and you cannot do Hiphop. Oppressed urban youth living in the ghettos of America are Hiphop. Rap is something you do; Hiphop is something you live (KRS-One, 2003, p. 211).

This hip-hop culture blossomed in the South Bronx during the 1970s. Otherwise condemned, disempowered, and invisible Black and Latino youth took to expressing themselves through graffiti, breakdancing, and eventually rap music, which are the three principle activities which characterized early hip-hop culture (Rose, 1994). Based on the model of Caribbean soundsystems, Jamaican DJs such as DJ Kool Herc provided music for nighttime parties in the South Bronx. These DJs introduced the beats that would become the backing tracks for rap music as they pioneered the art form of taking two turntables, each with a copy of the same record, and looping the instrumental breaks of the hits of popular black artists such as James Brown. Meanwhile, at these gatherings B-boys and b-girls would "break" dance to the DJs' music.

Eventually, the earliest rappers, or MCs, acted as emcees in the conventional sense, speaking over the DJs' beats and hyping the individual DJs or the hosts of the

party. Over time, the MCs began to move more and more to the forefront of the music, and these MCs would challenge each other verbally for the opportunity to maintain possession of the microphone. Rapping over the beats began to flourish as a way for young inner city youth of color to "inscribe one's identity on an environment that seemed Teflon resistant to its young people of color; an environment that made legitimate avenues for material and social participation inaccessible" (Rose, 1994, p. 59-60). Thus, the creation and performance of rap music became a form of empowerment for inner-city youth of color. This experience of living on the margins of postindustrial America is fundamentally intertwined with hip-hop music.

Since the man credited with birthing hip-hop music was a Jamaican who implemented Jamaican DJ techniques of a Jamaican musical style, and many Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latino and Caribbean people were part of early hip-hop music and culture, scholars debate the African-Americanness of hip-hop's origins. Some see hip-hop as more of a trans-Atlantic cultural form connecting Africa, North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean (Gilroy, 1993) whereas others argue that hip-hop is a distinctly African-American (Perry, 2004) cultural form. At any event, hip-hop music is and has been a defining aspect of contemporary American black urban culture. Rappers have been said to have a greater command on the attention of black youth than athletes, entertainers, politicians, teachers, and ministers (Kitwana, 1994) while their music "retains its close ties to the poorest and least represented members of the black community" (Rose, 1994, p. 183).

Reaganomics and the development of hip-hop's "conscious"-ness

Numerous policy decisions and happenings during the 1980s further decimated inner-city black communities, leaving residents confronting what Kubrin (2005) refers to

as extreme concentrated disadvantage characterized by the effects of poverty, unemployment, family disruption, and isolation from mainstream America. The consequences of a shift from a manufacturing to service economy since late 1960's continued to manifest in ways devastating to increasing impoverished, increasingly black inner-city communities. Reaganomics slashed more social programs and services that had benefitted the poor. These economic policies promoted increasing economic inequality, and while the rich became richer the poor became poorer (McQuillar, 2007). While youth unemployment was static between 1965 and 1990, black youth unemployment quadrupled during this time period (Walser, 2003). Poor, inner-city people of color were confronted with a limited opportunity structure and a scarcity of legitimate avenues for success. These people often turned to illegal means such as theft and drug dealing to prosper in this context.

Criminal activity stemming from a lack of legitimate avenues for success in "the ghetto" was confounded by criminal justice policies increasingly punitive since 1980 and the introduction of mandatory minimum sentencing and three-strikes you're out policies. These policies all disproportionately adversely affected inner-city communities of color amid claims that racism had become institutionalized in the criminal justice system (Chambliss, 1994). Consider that "[t]he level of violent crime is virtually identical for black and white populations, but three times as many black people are arrested for committing the same crimes. 13 per cent of US Americans are black, and 13 per cent of drug users are black, yet African Americans somehow earn 43 per cent of the drug felony convictions and serve 78 per cent of the prison time for such offences" (Walser, 2003, p. 31).

Incarceration rates for blacks in 1990 (1,860 per 100,000) were nearly seven times higher than those for whites (289 per 100,000) (Jankowski, 1992), and one in three African-American men in their twenties was incarcerated, on probation, or on parole on any given day (Mauer and Huling, 1995). Increasingly, it became natural and normal for black men to wind up in jail (Dyson, 2007). Furthermore, "police departments across the nation have policed the urban underclass ghetto with a vigilance that would create political revolution were the same tactics and policies implemented in middle-class communities" (Kubrin, 2005, p. 437). Unsurprisingly, although disadvantaged black communities are perhaps those most in need of police protection, residents in these communities tend to view the police with the most ambivalence (Kubrin, 2005). Assuming dishonesty on the part of police officers, these residents tend to avoid the police and refrain from assisting investigations (Anderson, 1999).

The rise of crack cocaine in the 1980s had devastating effects on inner-city black communities (Neal, 2004). Crack contributed to the destruction of communal relations within black communities through the spread of addiction to crack, as well as increased black-on-black crime resulting from the nature of the black-market drug economy in a social context largely devoid of legitimate avenues for success (Neal, 2004). Inequalities in cocaine sentencing for powder, disproportionately used by upper/middle class whites, and crack, disproportionately used by lower class people of color (a one hundredth of the amount of powder cocaine became required to net the same mandatory minimum sentence) further contributed to the imprisonment of black men and associated dire consequences on black families (Sabet, 2005).

In these dire conditions presenting inner-city black communities with previously unseen challenges in African-American life (Kubrin, 2005), hip-hop music continued to flourish and began to speak to these conditions. Despite the "subhuman" (McQuillar, 2007, p. 4) living conditions of the South Bronx, the lyrics of most early rappers focused on "verbal gymnastics" (McQuillar, 2007, p. 5) and the call-and-response West African tradition that has characterized American black popular music. The focus of the earliest rappers was on competition and keeping the party going. However, as conditions in the ghetto worsened, a few influential rap groups and Afrocentric organizations pushed hip-hop's development and evolution towards addressing grim realities of the black ghetto experience.

In groundbreaking "message" songs such as their watershed track "The Message" (Forman, 2004a), Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five depicted "the hues of dark social misery and stains of profound urban catastrophe" (Dyson, 2004a, p. 61-62) over a hip-hop beat as they pioneered music that combined social critique and cultural expression within impoverished black inner city communities. The release of "The Message" and other songs by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five such as "New York, New York" is considered to be a watershed moment in hip-hop history and is credited with inspiring a generation of rappers to present listeners with depictions of everyday ghetto realities in their lyrics. Socially conscious artists such as Run-DMC, Public Enemy, and KRS-One found commercial success by injecting their raps with uplifting messages ranging from black pride and empowerment to cultural resistance and social critique. According to S. Craig Watkins, such artists "embraced the notion

that they were real life intellectuals and made the pursuit of knowledge, at least

temporarily, a popular aspect of rap music (2005, p. 240)

In the late 1980's, controversial west coast "gangsta" rap further innovated music

that overtly brought to the forefront lyrics characterized by intense depictions of the

urban underclass experience of inner-city Los Angeles (Rose, 1994). Groups such as

N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude), "unlike their socially conscientious counterparts . . . have

no ethical remove from the violence, gangbangin', and drugs in L.A.'s inner city" (Dyson,

2004a, p. 65) vividly detail this context. Dyson calls their attitude "both one answer to,

and the logical outcome of, the violence, racism, and oppression in American culture"

(2004a, p. 65) though he challenges such groups to move beyond mere description and

develop an ethical perspective. Despite lacking the positive and uplifting messages of

other more socially conscious groups and instead containing violent and misogynistic

depictions, such gangsta rappers are credited with their raw, pioneering descriptions of

the brutality that characterized inner city life. Such early, pioneering hip-hop spoke to

young people in a unique way:

> This crew of hip-hop intellectuals recognized the movement's larger
> potential, the idea that popular media gave them and their communities
> precious air time. In the midst of their historic contributions to rap, they
> reconfirmed the idea that the genre could express a political point of view in
> the world of pop. As hip-hop's voice of New School consciousness, they
> embraced the notion that they were real life intellectuals and made the
> pursuit of knowledge, at least temporarily, a popular aspect of rap music.
> Whereas venerable organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League
> failed to fashion a political personality that excited young people, the
> bombastic style and rhymes cultivated by socially conscious rappers spoke
> to them with conviction, if not a program to realize their vision (Watkins,
> 2005, p. 240)

By the late 1980s, hip-hop had evolved into a complex and eclectic form of

expression, including a thriving space for hip-hop characterized by including uplifting

and resistant messages. However, it would be remiss to speak of the rise of uplifting, socially conscious, resistant, and Afrocentric hip-hop music without mentioning black nationalist/black empowerment organizations associated with early hip-hop culture that boasted affiliation with some of the most influential rappers of the time. One such group of particular importance was the religious group the Nation of Islam and a particular offshoot called the Nation of God and Earths (commonly known as the Five Percenters), founded by former Nation of Islam member Clarence 13X (McQuillar, 2007).

Throughout their history the Five Percenters have been a controversial organization that has been called a hate group (Miyakawa, 2005) and has been considered by the FBI to be a "street gang" (United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). The Five Percenters are characterized by "a black supremacist ideology which speaks directly to disenchanted youth" (Nuruddin, 1994, p. 110). The name of the organization stems from members' belief that 85% of the population is blind to the exploitation and propaganda that 10% of the population employs for its own profit and gain. They see themselves as the 5% of the population who are aware of the lost state of the 85% and the trickery of the 10% and dedicate themselves to teaching those who wish to know the "truth" (McQuillar, 2007).

A social organization associated with many early hip-hop acts was the Universal Zulu Nation. The Zulu Nation, "the single most enduring institution in hip-hop" (George, 2004, TTJ, p. 45), was founded by a DJ named Kevin Donovan, a reformed member of a New York City black street gang called the Black Spades who after a visit to Africa changed his name to Afrika Bambaataa and started this organization for communal black empowerment (McQuillar, 2007). Bambaataa dedicated himself to being a

positive force in his community and spreading a message of nonviolence to the youth (McQuillar, 2007). He organized events for ghetto youths and encouraged them to channel their anger from street violence and gang activity to artistic expression. The Zulu Nation continues to identify itself as an "International Hip Hop Awareness Movement" ("Universal Zulu Nation," n.d.) today.

Many of the top rappers of the time were associated with one of these groups. These associations are apparent through rappers' overt admissions, colors and symbols in their wardrobes, and organizational terminology embedded within song lyrics. The Five Percenters and the Zulu Nation helped to create a culture in which talking about the "subhuman" (McQuillar, 2007, p. 4) living conditions that characterized inner-city, African-American life was pushed to the forefront of musical creation. Some scholars (Dyson, 2007b; Gladney, 1995) note, in addition to these two black empowerment organizations, the influence of the legacy of the Black Arts Movement of the '60s on socially conscious hip-hop and locate hip-hop in the tradition of this cultural movement. Called the artistic wing of the Black Power movement and ignited by the death of Malcolm X, the Black Arts Movement represented an injection of African-American culture into the arts. This overtly political and socially engaged cultural production promoted activism within the Africa-American community.

During the period spanning the late 1980s and early 1990s hip-hop music grew in popularity and raised its profile within popular culture, kicking off what is considered to be the "golden age" of hip hop. Ignited by a few influential rappers and buttressed by black empowerment organizations, during this era "politically conscious rap music flowered that vociferously critiqued white supremacy, classism, and racial exploitation"

(Perry, 2004, p. 28). According to Michael Eric Dyson (2004a) "[a]s it evolved, rap began to describe and analyze the social, economic, and political factors that led to its emergence and development: drug addiction, police brutality, teen pregnancy, and various forms of material deprivation" (p. 61). Hip-hop music began to give voice to the everyday realities of ghetto life (Neal, 2004). Within a decade of its genesis, local hip-hop scenes developed beyond New York in inner-cities across the country that although characterized by their own unique nuances "link various regional postindustrial urban experiences of alienation, unemployment, police harassment, social, and economic isolation to their local and specific experience via hip-hop's language, style, and attitude" (Rose, 1994, p. 60).

Over the years, hip-hop music has been said to have acted as a form of artistic expression for a marginalized urban social bloc (Smith, 1997) while having "maintained a striking capacity for political insight and social critique" (Forman, 2004, p. 7). Keyes asserts that the Hip-Hop Nation sees rap music as "a tool for educating its audience and addressing its community's concerns" (2002, p. 185), and Powell (1991) argues that hip-hop music has historically provided informal education for adolescents extending beyond the confines of classrooms. Neal (2004) argues that the emergence of hip-hop "was represented of a concerted effort by youth urban blacks to use mass-culture to facilitate communal discourse across a fractured and dislocated and national community" (p. 371). In the words of Dyson (2004b, p. 410):

> Rap is a form of profound musical, cultural, and social creativity. It
> expresses the desire of young black people to reclaim their history,
> reactivate forms of black radicalism, and contest the powers of despair and
> economic depression that presently besiege the black community. Besides
> being the most powerful form of black musical expression today, rap
> projects a style of self into the world that generates forms of cultural

resistance and transforms the ugly terrain of ghetto existence into a searing portrait of life as it must be lived by millions of voiceless people. For that reason alone, rap deserves attention and should be taken seriously; and for its productive and healthy moments, it should be promoted as a worthy form of artistic expression and cultural projection and an enabling source of black juvenile and communal solidarity.

A defining characteristic of hip-hop music is the West African tradition of a commitment to meaningful lyrics that reflect individuals' responses not just to everyday life but also to more abstract social problems (Ellison, 1989). Ellison argues that black music engages topics such as human rights, freedom, equality, and political possibilities. Black people's human choices are "hinted at in the music, but they are explicitly explored in the words" (1989, p. 1). Perry locates hip-hop at the crossroads of black musical and literary traditions (2004). She asserts that "while the hip hop community refers to the poetry of the music as lyrics, it might better be described as verses and the subsections as stanzas" (2004, p. 33).

An important aspect of rap music that we must not lose sight of despite the ways in which progressive rappers may present constructions of social problems in their lyrics is the crucial point that rap music is music, characterized by aesthetics, poetry, and beats. As Glaude, Jr. (2010) is careful to point out, if we conceptualize a rapper's work solely in terms of the sociological and political messages, we miss out on the aesthetics of hip-hop, and the masterful wordsmithing, rhythmic dynamics, and talent that the artists have at the craft of rapping. Rap music is, after all, music.

That said, hip-hop artists themselves have recognized how hip-hop music may act as a forum for meaningful expression as Chuck D infamously called it "CNN for black America," KRS-ONE has referred to it as "edutainment," and Queen Latifah has said it can be "a newspaper that people read with their ears" (Kubrin, 2005, p. 433). As

Gladney cautions, "(f)ailing to analyze hip-hop lyrics and ideology critically and intellectually may lead one to dismiss an art form capable of transmitting ideas to a community in dire need of positive solutions" (1995, pp. 292-293).

Structural limitations?

Consider rapper Chuck D's metaphor of hip-hop music as the Black CNN. To what extent can hip-hop music be conceptualized as a news source? To what extent do (some) rappers act as reporters or journalists who document and report their inner-city experiences of poverty, alienation, and marginalization sprinkled with their editorial commentary? Perry and Negus each present an issue that complicates a conceptualization of rappers as simply documenting their experiences through their lyrics and must be considered along with rappers' presentations of their experiences.

While "keeping it real" and perceived authenticity in the streets is paramount to a rapper's legitimacy and success (Rose, 2004; Watkins, 2005), hip-hop lyrics are not to be read as completely autobiographical accounts. Perry (2004) cautions us that to interpret hip-hop music in realist terms as an expression of a rapper's experiences representative of his/her community and thus ripe for social scientific analysis is reductionistic. As a form of black performing arts, hip-hop is more complicated than simple autobiographical accounts. In taking all lyrical accounts completely literally, we risk mistaking a theatrical component of hip-hop as "real life." Just because a rapper depicts a particular experience does not mean that he or she necessarily lived this experience.

However, Perry also notes that "realism in hip-hop is an artistic format inextricably linked to the material conditions of black American urban communities" (2004, p. 88). Perry continues: "Being present for the ills of the ghetto and watching someone go

through the transformations of drug abuse, murder, poverty, and mental illness can be as traumatic as experiencing those things. Hip hop at once witness and testifies to certain events, whether or not the speaker participates in them. . . ." (2004, p. 88). Thus, although not every scene depicted in hip-hop lyrics is necessarily autobiographical in a strict sense of the word, the lyrics speak to the realities of a shared collective experience. As C. Wright Mills might observe, the problems they present are not just personal but are rooted in social realities. Glaude, Jr. (2010, p. 184) invokes the term "creative (re)presentation" to characterize the relationship between rappers as artists and their social contexts. Rappers' depictions of ghetto life may contain hyperbolic, stylized, and fictional accounts; however, these accounts are located in an actual experience that provides foundation for artistic, poetic creation.

Negus (2004) pushes us to locate hip-hop expression within the dynamics of the music industry. He argues that the music industry's management of hip-hop music makes the situation more complex than an understanding of hip-hop lyrics as purely a documentation of experiences. The music of most well-known rappers is produced and distributed by four consolidated corporate major recording labels: Sony, Universal, EMI, and Warner (the "Big Four"), subsidiaries of one of these groups, or seemingly independent labels that are owned or have distribution deals with one of these large music conglomerates. These four companies control 82 percent of the music market in the United States (Rose, 2008).

Despite hip-hop's roots in the streets and its ability to function as a voice for often invisible people, Negus (2004) warns that we need to be wary of the romanticized notion that rappers are iconoclasts who are operating outside of the mainstream,

corporate world. Considering rappers as reporters who document their experiences directly to the ears of their audiences verbatim fails to consider the role of the music industry in the music it produces, manages, and distributes. Negus argues that we must recognize that despite its claims of street authenticity, much of rap music maintains close corporate ties. To what extent is hip-hop music produced, promoted, and/or distributed an expression of "genuine" hip-hop culture, and to what extent is it an expression of corporate interests?

The Corporate Co-option

Hip-hop is currently an immensely popular form of popular culture and has even bypassed rock music as the primary form of popular music in our society (Kortaba & Vannini, 2009). Applying the insights of Gramsci's (1971) conceptualization of cultural hegemony, cultural theorists (Storey, 1999; Street, 1997) have observed that whenever a critical, rebellious, countercultural musical form emerges organically, there is an effort by the culture industries representing the dominant culture to co-opt it; protest music inevitably becomes commodified, sanitized of its subversive politics, and promoted solely for profit. The ramifications of this process coinciding with hip-hop's rise in popularity, particularly among suburban white youth who represent an estimated 70 to 75% of hip-hop music purchases, has been extensively explored and debated (Rose, 2008; Watkins, 2005).

The 1991 introduction of Soundscan as an accurate means for tabulating sales of recorded music illustrated that the market for hip-hop music was much larger than previously thought and middle-class white consumers were substantial (Watkins, 2005). From this point forward, "corporate hip-hop, though few would admit it, was manufactured first and foremost with young white consumers in mind" (Watkins, 2005,

p.96). Many scholars have observed the corresponding substantive changes in the

lyrical content of mainstream hip-hop music in the decade and a half following the

"golden age" of hip-hop (McQuillar, 2007; Rose, 2008) that not-so-coincidentally

coincided with the "corporate annexing" (Neal, 2004, p. 379) of hip-hop, or the purchase

of independent hip-hop record labels, signing of hip-hop artists, and promoting of hip-

hop music by white-owned corporate major recording labels and media companies.

Notably absent from this corporately produced hip-hop is the diversity of voices and

expression (including particularly the socially "conscious" and politically charged ones

but also more avant garde varieties) that had comprised hip-hop music during the 1980s

and early 1990s. Consider the words of former president of pioneering hip-hop

recording label Def Jam Recordings Carmen Ashurst-Watson:

> "The time when we switched to gangster music was the same time that the
> majors bought up all the labels and I don't think that's a coincidence. At the
> time that we were able to get a bigger place in the records stores and a
> bigger presence because of this major marketing capacity the music
> became less and less conscious" (as cited in Hurt, 2006).

Instead, what began to be marketed by the large music groups and major

recording labels as hip-hop for mass consumption became increasingly characterized

by one-dimensional pimp and thug personas and nihilistic, materialistic, hedonistic,

misogynistic lyrics embodying caricatures of inner-city ghetto life characterized by

historically stereotypical representations of black men and women (illustrated by what

Tricia Rose (2008) calls the trinity of the black gangsta, pimp, and ho). In the words of

Jackson Katz, "If the KKK was smart enough they would have created gangsta rap

because it's such a caricature of black masculinity" (as cited in Hurt, 2006). Such

imagery has led some, including jazz musician Wynton Marsalis (2009), to refer to hip-

hop as a contemporary minstrel show (Bynoe, 2010). An interesting situation emerged

in which white-owned corporations began to profit by selling one-dimensional historical black stereotypes which failed to threaten or challenge the status quo to a new youth culture (youth of color and also white youth). Rather than challenging social structures, corporately produced hip-hop began to reinforce the idea that African-American men are a dangerous, deviant "other" both to be feared and deserving of their stations in life due to their moral shortcomings.

Whereas some scholars argue that even when hip-hop music lacks overt sociopolitical lyrical commentary hip-hop music is by definition political in the sense that it provides a voice, forum, and form of empowerment for expression among institutionally underrepresented African-Americans (Light, 2004), others are critical of corporate hip-hop and its representation of African-Americans. Critics, including self-proclaimed lovers of hip-hop music (Rose, 2008) argue that rather than challenging the status quo and its marginalizing social structures as hip-hop at its best has historically done, much contemporary hip-hop promoted by large media companies apolitically embraces and celebrates the status quo while it "panders to and helps reinforce America's veiled but powerful interest in voyeuristic consumption of black stereotypes" (Rose, 2008, p. 242). Such music is characterized by lyrical content and video imagery that promotes a black masculinity embodying greed, materialism, consumption, the objectification and exploitation of women, homophobia, aggression, and the glorification of street violence. The primary image of black masculinity that young people experience in contemporary black popular music is that of a hardcore thug. Women, with the exception of a few "good girls" are hyper-sexualized and depicted with the function of being eye candy and sex objects for men.

Of course, media companies did not invent this hardcore thug image of black males and inject it into hip-hop. There were materialistic, violent, misogynistic expressions within hip-hop during the "golden age" of the late 80's and early 90's and earlier. However, such music existed among a diversity of types of hip-hop expression. Scholars contend that it is not problematic that these images simply exist in hip-hop music; it is problematic that these images are practically the only visible expressions of black masculinity produced for profit by white-owned corporations to be consumed and emulated by youth of color (and white youth). Mos Def, often labeled a conscious rapper, asserts "I ain't mad at Snoop. I'm not mad at Master P. I ain't mad at the Hot Boys. I'm mad when that's all I see [mainstream hip-hop]. I would be mad if I looked up and all I saw on TV was me or Common or The Roots, because I know that ain't the whole deal [conscious hip-hop]" (Rose, 2008).

Thus, the argument is not that back in the "good ol' days" all hip-hop music was politically charged and counter-hegemonic. Nor is the argument that during its golden age, there were no problematic expressions within hip-hop. Let us avoid looking at hip-hop through rose-colored lenses. Materialism, violence and sexism have always had a place in hip-hop. This should not be surprising in a materialistic, violent, sexist society in which elements of all forms of media entertainment such as television, movies, and video games may be characterized by these attributes (Rose, 2008; Dyson, 2007b). However, these expressions used to be just some of the voices among an eclectic multitude of expressions that constituted hip-hop music. The argument is that in lieu of such a diversity of expression in contemporary corporate hip-hop, there is a single, one-

dimensional dominant form of expression and it is characterized by the worst of historical black stereotypes.

Furthermore, scholars contend that even the gangsta image of black men in contemporary corporate hip-hop is more problematic than in its original manifestation in the late 1980s and early 1990's. The original gangsta rap was full of contradictions which spoke to the contradictions characterizing inner-city black life (Dyson, 2004b). This music was critical of social structures yet at times was also materialistic, violent, misogynistic, and hedonistic. The music was brutal, it was raw, and it was complicated. Yet, many of these rappers such as Tupac Shakur emphasized that the root cause of the negative imagery that many observe in this music is society itself and hegemonic social structures. The lyrics of these rappers must be considered as a reaction to the poverty, violence, and racism they observed in their communities on a daily basis.

Hip-hop has always embraced the outlaw as a symbol of resistance to marginalization (Perry, 2004), falling in line with Cornel West's (1982) conceptualization of a marginalist tradition reacting towards American society. However, once gangsta rap began to rise in popularity, the outlaw, gangsta image continued to be promoted by large media companies, yet gone was the context and reasons for the gangsta-ing. Devoid from the gangsta-ization of mainstream hip-hop music were the socio-historical reasons for the creation of the gangsta. Gone was critique of the American society and social policies that created and necessitated the outlaw. Thus, contemporary corporate rappers represent decontextualized, one-dimensional thuggery, which is perhaps even essentialized due to the lack of context; this is a far cry from the complex, contradictory, and socially critical early gangsta rappers.

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In his enlightening 2006 documentary, Byron Hurt illustrates that up and coming, aspiring rappers understand the type of lyrical content that major recording labels are looking for in new talent. A young rapper looking for a record deal states that in terms of conscious hip-hop, "[the industry] don't accept that shit. . . . They usually don't give us deals when we speak righteously and things of that nature" (Hurt, 2006). Young rappers understand that to have the greatest chance at a record deal and making it as a rapper, their lyrics must eschew positive, critical, and thoughtful messages for Rose's gangsta/pimp/ho trinity. Thus, the reality is that hip-hop culture is dictated to young hip-hop fans by, in the words of conscious rapper Talib Kweli, corporations "owned by people that have nothing to do with hip-hop who are just trying to cash in" (Hurt, 2006).

Hip-hop is dead?

What does the corporate co-option of hip-hop music mean for hip-hop as a culture and art form? Legendary rapper Nas initiated a debate as to the state of the one-dimensionalized art form that corporate hip-hop devolved into with his provocatively and controversially titled 2006 album Hip-Hop is Dead. Scholars, journalists, and artists reacted to Nas's claim that hip-hop as the counter-hegemonic art form that it was once known as was "dead." Rose asserts that hip-hop is not dead but finds itself in a terrible crisis (2008). This debate is reflected by the titles of recent books and articles: Is Hip Hop Dead? (Hess, 2007); "Hip Hop is so far from dead!" (Goodson, 2007); "Hip-Hop is Alive . . . and Vital" (Dyson, 2007a); "Hip-Hop Culture has been Murdered" (Powell, 2007); "5 Reasons Hip-Hop is Dead" (Serpick, 2007); and "5 Reasons Hip-Hop is Not Dead" (Serpick, 2007); as well as titles of hip-hop albums and mixtapes: KRS-ONE and Marley Marl's *Hip Hop Lives* (2007) and Lil' Wayne's *Hip Hop Ain't Dead* (2008).

At this point, it is crucial to mention that although corporate hip-hop is widespread, dominant, and the only visible variety of hip-hop on corporately controlled music television and radio stations, corporate hip-hop is not the entire story. "We have never let the media define us so why are we doing it now?" asks conscious rapper Talib Kweli (Hurt, 2006), troubled at how a once organically emerging cultural form is presently being dictated to youth of color in a particular way by white-owned corporations for the sake of profit. Yet, within contemporary hip-hop music, there also exists a flourishing though marginalized underground sector in which "conscious" rappers such as Kweli sacrifice greater commercial and financial success by eschewing the dominant images that characterize corporate hip-hop and instead promoting positive, uplifting, meaningful, and/or socio-political messages in their song lyrics.

Dyson describes conscious rap as "rap that is socially aware and consciously connected to historic patterns of political protest and aligned with progressive forces of social critique" (2007, p. 64). McQuillar (2007, p. 2) adds that conscious hip-hop includes songs "that are responsible, thought provoking, and/or inspirational toward positive change or a cry of protest against social injustice." Rose asserts that the distinctions between mainstream commercial hip-hop and conscious hip-hop "tend to revolve loosely around whether or not a given artist has politically progressive content" (2008, p. 241).

Conscious hip-hop expression is most common in "underground hip hop," a realm of hip-hop absent from television coverage and radio play but "which defines itself as a purer form of hip hop, in opposition to the record industry's pop rap" (Hess, 2007, p. 127). Here, conscious rappers are said to not be limited by the cartoonlike

representations of corporate hip-hop. It is in this area in which hip-hop is said to act as

a contemporary manifestation of the critical social commentary that characterized hip-

hop music during its so-called golden age. Though conscious hip-hop tends to include

politically charged messages and intense protest music, McQuillar (2007) is careful to

point out that conscious hip-hop also includes a range of positive and uplifting styles

and voices including the bohemian and jazz-rap fusion. Dyson adds:

> Contemporary conscious rappers are lauded as much for what they don't
> say as for what they spit on record. They don't brag about exorbitant
> jewelry, excessive women, or expensive automobiles. Conscious rappers
> do talk about racial injustice, police brutality, over-incarceration, political
> prisoners, rampant poverty, radical educational inequality, and more (2007,
> p. 66).

As I discuss in the methods section of this project, the term "conscious" and the

conscious/commercial duality it suggests are problematic (Hill, 2010; Bynoe, 2010).

However, despite criticism of the conscious label, such categorization of hip-hop is

practiced, and there are consequences of being labeled conscious. Scholars agree that

despite the diversity of expression in hip-hop music, it is the non-socially conscious

ones that tend to be encouraged and promoted by the culture industries.

To be labeled a conscious rapper is to be considered unmarketable, regulated to

the sidelines of hip-hop, and denied mainstream promotion and exposure. In fact, Rose

(2008) argues that if the legendary Tupac Shakur, who is celebrated as one of the

greatest, most popular, and best-selling rappers of all-time, emerged today and

released the same music, he would be marginalized as merely a conscious rapper.

Thus, conscious hip-hop tends to flourish in the "underground" rather than through

mainstream major media outlets. Such a marginalization of hip-hop music that is

considered to be "conscious" and thus unmarketable is reflected by the title of conscious rapper Talib Kweli's upcoming album, Prisoner of Consciousness.

Rose (2008) argues that the duality imposed on hip-hop resulting in either commercially viable or politically engaged hip-hop music has driven hip-hop's progressive spirit to the margins. Either a rapper can promote the gangsta/pimp/ho imagery or conscious, progressive imagery, with little room for any complex grey area in between these two extremes. Rappers are thus faced with what Light calls a tension between a salary and reality (2004). Should the music of an impoverished rap hopeful be characterized by what sells or sociopolitical commentary? Unsurprisingly, the pursuit of mainstream and in turn financial success often means a sacrifice of socially conscious messages for most unestablished young rappers.

Scholars consider hip-hop in terms of the contradictions and complexities inherent to such counter-hegemonic cultural movements (Rose, 2008; Dyson, 2007b). The music of some contemporary conscious rappers has been noted to be ripe with such contradictions. What is considered to be among the most conscious and progressive of hip-hop music is not without flaws. Socially conscious hip-hop at times seems to use language and imagery similar to that which scholars find problematic about mainstream hip-hop. Yet, consider the words of Rose (2008, p. 244):

> Progressive, community-centric music can sometimes be vulgar, explicit, and violent. Rappers with a progressive social conscience can't be expected to pretend that street violence, exploitative sex, and self-destructive behaviors don't exist, or claim that nothing being said about them is worthy of artistic examination, just because of the current state of mainstream commercial hip-hop. The distinction, then, between "gangsta" rap and progressive or "socially conscious" rap is not solely about the subject of the story being told but also about how and how often that story is being told. What kind of community is being hoped for, what standard for treating others in one's community is being elevated and emulated?

Manufacturing consent?

If we are to consider (some) rap music as the Black CNN, it is interesting to think about hip-hop in terms of Herman & Chomsky's (1988) seminal critique of corporate news sources such as CNN. Herman and Chomsky present what they call a propaganda model for understanding corporate news. To fully understand news companies, they argue, we must recognize that they are businesses that strive to above all increase profit for their shareholders and sell advertising space. Thus, it is not in the interest (as well as explicit legal obligation) of these companies to critically report on anything that might jeopardize their stock prices or cause advertisers to vacate. Thus, Herman and Chomsky's model features five filters that simultaneously protect these interests and distort what passes for "news" produced by corporately owned media companies: 1) size, ownership, and profit orientation, 2) advertising as a source of revenue, 3) sourcing of mass media news, 4) flak and the enforcers, and 5) anti-communism, or in Chomsky's (2002) recent incarnation, anti-terrorism.

To what extent are critical messages similarly distorted and/or filtered out of corporately controlled conscious hip-hop music? The change in lyrical content of mainstream hip-hop music coinciding with the purchase of hip-hop recording labels by the large music groups has been duly noted. A question that is raised and is at the focal point of the current research is what are the consequences on the representation of social problems—which has historically characterized (some) hip-hop music—when hip-hop is produced and distributed by large, profit-driven corporate conglomerates.

Does corporate hip-hop music simply "filter" critique? Is music able to "get away" with more than news companies in terms of critical constructions of the world and presentations of social problems because song lyrics are not perceived as legitimate a

means of diffusing information as the news? If hip-hop with critical lyrics sells, will

corporations release it despite its controversial, counter-hegemonic constructions? To

what extent is claims-making activity in contemporary hip-hop music sanitized when this

music is distributed by large media conglomerates? Is hip-hop that is produced outside

of the grip of large multinational corporations the only legitimate site for the creation of

hip-hop music as it was known in the glory days of critical yet uplifting and empowering

hip-hop? Is hip-hop dead? Or has it just been "buried" in the underground?

CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Beginning with the premise that (some) contemporary rappers may act as claim-makers whose song lyrics present perspectives on social problems, I conducted a grounded theory analysis on the song lyrics of contemporary progressive rappers to comparatively explore how the artists of corporate and independently produced hip-hop music represent social problems within. My first challenging step in this project was to construct a representative and appropriate sample. However, before I discuss the formulation of my sample, I will first discuss what I mean by the phrase "progressive hip-hop" and why I chose to use this phrase to refer to the music included in the analysis.

Conscious, Political, or Progressive Hip-hop?

What do I mean by "progressive hip-hop?" Why do I use this term to characterize the music under analysis in this project? Indeed, this is the preferred term that I invoke throughout this project to conceptualize all of the music throughout the sample and to represent the space within the broader hip-hop cultural landscape for substantive lyrics characterized by critical social commentary.

The term "conscious hip-hop" is often used to label the artists in the sample and the varieties of hip-hop characterized by social commentary. This term is often used to refer to the "good" hip-hop, or what Michael Eric Dyson refers to as "the broccoli of the rap world" (n.d.). Conscious hip-hop is characterized as such based on some combination of what it includes and what it excludes: rappers whose lyrics either feature overtly political, progressive, or uplifting messages or refrain from the one-dimensional, problematic imagery that characterizes mainstream hip-hop.

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However, a critique of the conscious label is that it implicitly implies and promotes a false conscious/commercial dichotomy within hip-hop in which the former is said to be concerned with raising the consciousness and lifting the spirits of "the people" and the latter is said to be concerned with conforming to trendy pop standards to sell as many records as possible. Hip-hop is more complex and nuanced than allowed by a characterization in terms of these binary opposites. Some artists, such as Common, Kanye West, and particularly, Nas are extremely commercially successful and have had top-selling albums, yet have been referred to with the conscious label based on their lyrical content.

Moreover, the music of rappers who are labeled conscious at times have non-conscious songs celebrating the good life and suggesting similar imagery to that which is often critiqued in mainstream hip-hop and what conscious hip-hop is defined in opposition to. Nas points out this flaw in the descriptive power of this term: "Some people say I'm conscious, some say I'm a gangsta rapper — it's just me doing me. I'm stomping in my own lane. I'm doing what I do" (as cited in Reid, 2007, para. 18). For Nas, his music resists easy sub-categorization.

Some rappers in the sample such as KRS-One openly identify as conscious and invoke the term to distinguish themselves from mainstream hip-hop and its dominant imagery and indicate their subsequent marginalized space within hip-hop. However, other rappers in the sample such as Mos Def openly reject the conscious label as an externally imposed division between the "good hip-hop" and the "bad hip-hop." For these reasons, I am hesitant to use the phrase "conscious hip-hop" to refer to the music in this project.

Sometimes the term "political hip-hop" is used to describe artists in the sample, particularly those with overtly political messages. However, this term seems problematic because as Asante (2008) argues, all artistic and musical creation is political in that it either challenges or promotes the status quo and prevailing social arrangements. Moreover, this term seems ambiguous when one considers the songs put out by generally apolitical, mainstream artists in support of 2008 presidential candidate Barack Obama. These are clearly songs with political implications but they are released by artists who generally release music that conforms to the hegemonic hip-hop imagery, the "bad hip-hop" which is not the music that I wish to analyze. Thus, "political hip-hop" does not seem to be the appropriate term to use.

I settle on leaning on Tricia Rose's (2008) use of the phrase "progressive artists" as the best way to characterize the sample. She notes that while such artists are not "perfect" based on aspects of their lyrics which may be critiqued for celebrating materialism and sexual imagery at times, she notes that it is important to take a nuanced view and consider the context and frequency of these lyrics. Moreover, she asserts that the parameters of what may be included as progressive manifestations of hip-hop should not be so limited that very few artists may be included. Although the boundaries that separate what are considered to be contemporary forms of progressive hip-hop and the mainstream hip-hop landscape are often hazy, the artists whose work is selected for inclusion in the analysis are selected based on considering their music overall.

Forming the sample

Introduction

My goal in forming the sample was to establish a representative group of key voices of progressive hip-hop produced by both the Big Four and independent recording labels. A primary concern in formulating the corporate analysis group was to be certain to include the most subversive and critical voices. A primary concern in formulating the independent analysis group was to ensure that the artists were representative and not fringe voices.

In determining the artists whose work would be included in the sample, I first read accounts of political hip-hop and conscious rappers from the literature of hip-hop scholars, journalistic accounts, and fan blogs/websites. There is general consensus within the hip-hop canon (Forman, 2004b) as to the principle artists who should be counted under the umbrella of progressive hip-hop, particularly with respect to corporately produced artists (Rose, 2008; Kitwana, 2005; Dyson, 2007b; McQuillar, 2007; Neal, 2003a; Neal, 2003b). Moreover, the non-academic sources that I consulted generally overlapped and coincided with these names. I later engaged in theoretical sampling and included particular additional artists to flesh out emerging ideas.

Corporate/Independent Analysis Groups

From the pool of hip-hop artists that may be considered under the umbrella of progressive hip-hop, I formed two analysis groups for comparison: the corporate analysis group and the independent analysis group. As the names of the analysis groups imply, the artists were grouped for analysis in terms of whether their music was produced by either one of the "Big Four" corporate music groups or an independent company to facilitate the exploration of my research question considering the

implications of corporate affiliation on the claims-making process in contemporary progressive hip-hop song lyrics.

In her discussion of contemporary hip-hop music, Rose (2008) conceptualizes a corporate/conscious duality to describe contemporary hip-hop. She intentionally invokes the loaded term "corporate" in describing contemporary mainstream hip-hop music to draw attention to the role of large, consolidated music companies in marketing the worst of hip-hop and historical African-American stereotypes. However, in her conscious category she counts some rappers who she notes are technically corporate in the sense that their music is produced and/or distributed by one of the major music groups, but their music does not present one-dimensional, problematic images of black people. Rose's corporate/conscious distinction is based on the substantive content of the artists' lyrics. If an artist's lyrics reflect the problematic images that characterize mainstream hip-hop, the artist is considered corporate. If an artist's lyrics are more complex and feature uplifting or critical messages, the artist is considered conscious regardless of the nature of the music's production or distribution.

Like Rose, I agree that the work of some rappers connected to the four major music groups may be counted as conscious hip-hop. While conscious hip-hop tends to be marginalized and restricted to the "underground" we do find manifestations produced by the Big Four. However, I depart from Rose and consider whether hip-hop is "corporate" or not in a more Chomskian way, in terms of its actual material production and distribution. Thus, within the realm of what scholars consider to be conscious/political/progressive hip-hop I draw a corporate/underground distinction.

Thus, in the analysis I will invoke the term "independent" to refer to progressive hip-hop music that is distributed without ties to Sony Music Entertainment, Warner Music Group, Universal Music Group, or EMI. I use the term "corporate" to refer to progressive hip-hop music that is produced by one of these Big Four music groups, one of their subsidiaries, or a company that is directly owned by one of the groups. Thus, the song lyrics to be selected for inclusion in the analysis will be considered in terms of these two categories defined by the characteristics of the music's production and whether it maintains ties to the corporate ownership allow for comparison between corporate and independent manifestations of progressive hip-hop.

Determining "Excellent" Participants

The next important challenge to consider in the project was how to form a representative sample of corporate and independent contemporary progressive hip-hop music. The sample of hip-hop artists whose lyrics were selected for inclusion in the analysis was formed by following the sampling principle of qualitative inquiry that "it is necessary to locate 'excellent' participants to obtain excellent data" (Morse, 2007, p. 231). As previously mentioned, to consider a particular manifestation of hip-hop music to be "conscious" does not necessarily mean that it is overtly resistant, critical, and subversive but often simply that it does not cater to and promote hegemonic and stereotypical discourse of African-Americans. Thus, for my particular research question, I decided that progressive artists who are most notoriously recognized for their social commentary would serve as the best examples of claims-makers from the underside for my research question.

I determined that by extensively researching both scholarly, journalistic, and fan work on the artists that comprise progressive hip-hop and increasing my familiarity with

these artists, I would be able to make a determination of the artists who are most noted for overt and intense claims-making activity and would thus make the most "excellent" potential objects of inquiry. I complimented the accounts of hip-hop scholars by scouring various blogs, internet forums, and top ten lists about socially conscious rappers, took note of the names that tended to overlap, and further researched them. I am confident that the group of artists that I have included in the sample fairly represents corporate and independent manifestations of the most overt representations of progressive hip-hop. I left the possibility open to add additional artists during the analysis until theoretical saturation is reached. Indeed, I later sought out and included the work of specifically white rappers, as well as female rappers to provide additional data for analysis regarding emerging theoretical insights.

To determine whether the artists that I was considering for inclusion should be located in the corporate or independent analysis group, I examined the albums of these artists released during the time period under study on the Rhapsody music service and Billboard website and researched to see whether the record labels that released these albums were truly independent or if they were one of the "Big Four"/a subsidiary owned by a Big Four music group. After separating these albums into corporate and independent groups in terms of the ownership of their production, I read the biographies and journalistic descriptions of the music of the conscious artists on Rhapsody to determine based on the language used to describe the artists which of them would act as the most "excellent" of claims-makers. I formed the sample keeping in mind that I wanted to have a similar number of data to compare in each of the two analysis groups.

Selecting the artists to include in the corporate analysis group was a relatively

simple endeavor because there were not that many corporately produced artists

consider under the umbrella of progressive hip-hop to choose from. Indeed, included in

the corporate analysis group of the sample are all rappers that were identified by hip-

hop scholars as representing progressive voices in hip-hop. Artists whose work was

included in the corporate analysis group (with some examples of the accounts

illustrating why I selected them) include the Roots (who Rhapsody writes are "known for

their positive and conscious lyricism" and "always give you something to think about,

dropping verses on such heavy topics as politics, equality, and respect for fellow man"),

Talib Kweli ("conscious lyricism" and "an outspoken supporter of many sociopolitical

issues (both on and off the mic")), dead prez[1] ("revolutionary hip-hop," "fiery verses

challenge corrupt lawmakers, racist police, and various social injustices while

demanding freedom and equality for all citizen," and "protest music"), Mos Def,

Pharoahe Monch, Common, Kanye West, Lupe Fiasco, and Nas.

Forming the independent analysis group was more challenging due to the large

pool of artists to choose from of varying degrees of recognition/popularity. This very

point suggests a pointed difference between the two analysis groups from the outset of

this project. I wanted to ensure that this analysis group of the sample avoided inclusion

and overemphasis of obscure, marginal voices. To ensure that the independent voices

that I selected were representative, I selected artists that were 1) recognized by hip-hop

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[1] Interestingly, dead prez and to an extent Talib Kweli released music through both corporate and
independent channels during the time period under consideration. Their corporately released work will be
considered in terms of the corporate analysis group and their independently released work will be
considered in terms of the independent analysis group. Also, Public Enemy and KRS-One are "golden-
age" artists who released music through corporate channels prior to the beginning of the time period
under consideration. However, all of their albums in the sample were independently produced and thus
are included in the independent analysis group.

scholars and 2) overlapped with the non-scholarly sources that I consulted. I am comfortable that while my sample is not exhaustive, it is representative of contemporary independent voices in progressive hip-hop music.

Following the same method as I used to determine the most "excellent" participants among the corporate group, the artists included for consideration in the underground conscious hip-hop analysis group include Immortal Technique ("arguably the most important political rapper in the game today," "attack on the injustices of American law enforcement, the military, covert ops, racist drug wars and President Bush," and "could very well usher in a new movement of social justice in popular music"), the Coup ("calculated social commentary on a broad spectrum of subjects, from the realities of the ghetto to the corruption of the White House," "drop political game and mack poetry for your mind, all with the goal of overthrowing capitalist society one street corner at a time," and "revolution"), KRS-One, Paris, Public Enemy, dead prez, X-Clan, the Perceptionists (including both their work together as well as the solo work of both Mr. Lif and Akrobatik), Sage Francis, and Brother Ali.

Of the artists selected for inclusion in the analysis, all of (and only) their albums released in the (non-technically speaking) first decade of the twenty-first century (2000-2009) will be included in the sample. A number of factors make this an interesting decade for study. First, this decade begins comfortably after the so-called golden era of hip-hop music ended in the mid-1990's. The process of the corporate co-option and commodification of hip-hop has been fully realized this decade. Furthermore, this has been called "the Decade from Hell" by Time magazine. It seems that a decade so considered, one bookended by 9/11 and a recession, and one characterized by the

Bush years leading into the election of Obama would be ripe for the social, political, and cultural critique and claims-making activity that has historically characterized much of hip-hop music and black music more generally. This seems to make for an ideal landscape for a research agenda focused on considering claims-making activity in hip-hop lyrics along with the implications of corporately produced and distributed hip-hop.

Conducting the Analysis

I performed a grounded theory analysis on the lyrics of all of the songs of both analysis groups to explore how the artists represent social problems in both analysis groups. My analysis began through line by line coding of the lyrics. I categorized, subcategorized, and recategorized themes as they emerged through the constant comparative method. During this process of coding and categorization of emerging themes, I coded and categorized the lyrics without respect to which of the two analysis groups the songs represented. After reaching a point of saturation, I then considered each of the categories and subcategories as represented in the lyrics of each analysis group.

While coding the lyrics, I listened to all albums included in the sample while simultaneously reading the lyrics. I accessed the lyrics to all available songs from the Original Hip-Hop Lyrics Archive (http://www.ohhla.com). For lyrics that were not available through this preeminent hip-hop lyrics source, I attempted to consult other lyrics websites and attempted to reach a consensus if there was disagreement. The last resort that I employed to obtain the lyrics for a small percentage of songs unavailable from these sources was to transcribe lyrics myself.

I chose to include the examples that I did in the analysis chapters that follow by selecting examples that are representative, trying to include a variety of voices from the

sample, and considering the research question by invoking as examples the most overt and subversive examples that I could find. I actively sought out examples in an attempt to counter the theory emerging early in the project regarding the distinction between the corporate and independent analysis groups. Particularly, when making comparisons between the two analysis groups and the examples that I include indicate that the corporate analysis groups presents a more subdued critique, I was careful to ensure that this was the most direct, overt, detailed, and strongest corporate example that I could find. I want to be clear that I did not intentionally select weaker examples from the corporate analysis group to illustrate a predetermined conclusion that the rough edges are sanded off of critical messages in corporately produced progressive hip-hop. On the contrary, a part of me was rooting for the opposite to be true for the sake of contemporary hip-hop culture. I strove to find the strongest, most subversive, and most descriptive examples that I could from the corporate analysis group and offer them up for comparison with the independent examples.

My analysis resulted in three general categories. Each of these is comprised by a number of sub-categories. These include "us," how the artists represent and locate themselves in terms of the experience of a particular collective; "them," those who the artists account for the social conditions that are represented as negatively affecting "us;" and "the weapon," claims overtly addressing contemporary hip-hop and its potential to act as a mechanism for claims-making activity in the context of its commodification.

Theoretical sampling

I engaged in the process of theoretical sampling to provide additional insight on a couple of emerging subcategories. In my exploration of the racialization of the collective *us* identity that the artists in both analysis groups attested to be speaking to and for, I

actively sought out additional white artists that are considered under the umbrella of progressive hip-hop to consider how they negotiate this racialized collective. Such artists include Vinnie Paz of Jedi Mind Tricks and Ill Bill. Likewise, in consider gender issues that arose in the lyrics while noting the lack of female voices, I actively sought out female rappers but found only the Conscious Daughters and Jean Grae, both of whom I included in the sample. Along the same lines, I attempted to find and include openly non-straight rappers but could not find a single non-straight rapper recognized within the progressive hip-hop community for consideration.

Structuring the Analysis

I structured my analysis of the lyrics by dedicating a chapter each to discussing the three general categories: *us*, *them*, and *the weapon*. This seemed to me to be the most logical layout. I begin by discussing representations of the experience of social problems, then move on to the cause of these problems, and finally discuss the role of hip-hop lyrics in such representations. My analysis will now commence by discussing *us*.

CHAPTER 3
US—CONSTRUCTING A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY OF CLAIMS-MAKERS

Introduction

In this chapter, I begin my analysis of the lyrics by focusing on one facet of a key theme that emerged throughout this project. In the lyrics of both analysis groups, social problems are consistently conceptualized and represented in terms of a general *us* against *them* narrative. In this chapter, I consider the *us* facet of this take on social life and discuss in depth the representations within both analysis groups of *us* as a social group that experiences social problems. In the next chapter, I focus on *them*–the other facet of this narrative. Because the rappers of both analysis groups locate themselves within a particular social group and make it clear that they are making claims on behalf of this collective, I conceptualize these artists and those whom they claim to be speaking to and for in terms of a collective identity that I refer to as *we/us*. Moreover, throughout the lyrics of both groups, my analysis reveals that for *us*, social problems are represented by two primary features: 1) the description of an oppressed experience and 2) encouraging resistance against this oppression.

My discussion of the *us* facet of the narrative of social life throughout this chapter involves the subtle distinctions between how the artists in each analysis groups both describe a particular marginalized life experience and promote active resistance against this marginalization. Interestingly, in both analysis groups, *our* experience of social problems is represented in a largely analogous way: as the implications of a particular intersection of race and class. However, whereas the representations of racial oppression are largely analogous in the two analysis groups, the most specific, concrete, and detailed discussions of economic oppression emanate from the

independent analysis group. This distinction is indicative of a qualitative difference between the two groups that becomes even more pronounced when we consider the resistant facet of *us*: the most detailed, nuanced, and overtly subversive representations tend to emanate from the independent analysis group, whereas those of the corporate analysis group tend to be more general and vague. This distinction between the lyrics of the two analysis groups reflects a larger trend that emerges throughout the analysis.

Who are *We*?—The Struggle

The artists of both analysis groups themselves often invoke first person plural pronouns such as *we* and *us* to overtly signify their experience of social problems in terms of a collective experience. Yet the question of how to characterize who *we* are— how to characterize the social group that progressive rappers claim to represent is a complicated one, and I attempt to tease out the nuances of this collective identity throughout this chapter. What is clear at the outset is that the artists of both analysis groups are in fact making claims on behalf of a social group. In addition to identifying in terms of plural pronouns, the artists of both analysis groups often invoke the phrase *the people* (as well as more personal variations such as *my people*) to signify the particular collective that they attest to be speaking to and for. I similarly invoke the phrase *the people* throughout this project to refer to those whom the artists make claims on behalf of.

Moreover, the artists in both analysis groups both describe and locate our experience within what they refer to as *the struggle*. *The struggle* is characterized as including both the experience of suffering that the artists describe as a consequence of their oppressed status, as well as active resistance against the social arrangements

responsible for *the people's* oppression. Note for example, that Black Thought of the

Roots locates himself within *the struggle*:

> *And smack 'em in the melon with another LP / C'mon, help a couple people in the struggle get free* ("Can't Stop This," 2006, corporate)

This example illustrates how the music in the sample is contextualized within the

phenomenon of *the struggle*. Not only do *we* "struggle" in that *we* suffer through the

challenges that life presents *us* and hope to get by. *We* are engaged in *the struggle*,

describing the sociological reality of a life experience conceptualized in terms of conflict

between *us* and *them*. Note how in addition to invoking struggle as a verb that we do,

Paris speaks of *the struggle* as a particular phenomenon that we are engaged in:

> *Welcome into Cali where we strong like that / We struggle with the struggle and it's on like that* ("How We Do," 2003, independent).

In such examples, the artists of both analysis groups locate themselves within a

collective defined and shaped in part by a shared experience of *the struggle.*

Throughout this chapter, a subtle qualitative difference between *the struggle* as

represented in the corporate and independent analysis groups becomes clear. *The

struggle* as represented in the music of the independent analysis group tends to be

more overtly subversive, militant, and specific.

There is another important point to be made about conceptualizing the rap

personas throughout this project as voices for *us* and speaking to a collective

experience. Consider *the struggle* as referenced in the following two examples:

> *Flames in the mosque, and people held hostage / Everyday I struggle, try to get up out the mosh-pit* (the Roots, "Lost Desire," 2008, corporate).

> *This is the point from which I will die and succeed / Living the struggle, I know I'm alive when I bleed* (Immortal Technique, "Point of No Return" 2003, independent).

Note that in these two examples, the language in which the artists refer to their participation in *the struggle* does not suggest a collective experience but rather an individual one. However, in considering the rappers' first-person conceptualizations of the struggle in these examples, it is helpful to consider Perry's (2004) claim that even when rappers seemingly speak in terms of their own personal experiences, this is often a rhetorical technique in which the *I* represents, stands in for, and speaks to the experiences of the collective that comprises their entire community, not merely one's own isolated, individual experiences.

So who are *the people*? Whose struggle are the artists speaking about? *We* are complicated to precisely define because throughout the analysis, multiple ways of conceptualizing this collective emerge. On one hand, many artists contextualize the struggle confronting *the people* as the contemporary manifestation of the historical struggle confronting members of the African diaspora over the last five hundred years. Thus, *the struggle* is that of specifically black people. Yet interestingly, such racialized representations of *the struggle* at times extend not only beyond African-Americans to other Black people but to other people of color, particularly Latino Americans.

Moreover, other representations of *us* emphasize a class-based struggle grounded in economic exploitation. Considering this facet of oppression, I consider this collective to be described primarily in terms of a particular intersection of race and class such that *the people* represent the shared experience of the black and Latino underclass, particularly those located in the inner-cities, whom Watkins (2005) refers to as hip-hop's base constituency. Finally, some artists simultaneously push *us* beyond particular race and class experiences towards an identity encompassing a more universal and global

conception of resistance against oppression.   In the first section of this chapter, I consider how the artists of both analysis groups represent *us* in terms of an experience of oppression, and in the second half of this chapter I consider their representations of resistance against this oppression.

Oppression

In both analysis groups, the artists locate themselves in terms of a collective experience of oppression and assert that they assert that they are speaking on behalf of other marginalized, unrepresented people living on society's margins. This oppressed experience is represented primarily in terms of racial oppression and class oppression, or more accurately in terms of a particular intersection of race and class. As such, the artists of both analysis groups present an ethnographic account of sorts (though not a pure ethnography in the academic sense of the word) as they generally provide us with a description of the everyday realities that characterize the life experience of the urban black and Latino underclass.

Generally speaking, the representations of racial oppression are largely analogous between the two analysis groups and are not characterized by a notable qualitative distinction. Yet interestingly, there is a notable qualitative difference between the two analysis groups with respect to how class oppression and economic exploitation are represented. Although class oppression is accounted for in the corporate analysis group, it is not presented with the same level of detail and specificity that characterizes some of the notable presentations in the independent analysis group. First, I will discuss the racial oppression of *us* described throughout the lyrics of both analysis groups.

The Experience of Racial Oppression

The lyrics of each analysis group describe an experience of racial oppression in contemporary American society. This racial oppression is largely represented (by a sample of primarily African-American rappers) in terms of the racial oppression of black people. However, some artists broaden the scope of racial oppression to a more expansive notion of racial oppression to include other people of color, particularly Latino-Americans, in a shared struggle. An interesting aspect of the artists' representations of the experience of racial oppression with respect to the research question is that, particularly compared to the representation of other facets of social problems, there is little qualitative difference between the corporate and independent analysis groups.

"Black Dialogue[2]"

When artists of both analysis groups detail *our* experience of racism, they tend to describe the experience and implications of being Black in contemporary American society. Consider the following assertion of Nas:

> *With survival of the fittest, everyday is a chal' / I would think I'm a part of*
> *U.S.A. and be proud / Confronted with racism, started to feel foreign / Like,*
> *the darker you are the realer your problems* ("Rule," 2001, corporate).

Nas describes the implications of skin color and the experience of being perceived as black in the United States as being presented with a unique set of challenges, obstacles, and problems. Thus, he speaks to a particular, Black experience of racism. Despite hip-hop's multicultural origins, this example is indicative of a trend that emerged during the analysis: *we* are conceptualized as a specifically Black racially oppressed

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[2] The Perceptionists, "Black Dialogue" (2005, independent)

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collective. Hip-hop's strong association with, emergence from, and location within

African-American culture is clear in how rappers of both analysis groups describe *us* in

terms of blackness throughout this project. In both the corporate and independent

analysis groups, the rappers racialize the struggle as they describe the struggle in terms

of a particular marginalized experience—being black in the United States.

Because of this experience of racism, Nas describes feeling less represented by

contemporary American society and perhaps even "less American" than members of

other social groups. MC Ren articulates the challenges associated with being black in

the United States in his verse on a Public Enemy and Paris song:

> *So each one teach one for the struggle / Bein' black in America's some shit*
> *to juggle / They won't give motherfuckas a job / They wanna throw you in*
> *the pen when you forced to rob* ("Raw Shit," 2006, independent)

Like Nas, MC Ren describes the experience of being black in America in terms of

presenting a unique set of challenges. He addresses a correlation between blackness,

unemployment, poverty, and subsequent criminal activity in the context of a lack of

legitimate means of success. MC Ren hints at having to negotiate the reality of the

prison-industrial complex, a sociological phenomenon I will address later in this chapter.

The lyrics of both analysis groups are characterized by the idea that to be black in

contemporary American society is to be faced with particular, racially-based challenges

leaving one feeling and being perceived as "less American" and excluded from various

facets of social life.

A powerful way in which the rappers racialize the collective marginalized identity in

terms of blackness is by contextualizing their experience of oppression in the wake of

the historical legacy of the African Slave Trade and by identifying as the contemporary,

not-so-distant descendents of slaves. On the Roots' track "Rising Down" Styles P

asserts that the historical legacy of slavery may offer an explanation as to why *the people* may be hesitant to proudly identify as Americans:

> *And it's hard to claim the land / When my great great great grands were shipped to it* (2008, corporate)**.**

As a descendent of African slaves, Styles P here describes a certain hesitance to proudly identify as an American—as a genuine citizen of the country that enslaved his recent ancestors. Other artists speak this legacy of African slavery which is engrained in their collective identity. Consider Paris who connects the contemporary oppression experienced by Black Americans experience to slavery:

> *No compassion in they action for the son of a slave* ("Make it Hardcore," 2006, independent)

Here, Paris contextualizes the way in which *they* treat *us* in terms of the not-so-distant history of slavery. I will discuss them in the next chapter. The point that I would like to make here is that these examples are indicative of how the artists of both analysis groups locate themselves, their music, and their struggle in the historical legacy of African slavery. This nod to the slavery is part of a broader technique in which the rappers racialize the collective identity: by more generally locating their experience and the struggle within Black History.

Interestingly, throughout the lyrics of both analysis groups, rappers locate their hip-hop cultural production not only within the same musical lineage and tradition as earlier forms of Black music but in the black intellectual tradition as well. The names of Black leaders, scholars, poets, artist, athletes, and intellectuals, are consistently referenced throughout progressive hip-hop lyrics in the same context. Consider the following two examples in which black musical artists are located alongside black intellectuals:

Tavis Smiley, Michael Eric Dyson / Stokely Carmichael, let's try to be like them / Nikki Giovanni poetical black female / Jim Brown to the people who sing well from / Fela to Miriam Makeba (Nas, "These are Our Heroes," 2004, corporate)

Martin and Malcolm knew it / Black dialogue / Grandma Moses drew it / Black dialogue / Stevie Wonder seen it / Black dialogue / Many games to steam with / Black dialogue / Jim Brown, ran with / Black dialogue / Huey Newton had a plan with / Black dialogue / Chuck D took a stand for / Black dialogue / KRS is the man with / Black dialogue (The Perceptionists, "Black Dialogue," 2005, independent)

In these examples, the rappers locate their work in black history and alongside black thinkers by invoking the names of and identifying with the actions of important figures in black history. These examples are interesting because they both promote significant figures of Black History and locate black artists alongside black intellectuals in a common project.

One way of considering these examples is to note that artists of both analysis groups overtly draw attention to some significant figures of Black history, and some go so far as to implore *the people* to explore the work of these individuals. Such a technique informs hip-hop and *the struggle* with a historical context. The significance of infusing progressive hip-hop with Black history cannot be overstated considering that it has been suggested that a contemporary crisis plaguing the African-American community is a lack of communication between members of the Civil Rights Generation and the Hip-Hop Generation (Asante, 2008). While a lack of intergenerational communication is not necessarily a phenomenon unique to the African-American community, within this community it is observed that there is dearth of public spaces for intergenerational exchange to occur.

In the context of this lack of dialogue between the two generations, the Hip-Hop Generation is often critiqued as not knowing both history in a general sense and their

history—Black History— and lacking an understanding and appreciation of their historical struggle. Thus, when progressive hip-hop artists locate themselves in Black history and connect themselves to figures of the Civil Rights Generation, it is significant in that this historically-informed technique cracks the barriers separating the two generations and perhaps pushes us towards what Asante conceptualizes as the post-hip-hop generation, "whose promise is to heal relations between all generations and classes of Black people" (2008, p. 232).

Moreover, scholars such as Mark Lemont Hill (2010) reference a black intellectual canon that is and historically has been transmitted primarily outside of institutionalized school settings. It is significant that the progressive rappers in the sample locate themselves within the context of and promote this non-institutionalized canon—what the Perceptionists refer to as "Black Dialogue." This practice raises a number of questions associated with conceptualizing rappers as intellectuals and liaisons of Black History which I discussed in depth in Chapter 5. At this point, the very fact that the progressive hip-hop is informed by Black History and characterized as contemporary black cultural expression in both the corporate and independent analysis groups is interesting in thinking about the racialization of *us* in terms of blackness.

Let me address that my discussion has not heavily addressed the particular research question at hand: the distinction between the corporate and independent analysis groups. Interestingly, this is because there is not much to address; there is not a pronounced qualitative distinction between the two groups with respect to the representation of racial oppression. *We* are racialized in a largely analogous way in the lyrics of both analysis groups. It is interesting that the subtle distinctions between

corporate and independent representations in other facets of the analysis, including the representation of resistance as discussed later in this chapter, are not characteristic of representations of racial oppression.

Beyond the Black experience

Although the racial oppression of black people is represented as a primary characteristic of *us* as represented in both analysis groups, it is not all-encompassing. Recall hip-hop's multicultural origins and the oft-neglected contributions of Latino and Caribbean people. Some scholars conceptualize hip-hop not as merely an African-American cultural form but rather in terms of trans-Atlantic Blackness (Perry, 2004). Furthermore, Watkins (2005) argues that thinking about hip-hop in terms of blackness is a false premise, and he pushes us to remember that hip-hop has been and continues to be a multi-cultural practice. Hip-hop emerged heavily informed by the experience of African-Americans in the South Bronx, but its emergence was also informed by the experience of people of the Caribbean, particularly Jamaicans and Puerto Ricans.

That said, some of the artists in both analysis groups attempt to push us to consider a collective identity characterized by racial marginalization and oppression beyond blackness and African-Americanness. These artists, while leaving room for issues pertaining specifically to Black people and the significance of hip-hop within African-American culture, push us to consider the collective in terms of a multicultural racialized collective united by the shared oppression of all people of color in the United States. Furthermore, some artists go so far as to conceptualize a collective marginalized identity that extends beyond the parameters of racial categories.

Consider that while Peruvian-American rapper Immortal Technique at times speaks to issues particularly relevant to Latin Americans, he also locates himself in the

same oppressed racial collective as African-Americans and acknowledges the similar oppressed conditions of black and Latino people:

> *My Latino and black people who are struggling to get food, clothes and shelter in the hood* ("The Poverty of Philosophy," 2001, independent).

In this lyric, Immortal Technique locates *his* Latino and black people in the same struggle. Furthermore, African-American rapper Talib Kweli acknowledges the shared experience of black and Latino bodies within the confines of the prison-industrial complex when he speaks of "*the blacks and Latins in prison*" ("Get By," 2002, corporate). These examples in which black and Latino people are located in a single collectively shared experience of oppression are significant in that they expand claims about racial oppression beyond merely the African-American experience. I discuss representations of *us* that transcend racial/ethnic parameters into a more unified oppressed collective more in depth in my discussion of the representation of *us* in terms of resistance later in this chapter.

White rappers negotiating a space within a racialized collective

In considering the representation of a *us* on the basis of racial oppression, it is interesting to consider the voices of white rappers who are included under the umbrella of progressive hip-hop. I locate some white rappers within progressive hip-hop due to 1) being identified as such by hip-hop scholars (Rose, 2008; Kitwana, 2005) and 2) having worked on tracks with artists who are. If the experience of oppression of *us* is racialized, then how do white rappers relate to this collective?

Further complicating the dynamics associated with white rappers is the long history of the appropriation of black musical forms and their presentation in more lucrative ways by white artists. This checkered past adds to a certain skepticism about

the perceived legitimacy and authenticity of white hip-hop artists. Interestingly, a point

of departure between white rappers and other artists in the sample is that there are no

white progressive hip-hop artists who are corporately produced. This distinction

between the two analysis groups is in and of itself interesting. My analysis of the lyrics

of these white rappers—all from the independent analysis group—reveals four main

techniques for coexistence within *us* in light of the racialization of this collective identity:

(1) racializing their ethnicity as non-white, (2) emphasizing a class, rather than racial

basis of oppression, (3) associating and identifying with black people and black culture,

and (4) asserting the significance of racism.

To illustrate the first point, consider that although Ill Bill identifies as white, he

represents his Jewishness as an ethnic basis for racialized oppression:

> *In Texas they dream about hunting Jews with Borat. . . . / Some claim the Jews be the biggest wiggers we're considered / most dangerous cause they think we shift our forms / Cast spells & wear beanies to restrict our horns / from being seen growing out our heads, the killers of Christ / these fools wear white sheets and believe that Hitler was right* ("White Nigger," 2008, independent).

Here, Ill Bill acknowledges his whiteness while simultaneously asserting his own

marginalization in terms of race by illustrating how Jewishness both historically has

been and in certain contexts of contemporary society continues to be a racialized,

oppressed identity by referencing the Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, and Jewish actor Sasha

Baron Cohen's satirically anti-Semitic Borat character. It is interesting to note here how

through this technique Ill Bill both expands and complicates race-based notions of

marginalization to include ethnic oppression despite whiteness.

Another technique employed by white rappers in the sample to locate themselves

within the collective identity despite their whiteness is by identifying with the class

aspect of the collective identity, which will be explored in depth later in this chapter.

First, note that rappers such as Immortal Technique acknowledge the legitimacy of a

class-based identity, rather than one that focuses solely on race:

> *I have more in common with most working and middle-class white people*
> *than I do with most rich black and Latino people* ("The Poverty of
> Philosophy," 2001, independent).

Note how in the following example, Ill Bill locates himself within the oppressed *us* on the

basis of class as he references "my Glenwood Projects" and speaks to his own struggle:

> *My grandmother was a holocaust survivor / and my uncle did heroin / my*
> *pops wasn't around / my moms kicked him out the house / and broke her*
> *back to put food in our mouths* ("White Nigger," 2008, independent).

In addition to again emphasizing his legitimate place within *us* by alluding to his family's

connection to the Holocaust, Ill Bill describes life in terms of the suffering that

characterizes the oppression of the ghetto experience. It is significant that Ill Bill overtly

locates himself in *the struggle*:

> *Word to my comrades in the struggle* ("A Bullet Never Lies," 2008,
> independent).

By locating himself within *the struggle*, Ill Bill expands its parameters. Another

technique white rappers employ to negotiate their whiteness and include themselves

within a conceptualization of *us* that includes a racialized facet is to locate themselves

alongside Black Americans in black culture. Although these rappers are white, they

emphasize that were raised and socialized alongside black kids, perhaps even

identifying more with black people, and feel strongly connected to black culture despite

their whiteness. Accordingly, as artists, they articulate being more drawn to hip-hop

culture and music than cultural forms more typically associated with white youth cultures

such as rock music. Consider how Brother Ali attempts to negotiate his whiteness in

hip-hop:

> *So they ask me if I'm black or white, I'm neither / Race is a made up thing I don't believe in it / My genes tie me to those that despised me / Made a living killing the ones that inspired me / I ain't just talking about singing and dancing / I was taught life and manhood by black men / So I'm a product of that understanding / And a small part of me feels like I am them / Does that make me a liar maybe / but I don't want the white folks that praise me to think they can claim me / 'Cause you didn't make me / You don't appreciate what I know to be great yet you relate to me / and that frustrates me and what can I say / 'cause I know that I benefit from something I hate / But make no mistake our connection ain't fake* ("Daylight," 2007, independent).

Brother Ali makes a few interesting points here with respect to race. He first

overtly suggests that he does not believe in race because it is just a "made up" social

construction. Though this claim may at first be critiqued as color-blind racism (Bonilla-

Silva, 2001), Brother Ali proceeds to acknowledge his white privilege and that he

benefits from his whiteness. Yet while he acknowledges this privilege, by he also

claims that he "feels black" because of his heavy association with black people and

culture.

Dismissing the relevance of race while acknowledging the significance of its

implications is a challenging and nuanced position that white rappers such as Brother

Ali attempt to stake out as they negotiate their whiteness within a predominantly black

and Latino cultural form, a collective identity represented largely in terms of racial

oppression, and a society in which white people are systematically privileged by the

existence of racism and racial inequality. While not denying or running from his

whiteness, Brother Ali asserts that he was socialized in a black community and

identifies more with black people than the white folks who may try to claim him. Here,

Brother Ali pushes us to consider the collective identity that characterizes progressive

hip-hop beyond strict racial parameters. Such an expansion of *us* complicates thinking about the *people* strictly in terms of African-Americans, Black people, or people of color.

Interestingly, at times white rappers offer critiques of institutionalized racism. Such critiques are analogous and comparable to the artists of color in this project. Consider how Brother Ali connects the historical legacy of African slavery to a contemporary internalization of oppression and a slave mentality:

> *Only two generations away from the / Worlds most despicable slavery trade / Pioneered so many ways to degrade a human being / That it can't be chains to this day / Legacy so ingrained in the way that we think / We don't need to wear chains to be slaves* ("Uncle Sam Goddamn," 2007, independent).

Brother Ali's references to slavery and an internalized oppressed consciousness are akin to the lyrical content of black progressive rappers and speak to the interests of black people, though they emanate from a white rapper. Although he is white, he contributes to and participates in the same conversation. It is very telling that he uses a plural first person pronoun "we" to describe this phenomenon—he overtly locates himself alongside the experience of African-American descendants of slaves.

The dynamics at play here are interesting. On one hand, white rappers are privileged by the white power structure which systematically marginalizes people of color, is critiqued by artists in the sample (see chapter 4), and is implicated in the creation of the conditions that gave rise to hip-hop. Furthermore, white rappers engage hip-hop in light of a history of white cooption of black cultural forms in which white artists (and the companies that sign them) have historically taken black music forms including the blues, R&B, and early rock music and sell the music to a larger audience composed of white people (for example, consider Elvis Presley, Led Zeppelin, and Vanilla Ice). In this context, independent white progressive rappers locate themselves with the

oppressed collective identity through a number of delicate techniques. In locating

themselves within *us* despite their whiteness, they expand *us* and push this collective

identity beyond strict racial parameters. Moreover, it is not just the white rappers in the

sample who expand these terms.

Consider African-American rapper Nas's untitled album, which was controversially

originally titled *Nigger* as an effort to help to take the power out of the racial epithet

while arguing the continued relevance of the word due to the contemporary status of

African-Americans in American society. This 2008 album acts as a mediation on the

controversial use of this word and it's cousin "nigga," as well as institutionalized racism.

Consider the following lyrics in which Nas extends the use of this racial slur historically

used to dehumanize and torment African-Americans to include various racial and ethnic

groups as he locates this word alongside other similar words historically used to

dehumanize other groups.

> *I'm a nigger / he's a nigger / she's a nigger / we some niggers / wouldn't you like to be a nigger too? / To all my kike niggers / spic niggers / Guinea niggers / chink niggers / that's right, y'all my niggers too / I'm a nigger / He's a nigger / she's a nigger / we some niggers / wouldn't you like to be a nigger too? / They like to strangle niggers / blaming niggers / shooting niggers / hanging niggers / still you wanna be a nigger too? (*"Be a Nigger Too,"
> 2008, corporate)

Here, Nas speaks to various ethnic slurs that signify oppressed social categories.

He questions why members of these social groups would want to be "a nigger" based

on its consequences in both historical and contemporary American society. Yet at the

same time, he locates people of various racial and ethnic categories in the collective of

his "niggers." This claim seems to suggest that oppression is oppression and invites

other experiences of racial/ethnic oppression under the same umbrella. In a sense,

here Nas extends the meaning of the term "nigger" to the experiences of all oppressed

racial/ethnic groups. Interestingly, after being promoted as a single/video that created

substantial flak due to Nas's liberal use of various racial/ethnic slurs this corporately-

produced song was excluded from the release of the album due to alleged sample

clearance issues. I discuss this situation in depth in Chapter 5 and its implication on

corporately-produced inflammatory and subversive content.

The declining significance of race?

The first point to conclude from the analysis with respect to representing *us* in

terms of oppression is that there are clear attempts to racialize this experience of

oppression. However, this experience is not racialized in a single, clear, consistent

way. One way of describing this collective is that *we* are represented in terms of

blackness and located within the historical conversation of black music and politics. In

the lyrics of both groups, blackness is conceptualized as a basis for racial oppression in

contemporary society. Most of the rappers who comprise what is considered to be

progressive hip-hop are black. Although hip-hop was multicultural from the start, black

rappers such as Public Enemy, KRS-One, and Brand Nubian, influenced by the

legacies of Afrocentric organizations such as the Nation of Islam and the Zulu Nation,

launched a black empowerment movement within hip-hop in the black oral tradition.

Hip-hop music was their vehicle to communicate and acted as, to once again cite Chuck

D's infamous and imperfect metaphor, the Black CNN.

Hip-hop is heavily tied to black music, African-American culture, and "black

dialogue." It yields a limiting understanding to decontextualize hip-hop from the African

diaspora. However, it is also problematic to reify the collective identity represented in

the lyrics of the sample in terms of blackness while neglecting the multicultural roots of

hip-hop and the Latin and Caribbean contributions to its emergence. Conceptualizing

the racial oppression of *us* solely in terms of blackness presents an incomplete

understanding of the complicated, nuanced racial dynamics of hip-hop culture. There

are instances in which progressive rappers of various racial backgrounds push us to

consider the collective identity beyond blackness and construct a more complicated,

nuanced, and unified understanding of racial oppression shared by people of various

racial and ethnic backgrounds, including even white people.

Because of its strong black and Latino base, racial politics are at the forefront of

progressive hip-hop (Watkins, 2005). However, Hip-hop is a diverse movement, and it

is limiting to reify the collective identity constructed in hip-hop in terms of particular

racial categories. In my discussion of resistance later in this chapter, I lean on the

insights of Osumare and others who study global hip-hop and suggest that progressive

hip-hop also extends the definition of blackness beyond strict parameters towards a

global signifier for oppression, extending the experience of oppression beyond race to

speak more broadly about oppression, injustice, alienation, and frustration.

To explicitly address the research question at hand, the lyrics of both the corporate

and independent analysis groups interestingly feature largely analogous representations

of oppression on the basis of race. One way to look at this emergence is that corporate

production status does not preclude critical descriptions of racial oppression in the

music of the corporate analysis group[3]. Yet when we consider representations of

economic oppression and lyrics that move beyond mere descriptions of the experience

of oppression into militant and subversive resistance claims, a qualitative distinction

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[3] Moreover, the claim that there is no filtering of messages of racial oppression in the corporate analysis
group becomes more tenuous when considering the potential censorship of the more inflammatory
content of the corporate analysis group as I discuss in Chapter 5.

between the two analysis groups begins to emerge. Furthermore, it is problematic to consider the racial oppression of *us* without considering class. Before we can draw conclusions, theorize, and make generalizations about hip-hop and race we must consider the class component of the collective identity.

The Urban Underclass Experience

Introduction

In considering the preceding discussion of *us* in terms of an experience of racial oppression, I now qualify this statement by asserting that *we* experience one of many such experiences in the United States. Indeed, there are diverse experiences and competing interests within African-American culture and the black community, as well as between the black community, the Latino community, and other people of color. Those who experience racial oppression are by no means a monolithic collective, and in this section I consider how racial oppression is represented in the two analysis groups at a particular class intersection. Indeed, *our* experience of racial oppression is contextualized within inner-city ghettos, informing *us* with a particular class-based facet; the collective encompasses the black and Latino underclass experience.

The class intersection

While the rappers construct a collective identity largely based on blackness and characterize this blackness in terms of the marginalization and oppression that results from being labeled black in the contemporary United States, a disjuncture between African-American hip-hoppers and the broader African-American community is revealed by critiques of perceived African-American conformity into the American system and the suggestion that such individuals "sell out" their blackness for the sake of a more comfortable, though still oppressed, position. Such individuals are critiqued on the

basis of their class privilege.   This point is evidenced by lyrics of both analysis groups

that invoke pejoratives such as "Uncle Tom" and "house nigga" to critique individuals

who are perceived to have assimilated into the oppressive American system and in turn

have "sold out" their people and their culture. Consider how in the following examples

the rappers invoke such pejoratives to both critique and distinguish themselves from

such individuals:

> *Lie to the youth, Uncle Tom you confused / Might as well give the Hip-Hop community a noose* (Nas, "American Way," 2004, corporate)

> *You might have some house niggas fooled, but I understand* (Immortal Technique, "Cause of Death" 2003, independent)

Both artists are critical of black people who they claim ascend in society by

conforming to and within the very system that creates the racial oppression that *we*

experience. They suggest a diversity of experiences and interests suggesting a more

nuanced understanding of *us* beyond solely racial oppression. Indeed, scholars note

that Hip-Hop Generation and hip-hop culture are often at odds with the interests of

mainstream African-Americans and the Civil Rights Generation, and that unlike the Civil

Rights Movement which featured a single issue to rally around (*de jure* segregation),

today's black community is far from homogenous and unified in pursuit of a single goal

or agenda (Kubrin, 2005; Dyson, 2004b).

Perhaps it should thus come as no surprise that hip-hop has often found itself

within the crosshairs of black public figures "hoping to preserve the notions of black

bourgeois respectability" (Watkins, 2005, p. 219) that young hip-hoppers seemed to

undermine, and the earliest critiques of hip-hop actually came from black people

(Asante, 2008). Furthermore, it has been argued that over the past forty years the

inner-city black underclass has become increasingly disconnected from the black

middle class. However, consider the following example in which Paris is critical of

visible African-American individuals in the public sphere who he asserts are guilty of

"betraying" their race by not adequately representing the community:

> *Oh yeah! And fuck these political hacks / Wanna act like they the*
> *mouthpiece for blacks / Jesse Lee and Ward Connerly and Keyes attack /*
> *anything black when white folks writing the checks / And in fact, I could see*
> *hella niggaz is blind / Like Armstrong leavin every child behind / And*
> *McWhorter's a whore too, shit is a crime / Clarence Thomas couldn't ever*
> *be a brother of mine / I shine light on that bullshit, it's all self hate (yeah) /*
> *Who the next face to betray the race?* ("Get Fired Up," 2008, independent)

Whereas the discussion of the experience of racial oppression has suggested a

largely analogous representation in the two analysis groups, there now appears to be a

crucial difference between the two groups when the tone of the claims moves from

description to critique. Here, Paris directly, subversively, and inflammatorily critiques

the (non)action of particular individuals as betraying the black race. What is particularly

interesting about this example is that there is no analogous claim in the corporate

example group aside from general claims about "selling out."

This point is indicative of a key distinction between the two analysis groups

throughout the project with respect to overt, subversive representations of resistance

against the structures and particular individuals who play a role in *our* oppression.

These characterizations of social life are much more pronounced in and characteristic of

the independent analysis group. Yet despite these distinctions, the two analysis groups

are unified in that in both bodies of lyrics, there is a clear distinction between *us* and

broad notions of a unified and cohesive black community. This distinction may be

characterized in terms of notions of class consciousness and *we* as a racialized identity

is represented as it intersects with a particular social class location.

Street life

The hip-hop of both analysis groups is clear that it is primarily speaking to and for the black and Latino underclass. Accordingly, the music in the sample may be characterized by what Imani Perry (2010) calls hood-centrism. *We* are represented by the artists of both analysis groups in terms of a particular class experience: the ghetto experience of the urban underclass. The rappers' imagery vividly presents portraits of black/Latino life within the context of the urban decay and impoverished living conditions that characterize inner city ghettos.

Discussions of this experience often include artists of both analysis groups speaking to the localized experiences of a particular block, housing project, or ghetto. This localization seems to raise a potential problem for making generalizations about hip-hop that represents a number of different locales such as New York, Chicago, and the Bay Area. However, these rappers also invoke more general abstract identifiers that locate them in a collective, shared ghetto experience.

General terms signifying the Black and Latino underclass experience such as the ghetto, the streets, the projects, and the hood are ubiquitous throughout the lyrics in the sample. Artists of both groups often locate themselves and their work in these shared spacial constructions. Moreover, at times, the rappers overtly conceptualize a general, universal ghetto experience and make it clear that they are speaking beyond the spacial borders of any one particular locale. Consider the following examples:

> *For every struggle, every strip, and every ghetto / For every nigga totin'*
> *inner pain and heavy metal / For every child that's born, and every nigga*
> *gone* (Nas, "Every Ghetto," 2001, corporate)

> *I'm omni-hood, that means I rep' every* street (KRS-One, "I Got You," 2008,
> independent)

In such examples, the artists indicate that they are not just speaking to their particular ghetto experience but rather to all such experiences. In doing so, the artists of both analysis groups illustrate a common ghetto experience which transcends the physical boundaries of a particular block, neighborhood or city. By invoking these general spacial conceptualizations, the artists locate themselves as products of and construct a collective in terms of a more general impoverished, post-industrial underclass experience. Thus, it can be argued that the ghetto in hip-hop acts as a community beyond spacial borders and a shared space that links common experiences which characterize the various ghettos throughout the United States. Hip-hop at times acts as a space allowing for this conversation.

By detailing experiences that characterize everyday ghetto life, the rappers illustrate the class-based facet of the oppression of *us*. Some artists who originally hail from lower class housing projects provide vivid accounts of the drug abuse, crime, and violence which characterize impoverished social contexts. Nas vividly describes and narrates such an experience in songs such as "My Country:"

> *Mother's a dope fiend embarrassin' me / All in front of my friends / In the street smile with no teeth / I never knew daddy, heard he had a 72 caddy / Died in a robbery, can't remember him, was probably 3 / Why didn't my folks just die in this society / Why wasn't I a child of a doctor, who left stocks for me / Two little brothers, two sisters, them shorties gots to eat / Mother's a junkie, she twisted, so all they got is me / I'm the provider, with goals to do much better than my father / Whether through drugs sold, or holdin' revolvers* (2001, corporate)

This lyric raises a number of social issues that characterize impoverished inner city contexts including drug abuse, lack of parental guidance, poverty, and crime committed in the context of a lack of alternative avenues of success. Similarly, consider dead prez's account of life in the hood:

You can get your blood spilled on the concrete / Little 17 year old nigga doing foul in the hood, on the prowl out in these streets / I've been in the same situation / Heartbeat racing / You come up or you don't eat / I done had to sleep in a train station / Going stop to stop but no place to be / Paperchasin' / Filling out applications for weeks / Just tryin' to get up on my feet / But they ain't hiring so a nigga's forced to resort to the streets / Just to make ends meet / It's called survival / The struggle continues ($timulus Plan, 2009, independent)

Here dead prez describe an attempt to negotiate the structural impediments that characterize life in the hood to procure the mere necessities for survival. Both artists here allude to a point which I address later in the section: the justification of criminal behavior as a necessity for survival in a context characterized by a lack of other opportunities. One point that is important to keep in mind here that such examples are not to be read as strictly autobiographical accounts, but rather as those of personas describing reality-based experiences. However, as Perry reminds us, one does not necessarily have to have directly experienced a specific situation that is widespread in the community in order to speak to their reality.

In addition to locating themselves in the ghetto experience, artists of both analysis groups overtly assert that they are speaking to and for the ghetto underclass. Songs in the sample are often dedicated to the people of this context, who are conceptualized as *the people* and as the artists' desired audience. For example, in the following two examples, the artists clearly state who their music is for:

This for the hood, for the ghetto (KRS-One, "Muskia," 2007, independent).

People's Radio, on the stereo / For the ghettos and the barrios (dead prez, "Radio Freq," 2004, corporate).

In their claims that their music is for the people of the hood, the ghettos, and the barrios (underclass Latino neighborhoods), the artists are clear that they are making claims to and for the people of a particular social class.

It is interesting that artists in the sample are clear in identifying their primary desired audience as the people of the ghettos. I read these overt declarations of their target audience as a strategy for legitimizing their music as remaining connected to the culture that gave rise to hip-hop music following the historical commodification/cooption of hip-hop by the culture industries. The implicit claim here is that their music is not for the white, suburban, teenager with disposable income demographic so coveted by the culture industries. Rather, that the music is represented as being for the voiceless, largely invisible underclass, infuses *us* with a fundamental social class component.

Note that the aforementioned descriptions of experiences of *our* economic oppression are for the most part analogous in the two analysis groups. There is not a radical qualitative difference in how life in the hood is represented between them. However, as the claims move from describing our oppression to critiquing those individuals and structures that account for our experience of oppression, a qualitative distinction between the analysis groups becomes clear, which has profound implications on the research question.

Economic exploitation

In addition to describing *our* experience of oppression by locating their work in and describing experiences of suffering which characterize the ghettos of United States inner cities, the artists inform *us* with a class intersection by connecting this experience to the idea that *they* benefit from *our* economic exploitation. Artists of both analysis groups inform this situation by explaining it in terms of a historical context; contemporary economic exploitation is both linked to the history of slavery and conceptualized as a contemporary manifestation of slavery. As such, slavery metaphors are widespread throughout the data as the rappers locate the present day

economic suffering and exploitation of African-Americans in the historical legacy of slavery. Whereas I discussed in the previous section that invoking slavery and locating their experiences in terms of slavery helps the rappers to racialize *us* and locates their work in Black History, slavery metaphors also speak to social class as slavery was an economic institution, albeit a racially-based one. Here, dead prez overtly assert that slavery was an economic institution that continues today:

> *Don't ever think slavery was just about race, slavery was about money /*
> *They say the USA was founded on freedom but slavery built this country /*
> *Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Hamilton, Jackson, Grant, all slave owners*
> */ And even today from Clinton to Bush they runnin the same game on us*
> ("$timulus Plan," 2009, independent).

First, they claim that racial divisions and racism are social constructions that were historically invoked to justify economic exploitation. Moreover, they assert that today's political leaders prosper off the exploitation of the ghetto underclass, just as did early presidents who were slave owners. The argument that slavery was *not* abolished but rather transformed into less overtly exploitative social arrangements is evidenced by artists in the sample addressing prison and military populations, which I discuss later in this chapter.

Moreover, even contemporary legitimate working class means of employment are represented as alienating, exploitative, and are viewed through the lens of slavery. In the spirit of Marx, artists such as Talib Kweli invoke notions of class consciousness as they are critical of contemporary working conditions:

> *They got you working like a slave from the crib to the grave / A minimum*
> *wage can barely keep a job for a home / A car or a phone, forget about*
> *gettin a loan* ("Hostile Gospel, Pt. 2 (Deliver Me)," 2007, corporate).

Here, Talib Kweli explicitly invokes a slavery metaphor to describe *the people*'s labor and asserts that the wages provided by working class jobs are insufficient to fund life's

basics. Such slavery metaphors add a qualitative intensity to the experience of oppression.

Moreover, the distinction between these two examples is indicative of the emerging corporate/independent distinction. Whereas the corporate example is more about describing *our* economic exploitation, the independent example is more about explicitly and specifically critiquing *them*. Talib Kweli does talk about what "they" do to exploit us. However, note that when dead prez speak of *them*, they specifically mention certain individuals who represent *them*. As I discuss in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5, there are instances of critique of people in power in the corporate analysis group; however, such critiques tend to be ambiguous, vague, and limited compared to the independent analysis group where we tend to find the most overt critiques of specific facets of *them*. This distinction between the two analysis groups becomes clearer by considering the implications on *us* of two sociological phenomena: the prison-industrial complex and the military-industrial complex.

Two "complex" examples

Considering representations of the prison-industrial complex and the military-industrial complex as examples illustrates distinctions between the two analysis groups with respect to the descriptions of the economic exploitation of *us*. In the context of a lack of available pathways for success, the rappers of both analysis groups assert that two options afforded the black and Latino underclass are turning to criminal behavior or joining the military. The rappers characterize both of these life paths as the exploitative use of lower-income brown and black bodies to subsidize the economic interests of the elite. Interestingly, the most detailed and specific accounts of this exploitation emanate from the independent analysis group.

Generally speaking, in both analysis groups (and in stark contrast to much commercialized mainstream hip-hop) crime is not glorified and celebrated for the sake of crime. Rather, crime is presented as a logical means to sustain one's self and one's family in a social context devoid of legitimate means of employment and avenues for success. Criminal behavior is morally justified as a rational choice and necessity for survival. Black Thought of The Roots presents poverty as justification for criminal behavior:

> *If I can't work to make it, I'll rob and take it / Either that or me and my children are starving and naked* ("False Media," 2006, corporate).

Black Thought asserts that he will engage in robbery; however, he states that he will only rob if he is unable to earn an income through legitimate means. Moreover, he justifies this action by noting that the alternative scenario would be lacking the funds to provide his children with sufficient food and clothing. Likewise, dead prez assert in their verse on a Paris track that the people from their neighborhoods do engage in criminal behavior; however, criminal behavior is framed and justified as a means for survival:

> *Comin' up in my hood, it's an everyday thang / Niggas is hungry and starvin' that's why niggas bang* ("Freedom," 2003, independent).

dead prez observe that in the social context from which *we* emerge, people do engage in gang-like, criminal activity. However, they do so as a consequence of poverty—the experience of which is illustrated by language related to hunger and starvation.   The rappers present a complicated and nuanced notion of crime by forcing us to consider question relating to why certain groups of people may engage in criminal behavior. Such behavior is not celebrated but it is ethically justified as a necessary means to attain the necessities in life in the context of a lack of choice of other available options.

Of course, a consequence of engaging in criminal behavior, even if done for morally defensible purposes, is arrest and imprisonment. Mirroring contemporary prison demographic data, the rappers present participation in the criminal justice system and subsequent prison sentences as a likely destination for *the people*. This threat of prison sentences looming over the people is contextualized in terms of the private prison industry. Consider Nas's description of this scenario:

> *Anywhere is better than this / It's America's plan every color of man inherits the shit / Yo I'm startin to think it's all a scheme, nobody cares / I know the warden is readin' the scribe / But yo I swear (it's a billion dollar business) / Courts, lawyers and jails / We all slaves in the system, I'm bout to rebel*
> ("My Country," 2001, corporate)

Here, Nas describes the specter of prison, a common theme throughout hip-hop. He asserts himself in opposition to the criminal justice system which he interestingly describes as a plan and a scheme contextualized within a billion dollar industry. He characterizes *us* as slaves in this system and merely the raw materials of this prison industry. Likewise, Jedi Mind Tricks overtly conceptualize prison labor as a contemporary manifestation of slavery:

> *It's one point six million people locked in jail / They the new slave labor force trapped in Hell / They generate over a billion dollars worth of power / And only getting paid twenty cents an hour / They make clothes for McDonald's and for Apple Bee's / And working forty hour shifts in prison factories / And while we sit around debating who the wack MC is / They have to work when arthritic pain attack the knees / Slavery is not illegal, that's a fucking lie / It is illegal, unless it's for conviction of a crime / The main objective is to get you in your fucking prime. / And keep the prison full and not give you a fucking dime / But they the real criminal keeping you confined / For a petty crime but they give you two-to-nine / And ain't nobody there to protect ya / Except a bunch of incompetent human rights inspectors*
> ("Shadow Business," 2007, independent)

Here, prison is constructed as literally a contemporary manifestation of slavery as disproportionately brown and black bodies are incarcerated and put to work. Submitting

one's body to the prison-industrial complex is a likely scenario for young black men in a social context devoid of legal, attainable avenues for success.

Although both of these examples regarding the implications of the prison-industrial complex on *us* allude to a billion dollar private prison industry, note the distinction between the two songs with respect to the level of detail in which this system that is described as exploiting *the people* is represented. First, the lyrics from the corporate example clearly allude to an exploitative prison industry. However, the lyrics from the independent example describe this phenomenon in a more nuanced and detailed way. Note that both examples invoke a slavery metaphor; yet the independent example illustrates *why we* can think of *ourselves* as slaves in a more overt, less ambiguous manner.

Similarly, another of the limited life choices that the artists of both analysis groups assert is available to *the people* is characterized as becoming a pawn in the military-industrial complex. Joining the military is offered as a way out of the ghetto; however, it is a path that exploits the lives and wellbeing of *the people* while serving the interests of the elite. The lyrics in the sample concerning the military-industrial complex should be read in the context of the United States's military involvement in both Afghanistan and Iraq during the time period of the sample. These two wars are constructed as being motivated by corporate interests under the guise of national security and liberating oppressed people. Note the opening words of Mos Def's aptly titled song, "War:"

War is a global economic phenomenon (2004, corporate)

Then later in the song, after invoking a sample which presents a humanistic quote about mobilizing to help rather than harm the various peoples of the world, Mos Def offers the perspective of the war makers:

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You know the drill / Fix ya face / I'ma hustle off the hill / Go get my money man / Go get my money man / Fuck you, pay me / Fuck you, pay me

In this corporate example, Mos Def describes the financial incentatives of war and the profitability of war for *them*. Again, like the other examples in this section with respect to descriptions of the industries behind prisons and the military, the independent example may be characterized as more overt and les ambiguous. Consider the following claim of Immortal Technique:

We act like we share in the spoils of war that they do / We die in wars, we don't get the contracts to make money off 'em afterwards! / We don't get weapons contracts, nigga! / We don't get cheap labor for our companies, nigga! / We are cheap labor, nigga! ("The 4th Branch," 2003, independent)

Whereas in the corporate example war is represented as profitable for them, note that the independent example more specifically details why war is profitable for *them* and how it exploits *us*. For additional examples of specific and detailed critique of the military-industrial complex from the independent analysis group—examples that are absent to the same extent in the corporate group—consider the alternative narratives presented in the next chapter.

In a social context characterized by a lack of legitimate life choices for success, two life paths represented as being open to *the people* are going to prison or joining the military—two options that are asserted to be poor black and brown men being commodified and used to benefit the economic among other interests of the elite. In Chapter 4, I discuss the elite, whom the rappers conceptualize as *them*, in great depth and detail. The point to take here with respect to the representation of *us* in terms of collective oppressed identity is the economic exploitation that characterizes the life experience of *the people*.

Let us now consider the fascinating point which is beginning to emerge. Throughout much of the description of the racism and the poverty which is described as characterizing the underclass experience, there is not a great qualitative difference between the independent and corporate analysis groups. However, in the claims that the rappers make concerning corporate interests such as the prison and military industries, we find that the more elaborate and nuanced descriptions and critiques are found in the independent sample group. This distinction is indicative of a larger trend through this project: when the lyrical content shifts from describing the suffering of *us* to critiquing *them*, there is a noticeable distinction in terms of the level of detail, overtness, and subversiveness of this critique between the corporate and independent analysis groups. This is a key point which will continue to be discussed as it emerges throughout the project.

The paradox of class consciousness?

On a track featuring dead prez, the Coup ask a question that the class component of *us* is largely defined by:

Is you a "have" or you a "have not"? ("Get Up," 2001, independent).

This is an interesting question because whereas none of the rappers in this project may truly be included in the upper-upper class of "haves," are they all "have-nots?" It is interesting to consider how the artists locate themselves in the underclass experience while noting that (1) some of the rappers in the sample were not born nor raised in an underclass context, (2) the rappers in the sample are all reasonably to highly financially successful, and (3) the rappers in the corporate analysis group are actually actively generating profits for the "haves." How do we reconcile these issues with my claim that

progressive hip-hop represents a collective identity based in part on the underclass experience and class-based oppression?

First, in discussing the social class component of *us*, it is worth noting that not all rappers in the sample are from inner city ghettos, housing projects, or underclass backgrounds. Yet interestingly, even such rappers for whom it is commonly known that they hail from comfortably middle-class households (Kanye West, Talib Kweli, Mr. Lif, members of the Roots) still frame their work as a voice for these unrepresented members of society and locate their music in terms of the underclass experience. Consider Talib Kweli's "Eat to Live:"

> *Yeah, this is a ghetto prayer / Prayin for all of those who ain't got it. . . . / My little man go to bed so hungry / Get up, go to school with his nose runny, come home with his nose bloody / His sister laughin, he like "What's so funny?" / 'Til she drowned out by the sounds of hunger pains in his tummy / Nuttin in the freezer, nuttin in the fridge / Couple of 40 ounces but nuttin for the kids* (2007, independent)

Here, Talib Kweli, a rapper whose parents are a sociology professor and an English professor, speaks to and describes in detail the experience of ghetto poverty.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that many of the rappers who originally hail from inner city ghettos presumably have relocated to safer, wealthier residences following their success in the music industry and thus no longer personally inhabit the impoverished contexts they continue to detail in their lyrics. Indeed, all of the artists in the sample (particularly the corporate ones) have achieved a degree of success in hip-hop music and are not personally impoverished. Yet, despite their relative economic privilege, throughout the lyrics of both analysis groups, a strong underclass identification and representation of economic oppression is maintained. The artists in the sample

continue to represent and speak to class issues affecting people of contexts such as the hood, the streets, and the ghetto.

Perhaps the artists' overt attempts to connect themselves to the streets is a strategy to maintain the perception of authenticity and legitimacy and to avoid the perception that they have "sold out." Indeed, it is in the interest of a hip-hop artist to be perceived as authentically connected to the streets and hip-hop's core demographic (Watkins, 2005). Yet, the discrepancy between artists' current life experience and the impoverished contexts they describe in their lyrics also seems to provide support for conceptualizing the artists in the project as claims-makers. One way of looking at this situation is that perhaps the artists are aware of an underclass experience that is very real but largely invisible. An impetus for such lyrics could be to detail this experience and in turn making claims on behalf of a social group that lacks a voice on the public stage and within the mainstream American conversation.

Although not all rappers in the sample represent members of the underclass, a theme that emerges from an analysis of the lyrics of both analysis groups is that progressive hip-hop is the music of the underclass. However, seemingly contradictorarily, at times corporate rappers such as Nas and Kanye West flaunt the wealth and the material possessions they have accumulated as commercially successful rappers. How do we reconcile this imagery in the context of a collective identity based in part of class marginalization?

The celebration of possessing cars, money, and women tends to characterize the commercial sector of hip-hop music and represent the imagery and lack of substance hip-hop scholars are critical of in contemporary hip-hop music. How can we reconcile

this celebration of the spoils of success with a collective identity constructed in terms of class oppression? How can rappers who flaunt the lavish luxury of the good life characterized by material success and monetary wealth be considered voices speaking to and for the urban underclass?

First, note that the rappers themselves seem to be aware of this paradox. For an interesting example of this, consider a track featuring arguably the two most commercially successful artists in the sample, Nas's verse on Kanye West's "We Major:"

> *I heard the beat and I ain't know what to write / First line should it be about the hoes or the ice? / Fo-fo's or Black Christ? Both flows'd be nice / Rap about big paper or the black man plight* (2005, corporate)

Here, Nas reflects upon this situation and whether he should rap about hegemonic mainstream hip-hop imagery or engage in what I consider claims-making activity regarding social problems. Indeed, his music is at times characterized by both. Nas is a unique example under the progressive hip-hop umbrella. His music speaks to the difficulty in forcing the complex, often contradictory lyrical messages in contemporary hip-hop into dualities like conscious/corporate. He is a commercial juggernaut, and his music is often characterized by commercial imagery.

Yet he is included under the umbrella of progressive hip-hop (Rose, 2008) despite his use of the imagery that scholars are critical of due to the frequency in which he uses it, other messages in his music, and how he contextualizes materialism in the context of an impoverished community descended from slaves—as the nouvre rich, there is a tendency to flaunt wealth that has been lost on the people. Nas is aware of the contradictions in his work and resists categorization. Despite the wealth he has accumulated, Nas maintains that he is connected to the "have-nots" of the underclass.

Interestingly, the music of Kanye West is often described in terms of "old Kanye" and "new Kanye" (Facebook, 2008). His first two albums are celebrated as progressive examples of conscious hip-hop ("old Kanye"). His following work, which is attached to his ascent into the upper echelons of mainstream pop success are often dismissed by fans of "old Kanye." Thus, it seems that as Kanye West's music becomes increasingly about celebrating the good life, it seems to lose its legitimacy and appreciation among fans of socially conscious hip-hop.

Furthermore, there is a correlation between his music becoming less overtly conscious and his rise to a more commercially successful artist and pop culture phenomenon. Nas went through a pop phase earlier in his career before reverting to making some of his most "conscious" (but still commercially successful, just not to the same extent) music. Perhaps Kanye West's career will follow a similar trajectory and after a few years as a pop culture phenomenon will revert back to lyrics characterized by more socially conscious messages.

I will address the third point in chapter in detail in chapter five when I consider what it means that artists from the corporate analysis group—artists who claim to be speaking to and for the streets—have record deals with the Big Four and are thus employees of major music corporations, particularly when these artists are critical of corporate recording labels. For now I would just like to mention that it seems somewhat paradoxical for corporate artists to be creating profits for these companies (*them*) while describing the oppressed experience of *us*.

One final point to mention concerning the representation of *our* experience of oppression with respect to social class is one that I address in the second part of this

chapter when I discuss representations of *us* in terms of resistance. Just as some artists attempt to push *our* experience of racial oppression identity beyond particular racial parameters, some artists attempt to push representations of class oppression beyond a particular experience of economic exploitation. Class oppression is more broadly considered beyond U.S. borders.

Despite such attempts to push the collective identity and hip-hop expression beyond these parameters, I comfortably assert that *we* are represented largely in terms of a particular intersection of race and class. Generally speaking, the collective experience of oppression in progressive hip-hop describes the black and Latino underclass experience, an experience located largely in post-industrial urban contexts of the projects, the hood, and the street.

It is most interesting and relevant to the research question to note the distinction between the corporate and independent analysis groups with respect to their representations of class-based oppression. As the descriptions of *our* experience of oppression begin to directly and specifically address *them*, how *they* benefit from *our* oppression, and how the system is set up, a distinction between the lyrical content of the two analysis groups begins to emerge. Before I discuss the second primary aspect of *us*, resistance, I briefly mention what these claims-makers do (and do not) have to say regarding two other principle mechanisms of oppression: gender and sexuality.

Gender/Sexuality Issues

In analyzing how *we* are represented as an oppressed social group, a surprising facet emerged with respect to how the primarily male and unequivocally heterosexual progressive rappers of both analysis groups address two other groups for whom it can be argued are similarly marginalized: women and gay men. Interestingly, the

purportedly "progressive" lyrics of this project which vividly describe *our* racial and class oppression offer incredibly contradictory messages about women, and seem to actively perpetuate homophobia. Though this issue may seem somewhat tangential to the research question, I consider it to be very relevant as the implications of sexist and homophobic lyrics seem to potentially undermine the very consideration of the music in the sample as "progressive."

Claims regarding gender

Immortal Technique reveals the root of gender dynamics in hip-hop in his taunt towards a fellow rapper:

> *You get no props in hip-hop like feminine men* ("Creation & Destruction," 2001, independent).

This lyric presents a profound insight into the hypermasculinity that characterizes hip-hop and the art of rapping. Male rappers are compelled to present themselves as masculine, i.e. strong, tough, aggressive, and sexually promiscuous.

One consequence of hip-hop's hypermasculinity is that it leaves little room for strong, independent female rappers (Watkins, 2005). Thus, the vast majority of voices in the rap sector of hip-hop and in music included in my sample are men's. Aside from a few visible exceptions such as the rise of Queen Latifah and Lauryn Hill during the 1990s (prior to the time period of the sample), there have been few women who have been able to stake out a place as a progressive rapper offering socially conscious takes on women's experiences.

In making these assertions regarding the lack of female rappers in progressive hip-hop, it is helpful to revisit the distinction between rap music (a style of vocal delivery) and hip-hop music (a broader term that speaks to the music that evolved out of and

within hip-hop culture). It seems that the progressive female voices that tend to emerge in hip-hop are primarily located within hip-hop informed neo-soul and R&B music (Erykah Badu, India.Arie, Alicia Keys), but not as rappers and are thus not included in the sample. As could be argued is also the case for male rappers, the most visible and mainstream female rappers tend to embody hypersexual personas (Lil' Kim, Trina, Nicki Minaj).

The presence of women in the music of both analysis groups is largely limited to singing the hooks and choruses of songs to complement the men's rapping. This is an interesting emergence considering that a large percentage of the music in the sample features guest rappers who contribute verses to the songs. Yet, when women are featured, they tend to not rap alongside the male voices but rather are relegated to singing the hook. Two notable exceptions to this trend are Jean Grae and the Conscious Daughters, who I will discuss shortly. Nas features an artist named Scarlett on a verse in "Live Now" but she does not maintain a further catalogue to analyze.

Let me note at the outset of this discussion that there are instances in which male rappers of both analysis groups speak to the marginalization and oppression that characterizes women's experiences in contemporary society. However, representations of gender oppression are not addressed with the same frequency, depth, or significance as are race and class issues. In discussing *our* experience of oppression, claims relating to sexism and women's experience of oppression are largely marginal. Furthermore, in addition to noteworthy claims that do speak to women's oppression, there are also examples in both analysis groups featuring lyrics that seemingly promote

and reinforce this oppression through objectifying and sexualizing representations of femininity and misogynistic male-female dynamics.

Moreover, consider the intersection of race and class in which *our* oppression is primarily represented. Note that this oppression is discussed almost entirely by men and thus from a primarily male perspective and experience. One example that points to this male-centrism in the sample is the "black dialogue" discussed earlier in the chapter. Consider that the figures of Black history who are referenced are primarily male. KRS-One instructs *the people* to remember these *men* ("Wachanoabout," 2008, independent). Perhaps this "black dialogue" could be more accurately described as "black male dialogue."

Interestingly, when the artists in the sample do acknowledge their gender and discuss their experience of maleness, it tends to be in terms of the oppression which characterizes their maleness as it intersects with race and class rather than in terms of the privilege they maintain as men. The rappers often speak to the dire, systemic consequences associated with being a young black male such as being suspicious to the police, having a disproportionately high likelihood of imprisonment, and being confronted with an ever-present threat of violence. For example, note how KRS-One genders the marginalized experience in terms of maleness:

> *The type of shit a young black man / Gotta go through every day of his life / Hard times to live in, wake up in the morning* ("My Life," 2006, independent)

The hardships that he describes— the experience of oppression— are not described merely in terms of race but also gender. Likewise, note how Talib Kweli genders the experience of the threat of death/violence:

> *They tryna kill off the black male* (Talib Kweli, "NY Weather Report," 2007, corporate).

I will discuss *they*, whom Talib Kweli asserts as the oppressive aggressor, in great detail in the next chapter. These examples illustrate how the rappers assert that they are speaking from the perspective and to the male experience (in a particular race and class context). Interestingly, this experience of maleness is represented as an oppressed experience vis-à-vis its intersections with race and class. Yet the privilege afforded by maleness remains largely unaccounted for and thus invisible. However, there are a few notable examples of men being critical of male privilege and treatment of women. Consider KRS-One's overt recognition of the need to respect women.

> *All my men that be holdin down they house and they spouse / Men, y'all know what I'm talkin about / Real men, providin for the kids, no doubt / Holla out, 'gwan shout, you the man of the house / Men! In my opinion if we gonna start winnin / F'real, we gotta respect women / Every mister, hug your sister, it's the / time to support your woman and not diss her* (KRS-One, "All My Men," 2008, independent).

KRS-One acknowledges that men often mistreat women and promotes both respecting and treating women properly. Of course, a feminist reading of these lyrics would critique the patriarchal undertones to his representation of what it means to treat women "properly," note the traditional gender roles that are invoked and associated with being a "real man," and recognize that it is problematic that a sample comprised of almost entirely male voices is representing these roles. That being said, such examples are worth keeping in mind as they infuse *us* with a gendered understanding. Likewise, consider how Nas reflects on women's oppression in contemporary society:

> *Love to sit on the Senate and tell the whole government y'all don't treat women fair / She read about herself in the bible believing she the reason sin is here / You played her, with an apron, like, "bring me my dinner dear" / She the nigger here* ("America," 2008, corporate)

In this lyric, Nas speaks to the structural, systematic, patriarchal oppression of women in the United States. Note how this example goes so far as to link the

experience of gender oppression to that of racial oppression by expanding the use of the racial slur "nigger" to encompass women's oppression in a patriarchal society. Just as African-Americans have been historically oppressed by white Americans, women have been historically oppressed by men. With the Garden of Eden and apron references, Nas alludes to women's internalization of their subservience to men. Here, Nas legitimizes and pushes gender to the forefront of the collective marginalized identity alongside race. Though relatively rare, there are such instances of male rappers of both analysis groups making claims regarding women's oppressed experience.

The aforementioned examples regarding gender illustrate that with respect to marginalization, there is not a qualitative distinction between the two analysis groups, and gender oppression is discussed in largely similar ways. Unlike the trend that emerged with respect to class, it is not the case that the independent analysis group is characterized by qualitatively more radically progressive understandings of gender. If anything, it could be argued that the examples that I included suggest "stronger" imagery in the corporate analysis group.

Let us now consider two notable exceptions to the rule that there is little room for females MCs in the hypermasculine world of the rapper: The Conscious Daughters and Jean Grae. Public Enemy and Paris features the female rap duo the Conscious Daughters on "Hard Truth Soldiers" which serves as a rare instance in the sample of women rapping[4]. Interestingly, in each of their respective verses on this track, the Conscious Daughters acknowledge their status as female MCs.

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[4] Many of the songs in the sample feature women, but it is typically in R&B style singing roles on the chorus or hook.

We ride, unified, playin' our part / Bein' sure that a woman's voice'll never get lost (2006, independent)

So before I begin, let's commit to rhyme / Keep the women in the mix and do it one more time (2006, independent)

Note the Conscious Daughters' concern with the lack of representation of female rap voices is such that in each of their verses in this song, they mention maintaining a space for women's voice. I think that this point is raised in each instance on this track in which they have a space to insert themselves as rappers is a profound illustration of the marginalization of women in rap music. A further examination of the lyrics of Conscious Daughters suggests that they locate *us* in the black female experience. They speak to women's issues including domestic violence ("Dirty Little Secret," 2009, independent) and overtly assert that their project is to *put the strong black women back on hip-hop's map* ("Don't You Ever," 2009, independent). In the context of the marginalization of female rap voices in progressive hip-hop, it is interesting to note that the few women overtly attempt to represent themselves as female voices.

Progressive sexism?

In addition to a lack of representation of female rappers in progressive hip-hop music are lyrics by progressive male rappers that contain overtly sexist, objectifying, and misogynistic imagery. It may potentially be misrepresenting and misleading to take a couple of lines out of context from songs and use them to make an argument against the legitimacy of hip-hop as a progressive cultural form[6]. However, if we are going to consider the music under analysis as progressive then it seems to be important to acknowledge such lyrics.

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[6] This is a common tactic of conservative critics of hip-hop music such as Bill O'Reilly. This technique is critiqued as being implemented to undermine the positive aspects of hip-hop.

Although Nas draws attention to the marginalized and oppressed status of women in contemporary American society in some songs such as the aforementioned line from "America," in other instances his lyrics are characterized by imagery that can only be described as misogynistic, objectifying, and oppressive. One such noteworthy example is a song called "The Makings of a Perfect Bitch" (2004, corporate). In this song, Nas selects various idealized body parts from various women for inclusion in what he conceptualizes as the "perfect bitch." In doing so, he reduces women to merely sexualized collections of different body parts each of varying degrees of attractiveness.

Interestingly, the lyrics of the independent analysis group are not characterized by such blatantly sexist language and imagery. However there are instances in this analysis group, as well as in the corporate group in which men are referred to by terms such as "ho" and "bitch." These words are invoked as insults to emasculate and feminize men, which I discuss shortly in reference to homophobia in hip-hop. It seems that a fascinating and problematic paradox emerges in that this groups of song lyrics which offer profound descriptions of oppression with respect to race and class also contain misogynistic epithets that marginalize, sexualize, and objectify women, another oppressed social group. Do these misogynistic lyrics call into question the conceptualization of some of the music in this project as progressive? Before I consider the implications of sexism in progressive hip-hop, let us consider a similar but even more extreme situation: the representation of homosexuality.

Hip-hop homophobia

Claims relating to oppression on the basis of sexuality and sexual orientation in both analysis groups are an analogous situation to those of gender; in fact, the situation is even more pronounced. Many of the so-called "progressive" rappers in the sample

demonize homosexuality and use homophobic slurs, both to denigrate gay people and homosexual behavior but also as a way of generally insulting or attacking the masculinity of another man. For example, in an infamous diss song to his then-rival Jay-Z, Nas call his then-rival a *dick-ridin faggot* and refers to him and his Roc-a-Fella Records as *Gay-Z and Cockafella Records* ("Ether," 2001, corporate). Claiming that Jay-Z engages in homosexual behavior and invoking homosexual slurs is implemented in song which's purpose is to attack him. Immortal Technique invokes the word "faggot" for a similar purpose:

> *And your crew is full of more faggots than Greek mythology* ("(hidden track)," 2001, independent).

As I mentioned earlier with respect to sexist slurs, men are accused of being gay as a way of demeaning them and calling their masculinity into question, which in turn challenges their legitimacy as a rapper and as a person. In other instances, homosexual slurs are invoked as an attack more ambiguously outside of the context of same-sex sexual activity. This language seems to just stand in for other insults.

However, unlike the critiques of sexism that are represented in progressive hip-hop, there is not a single critique of homophobia or heterosexism in any of the music of either the corporate or independent analysis groups; the lack of both critique of homophobia and acknowledgment of the oppression of gay people is deafening in its silence. Despite the efforts to expand marginalization beyond race and incorporate more experiences into the collective identity, there is never such a push to include homophobia in the construction. Homosexuality, a marginalized social identity, is clearly excluded from *us*.

One deviation from this trend was in 2005 when Kanye West made headlines during an interview by declaring that "everyone in hip-hop discriminates against gay people" and "I wanna just, to come on TV and just tell my rappers, just tell my friends, 'Yo, stop it'" after reflection upon discovering that one of his cousins is gay (Weiner, 2009). However, Kanye West never addresses homophobia in his lyrics and on the contrary, in his lyrics of a song released after he made this proclamation, he takes steps to distance himself from associations with being gay as he is careful to invoke the phrase "no homo" as a disclaimer. Indeed, homosexuality has been called the antithesis of the hyper-masculine world of hip-hop. There is not a single openly gay rapper in either analysis group. In music that is purportedly progressive, how do we account for not just the lack of representation of women and gay men in *us*, but also overtly homophobic and misogynistic lyrics and imagery which recreate the oppression of women and gay men?

Accounting for representations of gender and sexuality

Thus, to an extent the sexism and homophobia that characterizes the imagery of mainstream hip-hop spills into some of its more progressive articulations. This oppressive language and imagery seems to present a challenge if we are in fact to conceptualize this music as progressive. For how can we think of lyrics that objectify and sexualize women and lyrics that vilify homosexuality and gay people as progressive claims made on behalf of oppressed people? How do we reconcile rappers who offer some incredibly insightful and nuanced understandings of oppression but also use sexist and homophobic language? How do we reconcile the sexism and homophobia in hip-hop which present constructions of women and gay people that promote their continued oppression with the idea that rappers are progressive voices speaking out on

behalf of the oppressed? How is it that a progressive music that speaks about promoting freedom, equality, social justice, and liberation can be not only largely silent to sexism and homophobia but also actively promote these oppressions? Is hip-hop's representation of social problems a social problem?

Here, we are confronted with a fascinating and problematic paradox that would be disingenuous to neglect to mention in a project related to the construction of social problems in progressive hip-hop. One explanation for the sexist and homophobic themes in the sample is that these issues arise from outside of hip-hop and thus speak to larger issues of gender and sexuality in American society. Sexism and homophobia predate hip-hop, and as any social problems textbook would argue, hip-hop continues to manifest within a homophobic, patriarchal society that structurally privileges men and straight people in often invisible ways. Thus, perhaps it should not be surprising that hip-hop culture and music would be sexist and heterosexist despite its progressive claims towards race and class. As a cultural movement that arose within broader social norms, values, and ideologies, it should not be surprising to find these images within hip-hop. However, despite the structural realities that may explain a source of sexism and homophobia, hip-hop promotes and profits from such oppressive imagery and thus seems in some way implicated in it.

In considering this oppressive imagery with respect to the research question, it is interesting to note an element of conformity to mainstream hip-hop imagery. While misogynistic and homophobic imagery is not unique to the corporate analysis group, I find it interesting that the artist in the sample whose work is perhaps most characterized by this imagery, Nas, is not just corporately-produced but also the best-selling and most

mainstream of the artists. Perhaps there are market implications. How would directly challenging sexism and homophobia affect record sales and the perceptions of legitimacy of progressive artists?

One possible defense to critiques of these problematic lyrics, at least with respect to women, that is offered by the rappers is that they are only speaking about *some* women and not women in general. For example, note Nas's defense of "the makings of the perfect bitch:"

All the girls that I names are queens / no disrespect (2004, corporate)

The implication here is that if the particular women he is speaking of weren't queens then it would be acceptable to disrespect them as he does to other women in other songs. Hip-hop scholars discuss the duality that is created featuring the good sisters/queens on one side and the bitches/hoes on the other. Rose (2008) questions the legitimacy of a distinction that spares some women from misogynistic critique in the context of a patriarchal society. Also interesting is that there is no such attempt made to defend certain homosexual behavior or the "good" gay people.

Marc Lamont Hill (2010) reminds us that this bitch/queen binary has characterized progressive manifestations of hip-hop throughout its history. Hill roots this binary in the tradition of the patriarchal Afrocentric organizations that inspired and informed the earliest manifestations of progressive hip-hop. I would add that there has been a historical tendency for these organizations influential on hip-hop's evolution to be characterized by homophobia.

Moreover, it may be helpful to consider the problematic imagery with respect to women and gay men presented by predominantly heterosexual men of color in terms of Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) claim that individuals may simultaneously be both the

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oppressor and the oppressed with respect to one's various social characteristics. It is interesting to observe that the intersecting oppressions which characterize Collins's matrix of domination play out in the sphere of progressive hip-hop. The rappers of both analysis groups speak to the dire consequences of the implications of intersections of race, class, and gender for the black male underclass. Although the rappers speak to likelihood of incarceration and victimization due to violent crime, both fears legitimated by data[7], they interestingly largely fail to consider their heterosexual and male privilege and their roles as oppressor. As Michael Eric Dyson reminds us:

> Historically, it has been difficult for black men to understand that although we're victims, we also victimize; that although we're assaulted, we also assault. . . . As with all groups of oppressed people, it's never a matter of either/or; it's both/and. You can be victimized by white supremacy and patriarchy at the same time extend black male supremacy. Just because "the white man's foot is on your neck" doesn't mean that your foot can't in turn be on a black female's neck" (2007, p. 106).

Collins's matrix of domination, while not a justification or excuse for oppressive imagery, may help to explain the paradox of how lyrics which can be very critical of racism and classism can also be sexist and homophobic.

Thus, *we* can perhaps be best understood as an oppressed collective identity located primarily at a particular intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. However, that being said there are also attempts by the rappers to push us beyond some of these categories to make progressive hip-hop more of a universal voice for the marginalized and the oppressed. If progressive hip-hop is to evolve in such a way, then it seems that it must not only refrain from overtly promoting and recreating homophobia

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[7] 1 in 3 black men are involved in the criminal justice system (Mauer and Huling, 1995); homicide is the leading cause of death for young black males between ages 15 to 34 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010).

and sexism but also be open to critiques that challenge sexism and homophobia with the same vitriol as is reserved for racism and classism and become more inclusive and accommodate and create a space for women and gay men. Otherwise, as a progressive movement, it would seem that hip-hop it is just a movement to advance some people at the expense of others. Is that really progressive?   Is that really progress?

Conclusions

The artists of both analysis groups make claims on behalf of *us*. They represent *us* as an oppressed social group and describe *our* experience of marginalization. However, the particular social group represented as *us* can be considered in a number of different ways. That said, *we* are framed largely in terms of a particular intersection of race and class, and a close reading of the lyrics reveals more subtle but inescapable gender and sexuality components to *us*. Although the experience of *us* is represented in largely the same way in both the corporate and independent analysis groups with respect to racial oppression, one may notice that the most direct, militant, and subversive claims regarding class oppression tend to come from the independent analysis group. The qualitative difference between the representations of *us* in the two analysis groups becomes more pronounced when we consider the resistant facet of the collective identity.

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

Introduction

In considering the *us* versus *them* narrative of social life represented in the lyrics of both analysis groups, the second noteworthy facet of *us* is resistance. In addition to descriptions of how the artists and the social group they claim to represent are

oppressed, the lyrics are also characterized by active resistance against these social realities. This element of resistance ascribed to *us* reveals lyrics with an underlying theme of activism and an agenda of positive social change for *the people*. In this section, I explore *us* as a resistant collective and continue to consider the social group that is encapsulated by this collective.

Moreover, I consider the project of resistance that emerges in the lyrics. Although all of the lyrics in the sample are characterized by resistance to varying degrees, my analysis reveals that there is neither consensus as to what this resistance should entail nor mutually agreed-upon goals of the project of resistance—a project that lacks contextualization within a unified and coherent political movement. With respect to the research question, the interesting trend that emerged in the previous section continues to develop here: the most critical, subversive, and militant claims and representations of resistance are characteristic of the independent sample group.

Black Revolutionary Music?

Progressive hip-hop is represented in both analysis groups as a subversive art form. An immediately obvious technique through which the rappers clearly attempt to represent *us* in terms of resistance is by overtly identifying as "rebels" or "revolutionaries" in their lyrics. Nearly all rappers of both analysis groups invoke one of these two terms in their lyrics to describe themselves. Even those who do not identify and frame themselves (and in turn their music) as rebels or revolutionaries invoke and identify with subversive terms such as fighter, gangsta, hustler, and thug that signify resistance and connote their place within a resistant collective.

In identifying as rebels and revolutionaries, the rappers make it clear that they are carving out a particular substantive space within hip-hop and suggest a political function

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and substantive purpose inherent to their music. As I discuss in depth in Chapter 5, these progressive manifestations of hip-hop are intentionally distinguished from the larger hip-hop cultural landscape. This is not *just* hip hop for aesthetic or financial purposes (though it may and often does satisfy these ends as well) (Light, 2005).

More specifically, the music in the sample is largely represented as contemporary Black Revolutionary music. As discussed in the previous section, the rappers of both analysis groups racialize *us* by locating themselves and their work within black culture, the black intellectual canon, and Black History. However, as we consider the resistant facet of the music, it should be noted that the black historical figures alluded to earlier in this chapter whom the progressive rappers often locate their work alongside tend to be revolutionary figures and members/associates of subversive black social, religious, and cultural organizations. The rappers do not merely locate their work in Black History; more specifically, they locate their work in historical black resistance.

Artists throughout both analysis groups identify with, locate their work in the tradition of, and cite (and sample) the words of members of the Black Panther Party, the Nation of Islam, and other subversive organizations as key signifiers of resistance. Consider the following examples in which Common and Public Enemy connect their work to such figures:

> *In the Spirit of God / In the Spirit of the Ancestors / In the Spirit of the Black Panthers / In the Spirit of Assata Shakur / We make this movement towards freedom / For all those who have been oppressed, and all those in the struggle* (Common, "A Song for Assata," 2000, corporate)

> *So I wreck like I'm possessed by Malcolm X* (Public Enemy & Paris, 2006, "Rise," independent)

Note that in each of these examples, the artists situate themselves in the context of the work of historical Black Revolutionary figures. Moreover, these two examples represent

a trend that continues to develop throughout this chapter regarding the subtle distinction between corporate and independent examples. Despite references to Assata Shakur, the Black Panthers, freedom, and oppression, the corporate example is not characterized by the same action-oriented subversiveness as the independent example.

Note the connotations of agency inherent to the use of the subversive verb "wreck." The independent example is not just dedicated to a black revolutionary figure: it is represented as being embodied by one. This subtle distinction is significant in that it is not an isolated example of slight variances in language but rather is indicative of a larger trend throughout this chapter and the analysis with respect to the qualitative distinction between how *we* are represented in the two analysis groups. In addition to locating their work in the tradition of black resistance movements by citing and referencing revolutionary figures, the rappers employ other codes that signify Black Nationalism or black resistance, such as a raised fist representing the Black Power Movement:

> *Throw up a fist for Black Power, cause all we want is his freedom* (Nas, "Get Down", 2002, corporate).

> *We come back to the days of, grenades up / Black fist raised up, we stay rough* (Paris, 2003, independent)

Each of these examples is characterized by the symbol of a raised fist connoting Black Power. Yet again, note the subtle distinction between these two examples. The example from the independent analysis group is characterized by a militant edge vis-à-vis the grenade reference alongside the raised fist whereas the corporate example more generally speaks to freedom. This militant edge is more characteristic of the representations of resistance in the independent analysis group.

A key technique in which the music of both analysis groups is ascribed with black revolutionary thought is through the sampling of the voices of significant figures from the Black Panthers, Nation of Islam, and empowering organizations. By incorporating samples of recordings of the speech of these figures and literally inserting their voices into hip-hop songs the words of black activists and revolutionaries are fully integrated with the music and a bridge is constructed between historical black revolutionary figures and contemporary hip-hop music. Such techniques of connecting black revolutionary voices to contemporary hip-hop production both "hip-hopify" the black revolutionaries and make the hip-hop revolutionary. The words and ideas of these figures are kept alive and presented to a new generation through the palatable, accessible, and "cool" medium of hip-hop music.

Furthermore, this technique substantiates the legitimacy of both considering hip-hop artists alongside black revolutionaries and conceptualizing hip-hop music as a revolutionary medium. Rappers' work is located in the messages and objectives of these subversive figures and movements. These techniques contextualize the lyrics in a history of resistance against an oppressive power structure. The rappers construct their music as not "just" music but rather as resistance, and the rappers construct themselves as subversive, resistant figures such as the ones they identify with and locate their work in the tradition of. As such, we seemingly hear rappers and revolutionaries share the microphone, presenting the two on the same level in the same context and passing the torch of resistance, so to speak.

One of the more profound examples of "sampling resistance" is a recent Paris track consisting solely of a sample of Reverend Jeremiah Wright's infamous "chickens

coming home to roost" post-9/11 speech set to a hip-hop beat ("The Violence of the Lambs," 2008, independent). Although such samples of controversial voices are contained on corporately produced songs in the sample, it seems noteworthy and profoundly interesting that a song comprised entirely by one such sample, particularly one as controversial as Reverend Wright's comments, is found on an independent release. There is no analogous example in the corporate analysis group. This provides evidence for a developing conclusion, which is that there are indeed subversive and critical messages within corporately produced progressive hip-hop. However, the most overtly subversive, extreme, and "in your face" examples are generally found in the independently produced music.

Has a primary expression of black revolutionary thought migrated to hip-hop music? What is the relationship between hip-hop and black revolutionary thought? Has a strand of hip-hop become a primary source for the spread of black revolutionary ideas, particularly in such a way that *may* emotionally engage the audience, particularly the coveted youth demographic that politics and leaders seem to have trouble reaching? Such are a few of the interesting questions raised by this emergence from the data. Here we find evidence of Boyd's (2002) argument that although the Black Power movement was largely stopped by the state at the macro level, it has continued to remain vibrantly alive at the grassroots and cultural levels and has informed hip-hop.

As we consider the resistant component of the collective identity constructed in progressive hip-hop, let us revisit the representation of "the struggle" addressed earlier in this chapter. The significance and extent of the struggle that *we* are conceptualized as being engaged in is revealed by the regular use of war as a metaphor to describe

and add a qualitative intensity to the struggle. Invoking the term "war" underscores the

perceived significance and extent of the struggle. The resistance is not just a mere

struggle, it's a war. *We* are represented as being engaged in combat with *them*. Both

corporate and independent artists often invoke such war metaphors to describe this

situation both literally (*our* people are getting killed) and culturally (*we* are forced to

conform to *their* history, *their* constructions of reality, and *their* norms and meanings).

Consider how Talib Kweli refers to his participation in a war:

> *Bangin on the system, fightin my kind of war / Loud as a whisper, quiet as a
> lion's roar* ("Listen!!!" 2007, corporate).

Note that in this corporately produced example, Talib Kweli describes his resistance

against the system as fighting a war. This seems like a subversive and militant

corporate message. Thus, it should be noted that such language is not absent from the

lyrics of the corporate analysis group. However, compare this language to that used by

dead prez in their vibrant conceptualization and repeated framing of the various issues

that characterize the struggle as war:

> *The cops stop you just cause you black / That's war / Run your prints
> through the system / That's war / When they call my hood a drug zone /
> That's war / Slum lords charge me for the rent / That's war / Why they so
> rich and we poor? / That's war / If you young and black you sell crack /
> That's war / The White House is the rock house / That's war / George Bush
> coming out his mouth / That's war / Chillin' on the corner with your gang /
> That's war / Po-po do the same damn thing / That's war / When they
> murdered Amadou Diallo / That's war / Marching through the streets is a
> strategy of war / Knowing self defense is a strategy of war / Soldiers try to
> link with other soldiers / That's war / Revolutionaries gotta know the art of
> war* ("That's War," 2002, independent).

In this example from the independent analysis group, dead prez not only describe

their resistance as war, but provide a number of concrete and specific examples which

illustrate this war. Specifically, they describe racism embedded within the criminal

justice system and wealth inequality as a war against *us*. Moreover, they describe what they call their strategies of war including organizing, marching, and self-defense. Both the corporate and independent examples locate *us* in the context of a war, adding a qualitative intensity to the struggle. Yet at the same time, the war references in the corporate analysis group lack the intensity and particulars of the descriptions that characterize the independent analysis group.

This war metaphor is further illustrated by the ubiquitous use of the term "soldier" throughout the music of both analysis groups. The artists conceptualize themselves as soldiers but also *the people*, their audience. Paris speaks of his Hard Truth Soldiers and dead prez refer to the People Army.

Both the corporate and independent analysis groups are characterized by resistance. There are in fact militant and subversive representations of resistance in the corporately produced analysis group. However, that being said a close reading of these representations reveals a qualitative difference between the corporate and independent groups in that the more militant and subversive presentations of resistance tend to characterize the independent analysis groups.

Globally Minded

Complicating generalizations about resistance and the construction of social problems in progressive hip-hop lyrics is the renewed issue of who is represented by the constructors of these problems. Who are *we*? What social groups are included within the resistant collective for whom the rappers speak? How can we best conceptualize the perspective from which progressive rappers construct social problems and the collective identity that they construct?

Although both analysis groups are characterized by Black Revolutionary themes and thus speak to the specific struggle of the African diaspora, there are attempts in both to make the struggle more inclusive. Through claims of resistance, *we* are extended to include not just the entire black and Latino urban underclass in the United States, hip-hop's key demographic (Watkins, 2005), but rather oppression is pushed beyond U.S. borders and is conceptualized on a global scale. Thus, on one hand, hip-hop resistance represents Black resistance with a particular emphasis on its inner-city underclass constituents. *We* are strongly informed by a Black revolutionary influence. Progressive hip-hop locates itself in the vibrant history of Black resistance and can be largely conceptualized as a contemporary manifestation of Black resistance.

On the other hand, just as some progressive rappers push us to consider a marginalized collective identity beyond blackness and race while still maintaining a core collective identity heavily informed by issues of race, there is also a push by some rappers in both analysis groups to expand the scope of hip-hop resistance towards a more global perspective. Some progressive rappers locate their resistance in the context of other resistant groups engaged in similar struggles throughout the world and construct a shared global struggle against the lingering effects of, and contemporary manifestations of, all forms of colonialism and oppression. Thus, the intersection of race and class, in which the collective marginalized identity is largely constructed, becomes understood in the context of a global colonial phenomenon. Hip-hop resistance becomes a more integrated, global project and in turn, takes on a more global identity.

Immortal Technique is a key example of an artist in the sample constructing a more unified, integrated conception of the oppression experienced by various disenfranchised groups around the world. I heavily lean on examples from his work here because his lyrics are characterized by a subversive edge that is unmatched in the corporate analysis group. Having roots in Peru and being informed by Latin American struggles, he, while occasionally rapping *en Español*, locates *us* in terms of various countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, and suggests a shared experience of oppression among these and other countries. Consider one such example:

> *When I speak about Harlem, I speak to the world / The little Afghan boy,*
> *and the Bosnian girl / The African in Sudan, the people of Kurdistan / The*
> *third world American, indigenous man / Palestinians, Washington Heights,*
> *Dominicans / Displaced New Orleans citizens / Beachfront Brazilian favelas*
> *that you livin in* ("Harlem Renaissance," 2008, independent).

Here, Immortal Technique links the marginalized experience of life in Harlem, NY to that of various groups of oppressed around the world. Likewise, Mos Def pushes *us* towards a more global identity as he considers a more globally informed struggle drawing a parallel between the situation in the inner cities of the United States and that of other countries:

> *Palestine, Kosovo, Kashmir / No different than the avenues right here*
> ("War," 2004, corporate).

The independent example is more descriptive and specific in making the connection to particular people around the globe. Whereas the independent example describes the people in these oppressed contexts in greater detail, the corporate example briefly mentions the names of the three places. These typically brief, general, superficial claims of the corporate analysis group contrast with the more detailed and

elaborate depictions of a global struggle that characterize the resistance of the

independent analysis group. However, consider the following example from Talib Kweli:

> *Yeah I know a city that's surrounded by a beautiful beach / The economy boosted by the drugs they move in the street / More clearer than the crystal sky, blue as the beast / The people ain't got shoes for they feet, or food to eat / So they hurtin but what's for certain you can get you some heat / And over beef you laid to rest like you was gettin some sleep / Where the little kids get ammunition (word) you can't get no nutrition / Or any type of suitable living condition listen / They shoot you over that paper, its just survivalist human nature / to put you out of your misery like euthanasia (yeah) / Don't let them fool you we ain't different than the youth in Asia / Africa and Europe, it's a small world we truly neighbors* ("The Nature," 2007, corporate)

In this corporate example, it seems that Talib Kweli specifically details *the struggle* of a

particular international context, and then proceeds to conceptualize *us* alongside the

youth in Asia, Africa, and Europe. Although Talib Kweli pushes towards a more global

conceptualization of *us*, compare this example to a more overtly subversive

independent example from Immortal Technique:

> *I'm from where Soviet weapons still decide elections / Military is like the mafia: you pay for protection / Catamite sex toys, is what the country sells / And rich white businessmen make the best clientele / I'm from where they too pussy to come film Survivor / And they murder Coca-Cola union organizers / I'm from where the justice system esta podrido / Fuck government niggaz politic over perico / Rebelde conocido, enterado vivo, como otro argentino desparecido / cause Rico laws don't apply to the CIA / and mother fuckers make sneakers for a quarter a day / I'm from where they overthrow democratic leaders / not for the people but for the Wall Street Journal readers. . . . / So I'ma start a global riot / that not even your fake / anti-communist dictators can keep quiet / fuck your charity medicine, try to murder me / the immunizations you gave us were full of mercury / so now I see the Third World like the rap game soldier / nationalize the industry and take it over!* ("The 3rd World," 2008)

This description pushing towards a globally informed understanding of *us* is

characterized by not just a level of specificity and detail but a critical, subversive take

that is unmatched in any example from the corporate analysis group. He implicates

corporate interests in *the struggle* of the third world. Moreover, he offers his project as being the start of a global riot.

Representations of *us* in terms of a global struggle are also evidenced by artists of both analysis groups locating themselves alongside militant figures and resistance groups and movements of the world. The rappers' locating of themselves in terms of subversive historical figures is not limited to solely black American revolutionaries, even among the African-American rappers with nationalistic messages. The project of resistance transcends lines of race, ethnicity, and nationality as the artists juxtapose Black revolutionaries alongside others who share similar class and cultural struggles.

For example, consider how Immortal Technique locates his work in Black resistance:

> *I got a Black Panther mentality with a spic fist* ("Dominant Species," 2002, independent).

Yet in addition to contextualizing his work in terms of the ideology of the Black Panthers, note how Immortal Technique asserts his "spic fist." Moreover, consider how he locates his work alongside Latin American revolutionary figures:

> *Immortal Technique the resurrected Che Guevara / But y'all cats are just a bunch of fake Tony Montanas / I bring drama like revolución Cubana / And rock stages like my last name was Santana. . . . / My 'stilo is Túpac Amaru Y Zapatista* ("No Me Importa," 2002, independent)

Here, in comparing his work to Che Guevera, Tupac Amaru, the Cuban Revolution, and the Zapatistas, the resistant claims-making voice is expanded beyond US borders. *Our* resistance is thought of as not just historical black resistance but rather in terms of a more global project.

Similarly, in "I Have a Dream Too" (corporate, 2004) dead prez declare that the song is a "revolutionary salute" to "the comrades" including Black activists,

revolutionaries, and political prisoners such as Twyman Meyers, Kuwasi Balagoon, Jalil Muntaqim, Herman Bell, George Jackson, Jonathan Jackson, and Bunchy Carter. However, also included alongside these Black Revolutionaries is American Indian Movement political prisoner Leonard Peltier. Furthermore, in this song they include the Black Liberation Army in their dedications, but also the Kenyan Mau Mau and the Mexican Zapatistas. Finally they punctuate the revolutionary dedications with the phrase "Black and Brown Power" promoting unity in Black and Latino American, African, and Latin American resistance. Finally, dead prez declare "long live all souljas" followed by "Uhuru," the Swahili term for freedom which has been appropriated for use in the name of a particular Black power movement in the US as well as in various freedom from colonial movement groups in Africa.

It is interesting to consider here that not only are historical revolutionary figures referenced to inform the music with a resistant flavor, but at times these figures represent various global struggles, not solely specific to the black and Latino urban underclass. What is also interesting to consider in these examples is that the corporate example features a specific, detailed list of revolutionary figures that matches the level of description characteristic of the independent analysis group. This example illustrates that despite the general trend concerning the distinction between the two analysis groups with respect to specificity and detail that is emerging through this project, corporate production status does not completely preclude detailed elements of resistance. However, consider this emergence in the context of a point I raise later in this chapter: that dead prez, the artists who offer this detailed list of revolutionary figures, cease to be corporately produced by the end of the time period of the sample.

As discussed earlier with respect to the Black Revolutionary influence on representations of social life in progressive hip-hop, samples are invoked in songs such as Immortal Technique's "Harlem Renaissance" (2008, independent) and dead prez's "Propaganda" (2000, corporate) to clearly and overtly promote this idea of a shared, global, class-informed struggle and in turn conceptualize *us* on a global scale. Though outside of the scope of this particular project and thus their work was not included in the sample, one can consider the recent rise of globally informed rappers whose work has taken a place in American popular music such as Damian "Jr. Gong" Marley, K'naan, Emmanuel Jal, and M.I.A. Such politically engaged and socially conscious rappers, many who have worked with those whose work is included in the sample, expand the collective identity that hip-hop represents. These artists act as voices speaking to the struggle in contemporary Jamaica, Somalia, Sudan, and Sri Lanka, respectively, in a project of cultural exchange throughout the African diaspora.

There is a clear element of the music of both analysis groups that consider *us* and *our* project of resistance beyond the United States' borders. Thus, the collective that these artists attest to make claims on behalf of may be conceptualized in terms of the historical legacy of U.S. Black resistance and in terms of similar oppressed groups and historical revolutionary figures across the globe. In doing so, the rappers broaden the scope of and complicate who *we* represents. Whereas on one hand *we* can be primarily thought of as the black and Latino urban underclass, at times *we* is pushed to include oppressed people around the world in analogous situations. Borders are transcended as the struggle over here is considered in terms of the struggle over there.

Thus, one way of thinking about *us* is in terms of what the Perceptionists call "Black Dialogue." Considering Ellison's claim that hip-hop is rooted in the West African musical tradition, hip-hop can be considered an Afro-Atlantic yet multicultural creation. In the absence of a Garvey-esque physical return to Africa, it seems that the music in the sample represents a cultural diaspora of sorts by serving as a space for cultural production and exchange. People of African descent throughout the world may engage in a shared hip-hop dialogue.

Interestingly, these global representations of *us* compliment scholarly findings (Perry, 2008; Osumare, 2008). These artists push us to consider the Hip-Hop Nation in terms of what Osumare calls "the Hip Hop Globe" (2008, p. 173). She and other scholars (George, 1999) consider how the globalization of this American export informed by African and Caribbean aesthetics and cultures has begun to inform marginalized cultures around the world, or what Osumare calls hip-hop's connective marginalities.

Scholars such as Perry (2008) discuss how African-descended people throughout the world embrace a hip-hop informed notion of blackness as a signifier of marginality. Hip-hop becomes a space in which blackness is characterized by diversity but also by a shared history and a globally understood racial identity. Through hip-hop, Perry argues, transnational blackness is recreated as a diasporic identity. Yet interestingly, in its recreation, hip-hop complicates and expands ideas of blackness among groups who engage hip-hop in various contexts throughout the world. As these rappers push us to think about resistance in terms of a diasporic blackness, and in doing so, they

complicate and expand what this phrase means as global rappers who may not be traditionally thought of as black adopt this identity.

Thus, *we* in a globalized sense can be considered a voice of and conversations among the various pockets of the African diaspora. However, another way of understanding this collective is that it becomes a global empowering voice which complicates, challenges, and expands traditional understandings of blackness and the African diaspora. The diaspora becomes infused with a more multicultural flavor informed by other pockets of colonized and oppressed people. From the offices of bourgeois African-Americans to Palestinian refugee camps to *barrios cubanos*, hip-hop culture and music flourish within diverse groups around the world in what KRS-One calls an international culture ("Gro-oh!", 2008, independent).

Thus, to attempt to answer the question who *we* represents, I will say that *we* simultaneously represents different groups of people depending in the level of analysis. In a specific, narrow sense, the music in the sample can be thought of as the post-industrial voice representing the invisible American Black and Latino urban underclass. In a broader sense, progressive hip-hop may be conceptualized as "black dialogue" and represents a Pan-African diasporic conversation. However, in an even broader sense, progressive hip-hop complicates the meanings of the African diaspora and "black dialogue" as it represents various oppressed groups who appropriate and use it to confront whatever injustices or oppressions they face in various social contexts. I conclude that although rooted in and speaking to the U.S. ghetto experience, progressive hip-hop is evolving into a global project of cultural resistance within what Osumare (2008) calls the global hood.

That being said, whether *we* represents resistance to the oppression that characterizes the American hood or the global hood, this resistance is more thorough, subversive, and characteristic of the independent sector of hip-hop. Throughout this chapter I discuss that although both analysis groups may be characterized by rebellious, resistant representations of *us*, the resistance of the independent analysis groups is more detailed and nuanced whereas that of the corporate analysis group is generally more superficial and general. This trend applies to the conceptualization of *us* in global terms. Let us now consider the music of the sample and the corporate/independent distinction in terms of how the music represents activism and pragmatic social change.

The Hip-Hop Project of Resistance

Introduction

Despite the subtle qualitative distinction between resistance as represented in the lyrics of the corporate and independent analysis groups, artists of both groups do indeed represent themselves as resistant and locate their music within a project of resistance. The question then becomes what is the relationship between resistant hip-hop and pragmatic social change. As they say, "It's bigger than hip-hop." This phrase finds itself moving from the pages of rappers' lyrics (dead prez, "Hip-Hop") to the titles of scholars' books (Asante, 2008).

This increasingly used phrase acknowledges that for a project of resistance, the rebellious, critical, empowering and inspiring music of the unrepresented voices at the margins of social life that hip-hop at its best may embody is in and of itself insufficient to create positive social change. As Watkins asserts, "[t]he key issue that has always permeated hip-hop—providing young people real life chances and choices—is and

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always has been bigger than hip-hop" (2005, p. 253). Such pragmatic social change

requires a mechanism to organize *the people* at the grassroots level or a political

framework to harness hip-hop's energy and pursue social justice in a meaningful way.

This is a project that clearly extends beyond the creation of beats and socially

conscious rhymes.

Yet, at the same time the powerful role of music in inspiring those who may

engage in such mobilization should not be minimized or underestimated. While hip-hop

music may not in and of itself undermine oppressive social structures, it may play a role

elevating the consciousness and energy of those who may, as well as those who are

marginalized by these structures. Perhaps hip-hop has a place in facilitating such an

awakening—a crucial prerequisite to the rise of a hip-hop political movement with a

specific platform of social change.

There is a clear component of resistance to the lyrics of the artists of both

analysis groups. However, this resistance comes in many flavors. Resistance is

articulated and pushed forth in a number of different ways by the various voices of the

sample. Of particular interest to the particular research question is the emergence that

the representations of resistance that are most revolutionary, militant, and threatening to

the status quo are independently produced or of artists whose work shifted from

corporate to independent production status by the end of the time period of the sample.

Moreover, the corporate artists tend to promote an idea of resistance that is ultimately

more about reform and working within the system.

"Raptivism" and empowerment

KRS-One invokes a phrase represented by the acronym H.I.P. H.O.P.:

Her Infinite Power Helping Oppressed People ("Hip-hop Lives," 2008, independent)

Indeed, a key facet of the project of resistance as represented in both analysis groups is lyrics that speak to the empowerment of particular individuals engaged in *the struggle*. This empowerment is characterized by hopeful messages encouraging *the people* to recognize and embrace their agency and work towards positive social change. These lyrics emphasize despite our suffering, marginalization, and oppression, a better future is possible. However, *we* must take action. For example, consider the tenacious, empowering mantra that Mos Def repeats again and again for emphasis:

> *This is a song, got two lyrics / Very simple and plain we can all sing together / Nobody has to feel left out / Join in, this is the song people need to be singing right now / When they tell you you can't, you shouldn't, you won't / Tell 'em this: / There is a way / No matter what they say (4x) / Don't give up, don't give in (8x)* (Mos Def, "There is a Way," 2006, corporate)

In the context of the oppression described earlier in this chapter, Mos Def offers an uplifting message of hope. It is a message that he frames as being one for *the people* to sing together and one that they need to sing. Compare this lyrics with the empowerment that characterizes the repeating refrain of Paris's "Neighborhood Watch:"

> *Time to leave the wrong for right / Gotta make a change in my life / Shake all the stress and strife / And gain wealth with knowledge of self, baby / Settle down and raise a fam / And know about that master plan / That's why we gotta understand / Nobody looking out for us but us, true baby* (2008, independent)

With respect to the research question, it is interesting to first note the distinction between the empowerment represented in these two examples. My analysis suggests that the same distinction in the subversiveness of the resistance between the two analysis groups also characterizes the distinction between these messages of empowerment. Whereas representations of empowerment that most overtly challenge

the status quo and the system tend to emanate from the independent analysis group, the corporate analysis group tends to represent empowering individuals within the system but not as overtly challenging the system itself.

Here, Paris speaks of the necessity to empower himself and make positive changes. However, he speaks of this necessity in the context of and in opposition to a master plan. He suggests that nobody is looking out for *us* so we need to look out for *ourselves*. It is a subtle distinction but it fits into the general emerging distinction between the two analysis groups.

Consider an additional way in which the progressive rappers in the sample construct empowering, uplifting messages: by celebrating the very social characteristics that characterize *the people*'s oppression. For instance, both analysis groups assert that blackness is a basis for oppression in contemporary American society, but black pride is promoted and a self-determining blackness is celebrated. For example, consider the following analogous examples from Mos Def and Paris:

We black and proud (Mos Def, "Modern Marvel," 2004, corporate).

When I say it loud better know that I'm black and I'm proud (Paris, "Make It Hardcore," 2006, independent)

Here, both artists channel James Brown's famous anthem of the 1960's Black Power Movement. Consider the analogous celebrations of blackness in the two analysis groups in contrast with representations of resistance. A key theme that has been emerging with respect to resistance is that the independent representations tend to be more nuanced, detailed, and overtly subversive than those of the corporate group. Yet interesting, when we consider such "conscious" messages which characterize progressive hip-hop—messages that are not particularly militant, subversive, or critical

of the contemporary power structure but are rather more about uplifting *the people*—we find that the messages are equally representative of the two analysis groups and feature no real distinction between them.

This is an interesting point to consider in contrast to the critical messages because my analysis suggests that they reveal an independent group characterized by the idea that the status quo is *not* ok, thus the impetus for resistance. Yet the corporate analysis group tends to be more characterized about empowering individuals within the confines of a particular structure rather than challenging the structure itself. Such lyrics suggest that a key role that hip-hop may play in confronting systematic oppression is that it offers words to elevate the spirits of and perhaps inspire the people who may then participate in this project. Asante (2008) observes that true art does not just reflect the world as it is, but rather it presents additional possibilities. Along with the descriptions of the intense suffering of *the people* that characterize the music of both analysis groups, the rappers present hope for a better future and suggest a degree of agency that *we* may embody to bring about positive social change.

One important point concerning the uplifting messages is that they do not merely promote personal hope and the empowerment of individuals. Rather, these ideas should be considered in the context of the collective *we* that has been discussed throughout this chapter. Failing to consider the voices in the sample as representing a collective risks addressing social problems solely in terms of personal solutions. Social problems are clearly discussed in collective terms. The project is about positive social change for *the people*, not individual people, with a distinction between the two analysis

groups with respect to the challenging the system. So how do *the people* pursue social change?

Path to positive social change

The lyrics of both analysis groups are characterized by a fundamental element of activism. Consider that Common asserts that the very purpose behind his music is to inspire:

> *I found the purpose why I MC / Inspire a young world to be greater than me*
> ("Changes," 2008, corporate)

Indeed, artists throughout the sample inscribe their rhymes with claims that the people need to mobilize, unite, and make changes. Yet, the questions then becomes how? How do rappers such as Common *specifically* suggest that *we* should resist *our* oppression and improve *our* life experience? What is the path that the rappers offer *the people*?

These questions related to lyrics, activism, and resisting oppression force us to consider the complicated relationship between music/culture and politics/social change. The Civil Rights Movement is universally recognized as a social movement, as is the Black Power movement. In the context of each of these movements was empowering and inspiring music. Where is the Hip-Hop Movement in which hip-hop music is contextualized? How do the artists in the sample push hip-hop the cultural movement towards becoming hip-hop the political force?

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the artists of both analysis groups offer vivid descriptions of the oppression that characterizes the life experience of *the people*. In the next chapter I discuss how the rappers in the sample invoke a scathing critique of the power structure and construct an account of social problems informed by a

sociological perspective. However, it is interesting to note that absent from depictions of *the struggle* are fully fleshed-out descriptive, pragmatic, sociological accounts of solutions to these problems. Consider the following two examples in which the rappers state their intentions to organize to promote positive social change:

> *Yeah our lives fucked up, no doubt / All this shit we go through every day / Sometimes a nigga don't know what the fuck to do / But see I got my niggas / And we gon organize a people army / And we gon get control over our own lives* (dead prez, "We Want Freedom," 2000, corporate)

> *There's plenty of us out there, who might dare / Form an independent state, where life is more fair / We'll have our own laws, own schools, own cash too / and none of these funds will flow to you / We're cutting you off cause it's clear we don't share the same views / What have we got to lose?* (the Perceptionists, "What Have We Got to Lose?," 2005, independent).

These two examples are indicative of representations in the sample of the types of solutions to social problems that are offered and what the unified activism encouraged by the artists would entail. dead prez assert their intention to organize an army to combat their oppressed experience and empower themselves. The Perceptionists offer the idea of forming an independent state. Other impetuses for positive social change offered throughout both analysis groups include supporting black-owned businesses (Immortal Technique, "Harlem Renaissance," 2008, independent) and eating healthy food (dead prez, "Be Healthy," 2000, corporate) among other examples.

However, the activism that is promoted in the lyrics of both analysis groups tends to be rather vague. How should *the people* organize? How specifically can *the people* tackle the structures that create *our* oppression? Pragmatically speaking, what should *the people* do to satisfy the ends described by the artists throughout the sample? In the lyrics of both analysis groups, social justice, empowerment, freedom, and equality are all floated as goals, but questions remain as to what the specific goals related to these

vague, general terms are, and how *the people* would begin to go about achieving these goals. The hip-hop lyrics in the sample thrive in a diagnostic function but leave something to be desired with respect to being prescriptive. No clear, tangible path is outlined to eliminate the oppression that characterizes the life experience of *the people*. Where is the hip-hop platform?

Watkins (2005) argues that hip-hop's role as a force for change has been mostly symbolic and has changed American popular culture more so than American society. My analysis of progressive rapper's lyrics suggests that the rappers of both analysis groups do not present a political platform, nor do they detail a map for people to pragmatically follow towards change—but should they? Holding rappers accountable for failing to provide solutions to social problems begs the question that as artists they should be expected to do so. As artists who engage in what Chuck D calls "raptivism" ("Revolverlution," independent) and embrace revolutionary personas, should they also be offering pragmatic steps for *the people* to take to improve their life experiences?

While it may be true as some scholars (Love, 2006) argue that the line between music/culture and politics throughout the past few hundred years of diasporic African history has been rather blurry, I lean on the sociology of music literature with respect to social movements and contend that this project is indeed bigger than hip-hop music and the role of progressive rappers should not be understood as to develop and promote particular platforms, but rather to play a role in exciting, inspiring, and empowering others of *us* to rise up, become activists, and take on this project. Consider the words of late hip-hop legend Tupac Shakur: "I'm not sayin' I'm gonna rule the world, or I'm gonna change the world, but I guarantee that I will spark the brain that will change the

world and that's our job" (White, 1997, p. 59-60). Perhaps hip-hop serves the traditional functions of popular music in social movements such as providing cohesion, increasing solidarity, igniting emotions, spreading information, creating space for discourse about alternative realities, and facilitating the cultivation of a critical consciousness (Da Silva et al, 1984; Fischlin, 2003; Berger, 2000). While the music in the sample may not necessarily be significant in recruiting outsiders to join *the struggle*, its role in "preaching to the converted" should not be neglected.

If a rapper's role is to inspire, inject a resistant movement with emotion, and increase solidarity, which is the traditional function of music in social movements, then this begs another question: Is there a movement that the rappers may inspire people to become a part of? Indeed, the notion that such protest music is most effective when it is buttressed by a concrete political movement is supported by the various strands of literature that inform the sociology of music (Lieberman, 1989; Dyson, 2007b). So where do *the people* turn if they listen to the subversive messages in hip-hop songs and decide they want to, in the words of Immortal Technique, go to "war with the system" ("Hollywood Driveby," 2008, independent)?

Whereas many of the rappers in the sample locate themselves in terms of the Black Panthers and other revolutionary groups and individuals, there does not exist an analogous contemporary vibrant political movement today that the music acts as a soundtrack to. Unfortunately, scholars suggest that these empowering messages offered by rappers are largely not contextualized within an organized political mobilization (Asante, 2008; Watkins, 2005). Perhaps we should conclude the previous sentence with the word "yet" and maybe such a mobilization is a matter of time. As I

discuss at the conclusion of this project, there have been recent attempts to mobilize the Hip-Hop Generation.

Moreover, in the context of a lack of a hip-hop political movement akin to that of the previous generation, it is interesting to consider that artists in each analysis group invoke social movement language as they represent progressive hip-hop as a movement. The first emergence that evidences this phenomenon are some terms invoked by the artists to describe *us*. For example, the term "RBG" is ubiquitous throughout dead prez's (corporate and independent) music. This term references the Pan-African red, black, and green colors of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), as well as the *Revolutionary But Gangsta* title of their second album. One can also consider Paris's Hard Truth Soldiers. I read these terms as attempts by artists in the sample to create a space for *the people* to think of themselves as a resistant collective.

Furthermore, Talib Kweli and Paris each conceptualize the record labels they have set up and/or head as movements. Talib Kweli overtly frames the imprint that he co-heads, Blacksmith Recordings, as a movement:

Blacksmith is the movement ("Stay Around"; "Listen!!!" 2007, corporate).

Likewise, Paris references his Guerilla Funk Records throughout his work:

It's a Guerrilla Funk-orchestrated counter-attack / Formulate and infiltrate 'em so the people react ("Evil," 2003, independent)

Moreover, Paris invokes social movement language to describe his recording label:

Get up, get up, get up, get up / Get up, get up, get up, get up / Don't stop the movement! Don't stop it, don't stop it / Don't stop it, don't stop it ("Don't Stop the Movement," 2008, independent).

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These corporate and independent artists each represent hip-hop music as a movement. However, these examples seem to indicate very liberal uses of the term "movement" when we consider them alongside social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement, like other social movements, had songs that became strongly associated with it. However, this movement was also characterized by grassroots organization which afforded people a mechanism to channel the energy perhaps inspired in part by the music in a coherent direction toward pragmatic ends.

I read the social movement language in progressive hip-hop as an effort to fill a void and conceptualize and advance a movement that is necessary but has been absent. While hip-hop music can be a powerful tool to inspire, it seems that what *the people* should be inspired to do must be filled to achieve the positive social change emphasized as an end throughout the music. Moreover, to what extent can we take Talib Kweli's movement claims seriously when we consider that the parent company of his Blacksmith Records is Warner Music Group, one of the Big Four companies? I will discuss the nuances of corporate control of music production in depth in Chapter 5.

The artists of both analysis groups represent themselves as activists who inspire, uplift, and empower individuals who can then engage in the process of pragmatic social change. However, I find it interesting that while the artists of both analysis groups describe in detail both *our* oppressed experience and, as I discuss in the next chapter, the people and structure behind this oppression, they do not describe in detail what to do about this situation. The lyrics of the independent analysis group are not significantly

more detailed than those of the corporate group in addressing what to do, as the distinction with respect to other facets of the analysis might lead one to hypothesize.

Hip-hop emerged as a culture before it had any sort of political aspirations. Whether hip-hop plays a role in mobilizing political participation is an empirical question, but I would suggest that the culture and the music play a role in cultivating an activist consciousness, particularly among those who already have activist tendencies. That being said, despite the existence of marginalized but flourishing progressive hip-hop music, *the people* still need to pragmatically engage. Michael Eric Dyson (2007, p. 67) reminds us that while we need to acknowledge a more nuanced and complicated understanding of political activity that appreciates the role of rappers in inspiring individuals who engage in activism, it will clearly require action beyond mere hip-hop songs for positive social change:

> While black music at its best has often supplied a supplementary argument for political change, it is not a substitute for actual politics. And if you don't have a vital political movement, the music can only go so far. It can *help* alter the mind-set of the masses; it can *help* create awareness of the need for social change, it can *help* dramatize injustice, and it can *help* articulate the disenfranchisement of significant segments of the citizenry. But it cannot alone transform social relations and political arrangements. Politically charged music can *reinforce* important social values, but it cannot *establish* them.

Even if it can be empirically demonstrated that the lyrics of progressive hip-hop music create a cultural space for conceptualizing and inspiring a resistant movement, the project of social change is indeed bigger than hip-hop.

A heterogeneous project

Consider dead prez's claim that positive social change requires not just revolutionary music but revolutionary action:

Tell me what you gon do to get free? / We need more than MC's / We need Hueys, and revolutionaries" ("We Want Freedom," 2000, corporate).

dead prez recognize that the project of pragmatic social change requires more than just conscious lines over pleasant beats. In these lines, they push *the people* to seize the space forged by progressive hip-hop and embrace the work of organizing a real hip-hop movement.

dead prez's claim that *we* need revolutionaries brings up an interesting question: do all progressive rappers from both analysis groups agree with this most subversive and radical of takes on social change? As I have been discussing throughout the second half of this chapter, resistance as represented by the progressive hip-hop of the sample is characterized by varying degrees of subversiveness. Let us now consider that this corporate/independent distinction can be read as a distinction in what is considered to be an appropriate approach towards resistance.

My analysis suggests that within the sample, there are generally speaking more moderate voices such as Common, Talib Kweli, Kanye West who promote a flavor of resistance characterized by working within the system in a number of ways to uplift and raise the consciousness of *the people*, and there are more subversive, militant, and self-described revolutionary voices such as Immortal Technique, the Coup, and Paris that locate themselves outside of the system and strive for an overthrow of said system. My analysis suggests that these more militant and subversive voices tend to be independently produced whereas the corporately produced voices tend to be uplifting and empowering but less challenging to the status quo and fall towards the right end of the spectrum. It is not that all of the independent voices are subversive and militant

(i.e., KRS-One); it is that the subversive and militant voices tend to be independently

produced.

Consider some of these more subversive voices. Their lyrics do not suggest a

desire to create positive social change through participation in the system. Rather,

these lyrics suggest the overthrow of the system as the desired end. For example,

consider the words of Immortal Technique:

> *Niggas talk about change and working within the system to achieve that.*
> *The problem with always being a conformist is that when you try to change*
> *the system from within, it's not you who changes the system; it's the system*
> *that will eventually change you* ("The Poverty of Philosophy," 2001,
> independent)

Here, in a song whose closing lines are "viva la revolucion!" Immortal Technique is

critical of the possibility of successfully working within the system to achieve social

change. In addition to Immortal Technique, dead prez, the Coup and others are clearly

informed by Marxist perspectives and critique the social system. Such claims are more

generally characteristic of the independent analysis group.

Of course, this independent/subversive and corporate/status quo model is not a

perfect science, but rather is based on general tendencies and trends. These trends

reveal nuances and distinctions between the artists who comprise and represent the

collective identity in this project. However, there are a few caveats with respect to the

generalization that corporate hip-hop is less militant and subversive. For example,

consider the following dead prez lyric released under the Sony umbrella:

> *"And you can put this on the government's grave / Somebody payin for the*
> *way we have to suffer and slave / Assassination. . . . / You aint even safe*
> *with a full clip / Hustle out on the president's grave / I'm sick of livin in this*
> *bullshit / We down to take it to the full length / Meet us up on Capitol Hill,*
> *and we can get up in some real shit / Assassination [*gunshot sound*]"*
> ("Assassination," 2000, corporate)

This lyric describing the assassination of the United States president is characteristic of the militant facet of dead prez's music, which is as subversive as anything that is independently produced. Thus, it must be noted that there are some extremely militant and subversive corporately-produced claims in the sample. Although the more subversive and militant tend to be independently produced, that there are exceptions to this trend is interesting. My analysis suggests that corporate production/distribution does not preclude the emergence of intensely subversive and militant claims. Not all critical messages are filtered out, and there is a space within corporate hip-hop for the intense critique that characterizes the most subversive voices of progressive hip-hop.

However, there is a caveat that is important to mention. dead prez are arguably the most militant and subversive artist of the corporate analysis group, and I often invoke their lyrics throughout this project to illustrate how corporate production status does not preclude subversive and militant lyrics. However, by the end of the decade under analysis, dead prez was releasing their music solely through independent channels. While there are still highly subversive, challenging messages on corporate-produced music at the end of the time period of the sample (i.e., Pharoahe Monche and Nas), I find it interesting that the best representative of corporately produced subversive hip-hop made the transition from corporate to independent production status by the end of the time period of the sample. Also interesting is that Mos Def, whose song critical of the hip-hop culture industry was allegedly censored by his corporate record label, released his next album through an independent channel.

This is an interesting trend in which to contextualize the corporate analysis group, as it parallels a trend throughout the previous decade in which the Afrocentric,

"conscious" varieties of hip-hop music were left by the wayside as hip-hop became increasingly homogenized (Hurt, 2006). If we consider only the work of artists who remained signed to a recording label under the umbrella of the "Big Four" throughout the entirety of the time period of the sample, we lose many of the best examples of action-oriented and poignantly militant, subversive claims of the corporate analysis group. This shift away from the most subversive of corporately produced messages seems to continue a larger historical trend related to overtly subversive messages and progressive manifestations of hip-hop.

When the new Soundscan method of tabulating sales of recorded music revealed in the early 1990s that hip-hop was a commercially viable genre to market to the coveted demographic of white suburban youth with disposable income, the corporate record labels began to sign and produce the music of rappers without really knowing the specifics of their content, including the work of subversive, progressive artists such as Paris and Public Enemy. Yet, as the decade wore on and following a number of controversies related to their content, including Paris's infamous song titled "Bush Killa," the content of the music released by these companies became increasingly depoliticized, homogenized, and these artists moved to independent channels. Whether the work of subversive progressive rappers doesn't fit the contemporary corporate rap business model or whether the most subversive rappers prefer to not use corporate channels, the trend is and has been that over time, the work of the more subversive voices in hip-hop tends to migrate from corporate to independently produced channels.

Considering the distinction between the more and less revolutionary takes, there remains a challenge as noted by Watkins (2005) to unify the various flavors of hip-hop. In comparing and contrasting the varying degrees of subversiveness throughout the progressive hip-hop of the sample, it becomes clear that there is a range of methods of resistance. However, this diversity is only accounting for specifically progressive manifestations of hip-hop and not hip-hop more broadly defined, hip-hop culture, or a hip-hop generation, in which there would likely be even less consensus. Yet even within the progressive hip-hop of the sample, there is no articulated consensus on a single appropriate path of resistance to take for liberation from institutionalized oppression and social justice.

Considering the diversity in the fundamentals of the projects of resistance represented by hip-hop's progressive voices begs the question of whether we should thus be speaking of a plurality of hip-hops rather than a singular hip-hop. Is it problematic to speak of political agenda or platform of the Hip-Hop Generation when hip-hop is comprised of pockets of people pursuing radically different ends? Can Common and Immortal Technique be reified into a single hip-hop interest group? I return to these questions at the conclusion of this project as I consider the mobilization of the Hip-Hop Generation.

Conclusions

The lyrics of both analysis groups ascribe a resistant facet to *us*; progressive hip-hop is not merely about describing oppression but also about actively resisting this oppression. *We* are represented in the lyrics of both analysis groups in a number of ways: as a contemporary spin on historical black resistance, as a resistant project of the black and Latino urban underclass, and as a global project of resistance against all

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forms of oppression. My analysis suggests that there are instances of resistance in corporately-produced progressive hip-hop music. However, as the artists move from describing *our* oppression to actively resisting *our* oppression, the distinction between the representations of *us* in the two analysis groups becomes more noticeable. It is generally the case that the most nuanced, overt, militant, and subversive depictions of resistance are characteristic of the independent analysis group.

CHAPTER 4
THEM—THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Introduction

This chapter considers the claims-making activity of the artists in the sample with respect to what they consider to be the fundamental source of the social problems experienced by *the people*: the contemporary power structure. The rappers of both the corporate and independent analysis groups describe social problems in terms of interrelated phenomena stemming from the fact that *they* have set up society in such a way that its institutions privilege *them* at the expense of *us*. These artists generally critique a social system that they describe as being set up by an elite ruling class in accordance with its worldview for the purpose of advancing the interests of its members. Although the lyrics of both analysis groups are characterized by critique of the system and the powers that be, a clear distinction between the two analysis groups fully emerges in this chapter. There are instances of critique within the independent analysis group that are detailed, specific, nuanced, and direct, whereas the most subversive instances of critique in the corporate analysis group tend to be general, superficial, and ambiguous.

Who are *They*?

In this chapter I focus on the second facet of the *us*/*them* duality characterizing the narrative of social life that is pervasive throughout the lyrics of both the corporate and independent analysis groups. Whereas the discussion in the previous chapter relates to the construction of *us* as a marginalized and resistant collective identity, the discussion here involves the construction of *them* as the oppressive aggressor responsible for systemically creating the conditions of *our* oppression and necessitating *our* resistance.

Paralleling the previous chapter in which I discuss the rappers' usage of first person plural pronouns *we* and *us* in constructing a collective identity, the rappers complement this construction of social life by using third person pronouns such as *they* and *them* to speak critically of an "other" in which the collective marginalized and resistant identity is conceptualized in opposition to. The artists of both analysis groups describe this other as having interests in opposition to *us*, and the rappers shed light upon the people and interests that characterize this other.

A key underlying theme that emerged from the data is that both analysis groups construct a sociologically informed narrative of social life suggestive of the social conflict theory sociological paradigm. Society and its various institutions are conceptualized as benefitting *them* at the expense of *us*. While a number of the specific social problems that one might find in the table of contents of a social problems textbook emerge and are discussed throughout the lyrics, social problems are generally represented as an interrelated set of phenomenon that all stem from the system and its elite caretakers.

Because the artists in the sample discuss the social realities which structure the life experiences of *the people,* I argue that the rappers present a critique of social life informed by C. Wright Mills's concept of the sociological imagination (1959). Yet, there is a qualitative distinction with respect to this imagination as it is represented in the lyrics of the two analysis groups: the most specific, nuanced, and direct descriptions of *them* and *their* system tend to emanate from the independent sample group. So who are *they*? In short, *they* are the people in power. Moreover, the artists of both analysis groups conceptualize *them* as a social group whose interests are in opposition to *ours*, who exploit and oppress *us*, and against whom *we* are engaged in the struggle. *They*

are conceptualized as a ruling class social network that, as has been the case throughout the history of the United States and stemming from the European colonial era, society is structured to benefit at the expense of *us,* the collective identity constructed by the artists in the sample. Unlike the various ways in which *we* are characterized through the lyrics of both analysis groups, there is a general consensus as to who represents *them*.

The artists portray the social world as the realm of the elite—social institutions are set up to benefit *them* at the expense of *us* and teach *us* to internalize our subservience to *them* and *their* culture. *They* are the force behind contemporary social problems as what *we* consider to be problems actually benefit *them* and *their* interests. *They* are constructed as the oppressor who creates the oppressive conditions. As such, their interests are described as being served by the existence of the ghetto poverty and racism which negatively impact *us.* The inequality and imbalance of power between *us* and *them* and how society is structured to maintain this inequality is described as the root cause of social problems.

According to the rappers, *they* run America. In a song that critiques the American public education system, dead prez conceptualize an elite ruling class that reigns across various social institutions:

> *Man, that school shit is a joke / The same people who control the school system / Control the prison system, and the whole social system / Ever since slavery, know what I'm sayin'?* ("They Schools," 2000, corporate).

Here, dead prez ruminate on the existence of a particular social group that they assert controls (and historically has controlled) the social system and its various institutions, including schools and prisons. For KRS-One, various business interests, in both legal and illegal manifestations, are conceptualized as "controlling America:"

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Cocaine business control America / Ganja business control America / KRS-One still causin hysteria / Illegal business control America / Diamond business control America / The oil business control America / KRS-One still causin hysteria / Illegal business control America ("Illegal Business (Remix 2004)," 2004, independent)

Though both of these examples depict who runs society, note that the independent example is more specific in detailing particular business interests—the oil and diamond industries—who control America (while locating these businesses alongside what are more typically known to be illegal businesses). This subtle contrast between a certain vagueness as to who the people are that control America in the corporate example and the more overt, specific identification of these people in the independent example is indicative of a trend concerning the differences between the descriptions of *them* in the two analysis groups throughout the sample. This idea will continue to develop throughout this chapter.

Furthermore, the ruling class is described by the artists in both analysis groups in terms of a privileged intersection of race, class, and gender. If *we* are characterized primarily by the Black and Latino underclass, then *they*, as is implied by dead prez's aforementioned "since slavery" assertion, are conceptualized as a dominant social group comprised by upper class white men. Indeed, consider the following example in which dead prez overtly assert that it is white men who control the world:

The average Black male live a third of his life in a jail cell / Cause the world is controlled by the white male ("Police State," 2000, corporate).

The white male symbolizes a personified manifestation of the various systematic privileges that characterize the ruling class. White men are asserted to run the world in the sense that they are disproportionately in positions of wealth and power and act in accordance with their own interests to reproduce the status quo and to maintain and

further increase their power, wealth, and social standing. Society, they claim, privileges

whiteness, maleness. Interestingly, note how in this example, dead prez directly

connect this phenomenon to *our* oppression by citing the high rate of balck male

incarceration as an example. Although there are nearly identical descriptions of rich

white men running the world in the independent analysis group, this analysis group is

also characterized by more specificity in terms of which particular wealthy, white men

run the world. Consider Immortal Technique's description:

> *The people in the white house, the corporate monopoly owners, fake liberal politicians those are my enemies / The generals of the armies that are mostly conservatives / Those are the real motherfuckers that I need to bring it to* ("The Poverty of Philosophy", 2001, independent).

In identifying, as well as linking the executive branch of government, corporate

leaders, and generals of the military as his enemies, Immortal Technique presents a

more specific and nuanced understanding of the people in power than general claims

about white men. Also interesting to note is that Immortal Technique's characterization

of *them* parallels revered sociologist C. Wright Mills's (1956) conceptualization of the

power elite as the overlapping social network comprised by political, corporate, and

military leaders. Domhoff's (2008) empirical work on the power elite suggests that this

relatively exclusive social network does in fact largely control America insofar as it has

vast influence on dictating the important policy decisions which directly affect the United

States population and structure social relations.

In the next section I discuss the artists' descriptions of how *their* worldview is

institutionalized throughout society. However, it is first worth mentioning that in both

analysis groups there are instances in which the artists do single out and focus critique

specifically on particular individuals who represent visible faces or mouthpieces of the

ruling class and personify abstract concepts such as the power elite. For example, note

Immortal Technique's critique of the intersection of Dick Cheney's business interests

and foreign policy:

> *And Dick Cheney, you fuckin leech, tell them your plans / About building your pipelines through Afghanistan / And how Israeli troops trained the Taliban in Pakistan / You might have some house niggaz fooled, but I understand / Colonialism is sponsored by corporations / That's why Halliburton gets paid to rebuild nations* ("The Cause of Death," 2003, independent).

Here, Immortal Technique again references the relationship between wealthy

corporate businessmen, global military intervention, and U.S. politics which are all

intertwined in what President Eisenhower famously referred to as the military-industrial

complex. Former Vice President Dick Cheney is overtly addressed and critiqued, not on

the basis of the policy decisions of the Bush White House or his ideological leanings,

but rather on the grounds of his role in the overlapping relationships, what Domhoff

(2008) calls the revolving door of the executive branch of government and corporate

interests. Similarly, Nas offers a critique of Cheney and Halliburton in the same vein:

> *They say I'm all about murder murder and kill kill / But what about Grindhouse and Kill Bill? / What about Cheney and Halliburton? / The back door deals on oil fields? / How is Nas the most violent person?* ("Sly Fox," 2008, corporate).

Here, Nas responds to critiques of violent imagery in his lyrics by referencing the

violence in Hollywood movies that does not draw the same critique and also the "real

life" business practices of Dick Cheney. There are two interesting points that can be

made by comparing these two lyrics. First, note the qualitative difference between Nas

and Immortal Technique's descriptions of the vice president of the time and the

intersection of his political and business interests. Whereas the example from the

corporate analysis group does allude to "backdoor deals on oil fields" and does mention

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Cheney and Halliburton by name, the independent example goes into greater detail describing these deals, and these deals are located in a larger project of corporate colonialism.

Also worth considering is when these two songs were released. The independent example is overtly critical of Vice President Cheney and issues associated with the War in Afghanistan during the sensitive climate that characterized the post-9/11 United States, a time in which conformity was a virtue often equated with patriotism and dissent was considered in some quarters to be unpatriotic. The corporate example was release a safe five years later. This time issue is interesting because it supports the emerging idea that subversive claims with respect to current events are more characteristic of the independent analysis groups whereas such claims in the corporate analysis group are more likely to be relegated to events in the more distant past. Furthermore, as I address in Chapter 5, there are apparent instances of censorship when rappers of the corporate analysis group get too specific in addressing the particular individuals who comprise *them.* This phenomenon has profound implications on the distinction between claims-making activity in corporate and independent manifestations of progressive hip-hop music.

Moreover, in discussing both analysis groups' critique of particular individuals who comprise *them*, such as Dick Cheney, it is also important to note that these particular individuals are not presented as the end-all be-all *them*, but rather are invoked as signifiers of elite groups and the elite-controlled power structure. The critique does not merely focus on individuals. Rather, a key point is that the scope of the critique and the conceptualization of *them* is broader and more sociologically informed as it extends to a

conceptualization of social problems at the structural and institutional levels. Yet, both

with respect to the critique of particular individual representatives of the power structure

and the structure itself, my analysis suggests that the most nuanced and descriptive

critique emanates from the independent analysis group.

<center>**Social Structure**</center>

Both analysis groups recognize and draw attention to a social structure/system

that privileges the interests of the elite and is reflected across all areas of social life.

References in the lyrics to "the system" and the social structure are important because

they indicate a sociologically informed critique of *them. They* are presented not merely

as a community of individuals who maintain positions of power. Rather, *their* influence

and interests characterize the very structure or system within which social life, human

interaction, and agency take place. The artists acknowledge the sociological maxim

that it is not just about individuals and groups but it is about the system in which the

individuals interact (Johnson, 1997). For example, consider the following claim of Mr.

Lif:

> *America is run by the few, the chosen / And what's your name? / "Fair game" / Take aim / You can point at who you'd usually blame / It's a disappearing act but the structure's intact* ("The Fries," 2006, independent).

Like the examples of lyrics in the previous subsection, Mr. Lif conceptualizes an

elite ruling class. However, he also speaks to a social structure that exists beyond and

independent of any select powerful individuals, and makes the point that eliminating any

few perceived enemies does not acknowledge the way society is set up, which would

remain intact. Mr. Lif invokes the idea of a system which is structured to benefit elite

interests. This is important because he is not merely describing a group of powerful

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individuals pursuing their interests but rather he acknowledges a system in place in which "the few" are able to prosper at the expense of us.

Note how Talib Kweli identifies "the system" as the entity on the receiving end of his attack:

Yo, I activism / attackin the system ("Get By," 2002, corporate)

Here, Talib Kweli indicates that it is not merely the people in power who his resistance is defined in terms of, but this resistance extends beyond *them* to the system that *they* have set up. Note the subversive language which characterizes this corporate example.

There is overt acknowledgement of and representations of resistance against a structure/system in examples of both analysis groups. However, a theme that emerges through descriptions of *them* and *their* system throughout this chapter is that there is an element of nuance and detail in certain examples from the independent analysis group that is lacking in the corporate group. This emergence is interesting to consider alongside the instances in the previous chapter in which it seems that the more overtly subversive representations of resistance and the forces behind *our* economic oppression are found in the independent analysis group. A clear, profound pattern in the project is emerging in which the construction of social problems seems to be a more clearly-defined, nuanced, and overt project of the independent analysis group.

Because *they* are contextualized within a particular power structure and social system, I argue that the artists in both groups present a sociologically informed understanding of social problems. While the lyrics are characterized by critique about particular individuals who comprise *them*, including people in politics, corporate America, and the media, *they* are located in a structure. The individuals and groups

that are described as promoting a neoconservative, corporate, status quo agenda that runs counter to the interests/goals of *the people* are acknowledged as being embedded in a social system that extends beyond any particular individuals or groups. The artists in the sample point their fingers not just at *them* but at *their* system, the mechanism that structures the relationships among people in society and the mechanism that promotes *our* oppression. Yet, the most detailed, nuanced, and overt examples of critique of both *them* and *their* system are found in the independent analysis group.

Social Problems as Institutionalized Realities

In the description of a general worldview that emerges from the analysis, society is set up according to the interests of the elites, and the system serves *their* interests while oppressing the underclass that is required for it to flourish. The artists of both analysis groups advance the argument that the interests and ideology of the ruling class that characterizes the social structure is embedded throughout society's various social institutions. In the conflict theory-like paradigm they construct, society is conceptualized as *their* system, and accordingly social institutions are set up by *them* to serve *their* interests. For an example of this phenomenon, let us consider one social institution: politics[8]. Politics is conceptualized by the artists of both analysis groups not in terms of a pluralistic model of democracy but rather as a tool of the elite.

"Politricks[9]"

Generally speaking, in the lyrics of both analysis groups, the political system and its elected officials are viewed with deep suspicions as they are considered to be tools

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[8] This section on politics may be considered alongside the discussion of the prison-industrial complex and the military industrial complex in Chapter 3.

[9] Both Nas ("Black President," 2008, corporate) and Public Enemy ("The Enemy Battle Hymn of the Public," 2007, independent) use this term, a play on words adapted from Jamaican reggae culture.

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that advance the interests of the ruling class. For example, Paris alleges that

governments are set up to benefit *them* while neglecting and even exploiting *us*:

> *Set up puppet governments, for the rich to get richer / More money for them hoods, but the hood's in pain / When the schools close cause they say no money remain / Still undereducated, makin minimum wage / Got your Wal*Mart, makin new century slaves* ("Make It Hardcore," 2006, independent).

Here, Paris claims that elected officials are puppets of the corporate elite who really

govern the country, and these politicians promote *their* interests at the expense of *the*

people's. He advances the argument that government unjustly serves *their* interests

and works for *them*, not *us*. Furthermore, as evidence by the discussion of the military-

industrial complex in the previous chapter, the rappers (particularly of the independent

analysis group) describe a foreign policy based on corporate interests. Talib Kweli

presents a similar distrust of the political system as he asserts the perception that the

system is rigged making political participation a worthless and futile project:

> *They don't wanna raise the babies so the election is fixed / That's why we don't be fuckin with politics* ("The Proud," 2002, corporate).

In the context of a critique of the political system as serving the interests of the

elite, the rappers tend to construct voting as an ineffective charade. Rather than

representing an ideal of active participation in a pluralistic democratic system, the

rappers critique the idea that voting is an effective way to actually promote positive

social change because potential elected officials all represent the interests of the elite,

not the interests of *the people*. Note that the independent example more overtly

mentions how the elite benefit from this arrangement, which is indicative of a larger

trend. All in all, there is at best an intense skepticism of using the voting process as an

effective way to participate in democracy and bring about positive change.

Furthermore, the rappers assert that they lack potential candidates to vote for who represent their interests because our two-party system is characterized by two parties both run by *them*. Paris claims that the choice of electing a president is an illusion when the choice is between two very similar candidates who have both been preapproved by *them*:

> *When the plan is a shame like we makin a choice / Understand it's a scam who get handed a voice / And it's only a few and they decide in advance / Like votin for the President and both of them fam* ("Coincequences," 2006, independent).

Likewise, Nas articulates a take on the familiar "lesser of two evils" rhetoric and asserts that neither ballot choice would improve life in the hood:

> *Who you gonna elect, Satan or Satan? / In the hood nothin is changing* ("American Way," 2004, corporate).

Both analysis groups may be characterized by a healthy skepticism of engaging in the democratic process to elect individuals who can enact pragmatic social change from above. The rappers critique the political process as a charade, locate themselves outside of the political conversation, and construct an unrepresented collective identity. Their interests are not on the table and their representatives are not at the table. With respect to the independent/corporate distinction, it is interesting to note how the depth and degree to which Paris describes the corruption and flaws in the political system is unmatched in any examples from the corporate analysis group.

Also interesting is how this apathetic, dismissive take on voting seemingly stands in stark contrast to the key goal that the Civil Rights Generation mobilized toward: eliminating voting practices that disenfranchised African-Americans. Whereas the National Voting Rights Act of 1965 is considered to be one of the great successes of the Civil Rights Movement, here progressive voices of the culture that largely characterizes

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the next generation distance themselves from practicing their right to vote. This phenomenon seems to speak to the divergence between the principles of the Civil Rights Generation and the Hip-Hop Generation.

Furthermore, it seems somewhat striking that music as politically aware and engaged as progressive hip-hop would appear to be so dismissive of voting and in turn engagement in the political process. At first, these lyrics seem like a clear rejection of politics. However, a closer reading suggests that their critiques of the voting process present a broader, more nuanced notion of political engagement. The assertion that voting is a futile exercise because the political system is rigged to work against *us* and fails to represent *us* no matter who wins elections should not be taken to mean that progressive hip-hop lyrics dismiss the importance of politics. Apathy towards voting does not equate to apathy towards politics. Consider that one common thread that unites all artists of both analysis group is a degree of sacrifice of commercial appeal and viability by electing to participate in progressive expressions of hip-hop. This, in and of itself is a political act.

It seems that the crux of the critique is not the act of voting itself but rather the idea that *the people* can rely solely on voting for elected officials to solve *our* problems in the context of what is described as a corrupt system. Voting may in fact be part of the answer but the key is that voting is not *the* answer. This is because voting is represented as being incapable of bringing about the desired social change and is literally the least one can do to become political engaged in the struggle (KRS-One, 2003).

The somewhat cynical view with which the rappers in the sample tend to view the legitimacy of using the political process and elected officials to improve their situations is interesting to consider in light of the 2008 election of Barack Obama as President of the United States. It is interesting to note that some rappers in the sample celebrate Obama's election and what he pragmatically represents as a candidate of hope and change and symbolically represents as the first Black president. However, others are critical of him and question his intentions and interests. Interestingly, support and skepticism for Obama seems to be largely divided along corporate/independent lines. The work of corporate artists such as Common and Nas suggests optimistic support of the change that Obama can bring, whereas the more skeptical takes on Obama's potential for change and that this change will go far enough are found in the independently produced work of dead prez, Mr. Lif, Immortal Technique and Mos Def.

Consider first that Obama received a great deal of support from mainstream rappers who are generally not considered under the umbrella of progressive hip-hop, including pre-election pro-Obama songs from mainstream artists such as Jay-Z, Young Jeezy, and Ludacris. In fact, this phenomenon led some journalists to go so far as to question whether the mainstream was the real location of contemporary political rap (NPR, 2008). However, artists under the umbrella of progressive hip-hop present a more complex take on Obama than mere pro-Obama songs. Some artists in the sample (generally corporate voices) relish the rise of Barack Obama and greet him with hope, but there are also suspicious and cynical voices in the sample (generally independent voices). Consider how Common actively endorses Barack Obama as his

song "Changes" locates Obama alongside legendary activists/leaders Martin Luther

King, Jr, and Gandhi and asserts the inevitability of Obama's change:

Changes gonna happen, change is hope ("Changes," 2008, corporate).

Interestingly, as I write this, Common is excitedly detailing on his twitter feed about

hosting the annual lighting of the Christmas tree at the White House. Both Common

and the Roots have been tapped by Obama to appear at political events (Wolfe, 2010).

Contrast Common's support of Obama with Mr. Lif's opening lines on an album

released a few months after Obama's inauguration:

> *Oh I see so, uh, we all supposed to just start trusting the government again cause we got a friendlier face to it now, uh? All them problems going to be solved? Everything's all good, right?* ("Welcome to the World," 2009, independent).

Whereas there is an acknowledgement of the meaning of the Obama candidacy

and the subsequent symbolic achievement of electing a black president which is

celebrated by some rappers in the sample, others are careful to point out that despite

the election of a president there is still a power structure that remains in place. This

observation is indicative of the more general critique of the politicians and the political

system as tools to promote elite interests. The rappers are careful to point out that

having a black president does not mean that social problems, particular those related to

race relations and racial inequality, are adequately addressed though it may

dangerously present the illusion that they in fact are. I find it very interesting that

optimism/support of Obama versus skepticism/critique in progressive hip-hop largely

overlaps the corporate/independent distinction. Moreover, this distinction supports my

assertion in Chapter 3 that it is somewhat problematic to speak of a single progressive

hip-hop with a unified platform in the context of differences among the artists in the

sample with respect to the appropriate path towards positive social change. There

seems to be much correlate overlap among several of the dichotomies discussed:

support/critique of Obama, reform/revolution as desired ends, and

corporate/independent status.

Their Institutionalized Narrative

The artists of both analysis groups assert that the power of the ruling class

extends beyond policy and politics: *they* rule America through culture. It is not just that

social institutions benefit *them* at the expense of *us*; the very narrative promoted

throughout these institutions is characterized by *their* ideology. In the vein of Gramsci's

(1971) cultural hegemony theory, the artists of both analysis groups assert that society

as *we* understand it is society according to the terms of this ruling class. American

society and its various social institutions are conceptualized as a manifestation of *their*

worldview, values, and interests.

In their critique at the institutional level, artists of both analysis groups argue that a

narrative justifying the status quo and contemporary power structure as well as

promoting the interests and ideologies of the ruling class has become institutionalized

throughout various facets of social life. Thus, the social institutions that *we* participate

in speak to and cater to *their* interests, teach *us* to be the people who *they* want *us* to

be, and promote *their* worldviews while neglecting *our* concerns, interests, and culture.

The artists make the claim that *the people* are socialized through the various social

institutions into accepting *their* institutionalized narrative as "reality" in a process that

they critique as propaganda/brainwashing.

The rappers of both analysis groups respond to this narrative infused with the

ideology of the ruling class by (1) critiquing this narrative and the various social

institutions which promote it and (2) constructing alternative narratives to describe social life on their own terms in a process which they frame as illuminating the truth for *the people*. Whereas the lyrics of both the independent and corporate analysis groups are characterized by such counterhegemonic narrative work, both critiques of the institutionalized narrative and presentation of alternative narratives are more detailed and specific in the independent analysis group whereas that of the corporate analysis group tends to be more superficial and general. This is a key distinction in the difference in representation of social problems in the two analysis groups.

Critiquing *their* narrative

Artists in both analysis groups question the truth claims and foundations of the institutionalized narrative which is pervasive throughout all areas of social life. They critique this narrative as *their* narrative and for how it promotes *our* continued subservience to *them*. I will consider the institutionalized hegemonic ideology which the rappers are critical of as it manifests within three particular social institutions commonly referenced in the sample as being of particular importance: (1) education, (2) the media, and (3) religion.

Education

The rappers of both analysis groups assert that US schools teach in a Eurocentric tradition and promote a historical narrative that justifies colonialism and contemporary social inequality on the basis that European culture, and implicitly, Europeans, are superior to the culture and diaspora of Africa. Moreover, the artists claim that the American education system is Eurocentric in that it fails to acknowledge the black intellectual canon or the role and contributions of non-Europeans throughout history. Consider the following claim of the Perceptionists:

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Yeah, it was written in the books of Europeans we were savage / That our history was insignificant and minds below average ("Black Dialogue," 2005, independent).

The Perceptionists describe a duality of institutionalized representations of European and African history which they locate in the context of the history of European colonialism. The rappers critique the representation of Africans and note that it is *they* who are representing *us* and *our* people in this way. *Their* narrative is constructed as a Eurocentric narrative in that what is European is consider to be good, right, holy, and just whereas that which is African is considered to be inferior, uncivilized, primitive, and backwards.

dead prez offer a similar critique of the Eurocentrism that characterizes American History classes in "They Schools," a song whose very title suggests that it is *their* education and not *ours*:

I took a history class serious / Front row, every day of the week, 3rd period / Fuckin with the teacher's head, callin em racist / I tried to show them crackers some light, they couldn't face it. . . . / I tried to pay attention but they classes wasn't interestin / They seemed to only glorify the Europeans / Claimin Africans were only three-fifths a human being (2000, corporate)

Here, dead prez critique the history that is taught in American classrooms as presenting a racist historical narrative glorifying only the achievements of Europeans while simultaneously presenting Africans as inferior. Furthermore, in the spoken word outro to this song, dead prez speak to what they contend to be the real function of the American education system:

Cuz see the schools aint teachin us nothing / They aint teachin us nothin but how to be slaves and hard workers / For white people to build up they shit / Make they businesses successful while it's exploitin us / Knowhatimsayin? And they aint teachin us nothin related to / Solvin our own problems, knowhatimsayin? / Aint teachin us how to get crack out the ghetto / They aint teachin us how to stop the police from murdering us / And brutalizing us, they aint teachin us how to get our rent paid /

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Knowhatimsayin? / They aint teachin our families how to interact better with each other, knowhatimsayin? / They just teachin us how to build they shit up, knowhatimsayin? ("They Schools," 2000, corporate)

Here, dead prez assert that school does not teach *our* children how to better *ourselves* and *our* community, but rather teaches *our* children to be subservient to *them*. *The people* are not taught how to help themselves and climb the socio-economic ladder, but rather they learn how to help *them* and serve *their* interests. Paris similarly addresses the function of school as an agent of socialization as he shares what he would do if he was "wicked" to "rule the world and trick 'em":

I'd persist with some history that I would rewrite / In a school system where I'd keep the money too tight / I'd let 'em all know just where they belong in my world / Turn the boys into felons, makin' hookers of girls ("Evil," 2003, independent).

In this representative example from the sample, Paris represents the outcomes of *us* learning misrepresented history in underfunded schools: our children are implicitly taught to feel inferior and be deviant. The promotion of the institutionalized narrative in American schools is interesting to consider in light of the corporate/independent distinction because it appears that with respect to this particular issue, the corporate analysis group actually contains an example that is at least as subversive as (if not more than) that of the independent analysis groups in dead prez's assertion that school teaches *us* to be subservient workers for *them*. This instance stands as an exception to the general trend in the analysis in which the more subversive critique emanates from the independent analysis group. However, as I discuss in the previous chapter, the artist who makes this subversive claim, dead prez, was releasing their music through independent channels by the end of the time period of the sample.

The media

The lyrics of both analysis groups assert that the corporate news media is characterized by a narrative that supports the interests of the elite. It is asserted throughout the lyrics of both analysis groups that the mainstream corporate media, owned and controlled by a handful of consolidated, multinational media companies, construct and present a worldview in line with elite interests. In informing people about the world, it is claimed that the corporate media provide a particular understanding of the world. The media channels promote the institutionalized narrative characterized by the ideology of elite and refrain from presenting contrary worldviews and facts/images that compromise the institutionalized narrative. Artists in both analysis groups claim that critique of *them* is limited in these media channels.

Fox News in particular draws a great deal of critique from artists of both groups. Perhaps, this emergence should be located in the context of the critique of hip-hop music and culture offered by a some of its hosts, infamously including Bill O'Reilly. Consider the following lyrics from Nas's "Sly Fox," a song critical of Fox News and its promotion of a skewed narrative:

> *They monopolize and lose your views / And the channel you choose / Propaganda, visual cancer / The eye in the sky, number 5 on the dial / Secret agenda, frequency antenna / Dr. Mindbender / Remote control so controlling your brain holder / Slave culture, game's over / What's a fox characteristic? / Slick shit, sins in, misinformation / Pimp the station, over-stimulation / Reception, deception / Comcast digital Satan / The Fox has a bushy tale / And Bush tells lies and foxtrots / So, I don't know what's real / Watch what you're watching / Fox keeps feeding us toxins / Stop sleeping, start thinking outside of the box / And unplugged from the Matrix doctrine / But watch what you say, Big Brother is watching* (2008, corporate)

Here, Nas is critical of the country's most watched cable news network and represents it as a form of propaganda that promotes racism and misinformation. He draws a

connection between the content of this corporate news station and the official line of the

Bush administration. He repeatedly asserts in a number of rhymes and metaphors that

Fox News is toxic to one's mental capacity. However, compare this corporate critique of

Fox News to an independent critique of the entire corporate media, which is

conceptualized as the fourth branch of the government:

> *Embedded correspondents don't tell the source of the tension / And they*
> *refuse to even mention, European intervention / Or the massacres in Jenin,*
> *the innocent screams / U.S. manufactured missiles, and M-16's / Weapon*
> *contracts and corrupted American dreams / Media censorship, blocking out*
> *the video screens / A continent of oil kingdoms, bought for a bargain /*
> *Democracy is just a word, when the people are starvin' / The average*
> *citizen, made to be, blind to the reason / A desert full of genocide, where*
> *the bodies are freezin'* ("The 4th Branch," 2003, independent)

Here, Immortal Technique dismisses the media's role in informing about the world and

criticizes how journalists representing the consolidated, corporate media outlets

represent what occurs during war. He critiques news reports for how they misrepresent

the truth by what they include but also what they exclude; they refrain from discussing

the role and consequences of U.S. manufacturing weapons in global conflict, neglect to

mention the role of historical and contemporary European colonialism in global conflicts,

and remain silent on global atrocities that don't directly affect United States interests.

It is insightful to compare these two critiques of corporate news. Both artists are

critical of the power of corporate news media to shape people's opinions on what is

happening, yet Nas is largely critical of one network (though "Sly Fox" does feature a

line critical of CBS, and connects Fox News to other media owned by Rupert Murdoch,

who he mentions by name). On the contrary, in the independent example Immortal

Technique extends the problem beyond Fox News speaks more generally about the

entire corporate media landscape. Furthermore, the independent example features

more specific examples of what Herman and Chomsky (1988) call the filtering of certain critical messages.

Religion

A third social institution that is critiqued as being embedded with the ideology of the ruling class and promoting the interests of the elite is religion. Although there is critique of religious institutions in both the corporate and independent analysis groups, there is a key difference between critique of religion in the two analysis groups. Examples from the corporate analysis groups tend to be critical of certain hypocritical and problematic practices of religious institutions and their consequences whereas the independent analysis group tends to be critical of the very foundations and implicit ideologies of religious institutions.

Reminiscent of Marx's infamous "opiate of the masses" critique of religion, independent rappers such as Public Enemy, Immortal Technique, and Paris conceptualize religion as a social institution functioning as a source of misinformation which under the guise of liberating the people actually promotes the hegemonic narrative and seduces *the people* to forgo addressing their oppression in this world and instead focus on salvation in the afterlife. Paris lists the following among "the lies we're told" as part of "the plot to control and rot the soul":

> *Religion is the way, and we all full of sin / That it's better after death if we suffer and pray / Even though they fuck us off in this life today / And that white Jesus hangin on the wall in church / ain't a part of a lie to keep a brother subservient* ("Coinsequences," 2006, independent)

While there are instances of critique of religion in the corporate analysis group, such critiques are about particular practices of religious institutions, not the very foundations and functions of the institution of religion. There is no analogous critique of the social

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institution of religion in the corporate analysis group. Consider Talib Kweli's critique of religion's divisiveness:

> *Trying to get to God but ended up doing the work of Satan / Religion create the vision / Make the Muslim hate the Christian / Make the Christian hate the Jew / Make the rules of faith / That you condition to and to you gotta follow / And God forbid you go to Hell / But if you ever walked through any ghetto then you know it well / We in the third eye of the storm / It's all going to (Hell) / It's all going to (Hell) / Yup, we living in (Hell) / Yup, they giving us (Hell) / It's all going to (Hell) / It's all going to (Hell) / Yup, we living in (Hell) / Yup, they giving us (Hell) / The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want / Just because the lord is my shepherd don't mean I gotta be no sheep / You feel me? / More blood is spilled over religion than anything in world history / We saying the same thing* ("Give 'Em Hell," 2007, corporate)

Here, Talib Kweli is critical of the action inspired by religion in the name of God. He is critical how by pursuing a religious path to connect to God, one may learn to separate from other people of other paths. Though he is critical of the institution of religion and its ramifications, he does not engage the very foundation of religion as Paris does which is indicative of a trend concerning a distinction between critiques of religion in the two analysis groups.

A common theme underlying both the corporate and independents rappers' critiques of social institutions such as education, the media, and religion is that they are each embedded with the ideology of the contemporary power structure such that they reflect the norms, values, and interests of the ruling class. Through these institutions, *the people* are socialized into the hegemonic worldview by their very participation in social life. Yet interestingly, the independent analysis group tends to present the most detailed and nuanced representations that overtly and directly link these institutions to the ruling class power structure.

Such a critique of social institutions on the basis of representing and promoting the ideology of those in power can be understood in terms of insights of critical theorists

and cultural theorists in the Marxist tradition such as Gramsci, Althusser, Williams, Hall, and Frankfurt school scholars such as Adorno and Marcuse. Both the insights of these scholars and claims of the rappers suggest that the experience of oppression that the artists in the sample describe and represent a collective identity in terms of is both created and justified by the hegemonic ideology embedded in the social structure. The contemporary power structure recreates itself through the ideas promoted throughout its social institutions.

In this context, it is interesting to note that in this project, the hip-hop artists tell a different story. The rappers in the sample promote in their lyrics counter-hegemonic understandings of social life that both critique and challenge the hegemonic ideology and the social institutions in which it is embedded. Moreover, through their lyrics they promote alternative, counterhegemonic narratives that counteract this ideology and empower *the people* with alternative representations of history, social life, and truth claims.

Presenting Alternative Narratives

Introduction

In addition to the aforementioned critiques of the hegemonic narrative that manifests throughout various social institutions as "propaganda" promoting the ideologies and interests of the ruling class, the artists of both analysis groups offer alternative, counter-hegemonic ways of understanding and conceptualizing history, geopolitics, and contemporary social life. In accordance with their use of hip-hop music to "edutain" as I discuss in Chapter 5, the artists offer a perspective that tends to be absent from these social institutions. Through their lyrics, the artists in the sample carve out a space to offer a narrative for *the people* that is unrepresented in social

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institutions. The artists frame this process of countering the hegemonic narrative that characterizes society's institutions as illuminating hidden truths for the purpose of awakening *the people* to the reality of their manipulation and conditioning. With respect to the relationship between the research question and these alternative narratives, the most descriptive, detailed, and subversive accounts are located within the independent analysis groups.

Narrative Nuance

There are two general techniques used by the artists of both analysis groups to present alternative truth claims[10]. Through one technique, they dedicate entire verses or even full songs to fully articulating and fleshing out an extensive, detailed argument. Such verses tend to read as the presentation of a number of points comprising a coherent, logical argument. The second technique involves brief allusions to alternative representations of social life in a few words or even a single line. This particular technique often involves a name, or incident being invoked as the punch line of a metaphor. Due to their brevity, these lines represent either a nod to audience members with pre-existing knowledge or a catalyst requiring further knowledge to appreciate the alternative narrative. Yet, even these short lines represent a locus of the promotion and spread of non-institutionalized information.

Both the independent and corporate analysis groups contain instances of alternative narratives presented through both of these techniques. Yet interestingly, the elaborate descriptions that flesh out an extended, nuanced presentation of an

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[10] This contrast between dedicating an entire verse or song to a topic versus mentioning a topic in passing is not a unique phenomenon to presenting alternative constructions of social life. Another topic where this can be seen is the critique of the corporate interests behind mainstream hip-hop which I address in the next chapter.

alternative narrative are more characteristic of the independent analysis group whereas the short lines tend to characterize the alternative narratives of the corporate group. Consider the final verse of "I Can" by Nas for an example of an entire verse in the corporate analysis group that depicts a detailed argument characterized by a presentation of a non-institutionalized historical narrative:

> *Be, be, 'fore we came to this country / We were kings and queens, never porch monkeys / There was empires in Africa called Kush / Timbuktu, where every race came to get books / To learn from black teachers who taught Greeks and Romans / Asian Arabs and gave them gold when / Gold was converted to money it all changed / Money then became empowerment for Europeans / The Persian military invaded / They heard about the gold, the teachings, and everything sacred / Africa was almost robbed naked / Slavery was money, so they began making slave ships / Egypt was the place that Alexander the Great went / He was so shocked at the mountains with black faces / Shot up they nose to impose what basically / Still goes on today, you see? / If the truth is told, the youth can grow / Then learn to survive until they gain control / Nobody says you have to be gangstas, hoes / Read more learn more, change the globe / Ghetto children, do your thing / Hold your head up, little man, you're a king / Young Princess when you get your wedding ring / Your man is saying "She's my queen"* (2002, corporate)

Here, Nas presents an Afrocentric narrative of history in which what are considered to be the foundations of Western Civilization were informed by Africans. He presents a pre-colonial Africa as a rich place in many senses of the word. Whereas this verse serves as an example of presenting an alternative understanding of history, the following independent example deals with more recent history and contemporary geopolitics that they frame as the truth. Here, the Coup present an extended, nuanced, contextualized narrative in opposition to that of the Iraq War:

> *Bush and Hussein together in bed / Giving H-E-A-D head / Y'all motherfuckers heard what we said / Billions made and millions dead. . . . / In a land not very far away from here / George W. Bush was drinkin beer / His daddy was head of the CIA / Now listen up close to what I say / The CIA worked for Standard Oil / And other companies to whom they're loyal / In a whole 'nother land by the name of Iran / The people got wise and took a stand / to the oil companies, ay ain't shit funny? / This is our oil, our land,*

our money / CIA got mad and sent false info / to Iraq to help start the Iran/Iraq wo' / Pronounced war if I have to be proper / The CIA is the cops that's why I hate the coppers / Saddam Hussein was their man out there / They told him to rule while keepin people scared / Sayin any opposition to him, he must crush it / He gassed the Kurds, they gave him his budget / Said you gotta kick ass to protect our cash / Step out of line and feel our wrath / You know the time without lookin at the little hand / Time came for them to cut out the middle man / Children maimed with no legs and shit / Cause the "Bombs Over . . ." you know the OutKast hit / And they really want you to hate him dead / When just the other day they made him head / War ain't about one land against the next / It's po' people dyin so the rich cash checks ("Head (of State)," 2006, independent)*.*

In both examples, the artists attempt to present truth that is absent from the institutionalized discourse. Nas presents a perspective representing facets of Black History and the black intellectual canon which is not included in public school curriculums, and the Coup offer a perspective on the prelude to the Iraq War in opposition to the dominant narrative. Both of these examples contain nuanced, detailed descriptions of events. However, there are two key distinctions that can be made between these corporate and independent examples.

First, Nas's argument is essentially that the depth of African history and pre-slavery African contributions are missing from the institutionalized historical narrative, leaving young African-Americans with feelings of cultural inferiority and low expectations, rather than empowering notions of the greatness of the African diaspora. Although the corporate example does allege that European cultural imperialism continues to this very day, note that the Coup's independent example overtly identifies particular contemporary names and is much more directly critical of particular players in the power structure. Secondly, the independent example speaks to very recent history referencing contemporary figures and cultures, whereas the corporate example refers to ancient history. Presumably, speaking about more recent history and particular figures

and groups in power is a more subversive and threatening project. These two examples are indicative of a trend in which Afrocentric presentations of history are found in both analysis groups, but counterhegemonic representation of current events and the role of contemporary figures in manipulating these events are more characteristic of the independent analysis group.

Furthermore, although there are instances of such nuanced, extended alternative narratives in the corporate analysis group, they are more prevalent in and more characteristic of the independent group. The corporate-produced songs characterized by alternative narratives tend to contain less nuanced and extended presentations of information. Rather, these songs tend to feature a line or two that reference a historical person or incident. One such example is dead prez's "I'm a African":

> *Peter Tosh try to tell us what happened / He was sayin if you black then you African / So they had to kill him, and make him a villain / Cuz he was teachin the children* (2000, corporate)*.*

Here, dead prez allege that reggae singer Peter Tosh was murdered for disseminating an empowering Afrocentric ideology to the youth. Such briefer, less descriptive allegations are also characteristic of the independent analysis group. For example, consider the punch line simile of Immortal Technique's "Watchout (Remix):"

> *And I maneuver through the state department and their friends / With secret deals like the Nazis and IBM* (2008, independent)

Here, Immortal Technique alludes in passing to IBM supplying the Nazis with automated machines to count and track prisoners. Like the previous example of dead prez, he does not present a nuanced, extended explanation of this relationship. He rather merely includes a quick simile drawing attention to the allegation of a working relationship between IBM and the Nazis. To fully appreciate this reference, one would

have to have knowledge about this situation or conduct further research to explore the details of this relationship. Perhaps such lines function to stimulate the curiosity of members of the audience who are unaware of such allegations and provide a stimulus for further research.

With respect to the research question of this project, it is interesting to note that my analysis suggests that although both sample groups are characterized by the presentation of alternative narratives, the independent analysis group is characterized by extended, nuanced, and detailed descriptions more so than the corporate analysis group. A general theme that emerged is that in the independent analysis group, the "hidden truths" that the artists present to the people tend to be more overtly and clearly articulated. The corporate analysis group tends to hint at alternative narratives which are described in greater detail in the independent analysis group. Such thorough, detailed versus are rare in the independent analysis group.

What do we make of these alternative narratives which contradict or rebut institutionalized truths and myths? Are these alternative truth claims accurate? Assessing the historical accuracy of truth claims in progressive hip-hop lyrics is not as relevant to the current research question as is the very fact that these claims are being made. However, in a discussion of alternative narratives in hip-hop, it is helpful to consider Hill's (2010) distinction between crude forms of Afrocentricity and more sophisticated forms of Afrocentricity with respect to the Afrocentric paradigm that has been influential historically throughout progressive hip-hop's discourse.

Hill is critical of crude forms of Afrocentricity that "merely replace Eurocentric truth claims with equally dubious tales of a utopian African past" (p. 111) and are

characterized by romantic, historically suspect, and/or uncritical portraits of Africa. Rather, he champions more nuanced, sophisticated forms of Afrocentricity that attempt to counter European cultural imperialism by challenging its claims to universality. In considering Hill's critique of dubious truth claims within hip-hop and perhaps expanding it to include all counter-hegemonic claims, it is interesting to note that the discourse that characterizes these alternative narratives veer into what may be pejoratively labeled and dismissed as unsubstantiated conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy Theory?

Introduction

Consider how KRS-One's overtly frames the prevalence of guns as a conspiracy:

It's a conspiracy, hear me man, it's got to be something / I can get guns faster than I can get an English Muffin ("Hip Hop," 2008, independent).

The overt framing of a system that benefits *them* at the expense of *us* as a conspiracy is indicative of much of the alternative narratives that characterize particularly the independent analysis group. At times, these narratives lean into the realm of conspiracy theory and culminate in grand conspiracy narratives which explain how *they* are able to retain and extend *their* power over *us*. The extent of the oppression of *the people* is characterized as not unintended consequences or collateral damage of social policy but rather by intention.

Intention

The artists in the sample of both analysis groups claim that the current situation characterized by *their* dominance of *us* is the result of an intentionally orchestrated project. What the rappers present in chapter 3 as the social problems experienced by *us* are framed as the desired results of a deliberate plan. For example, Public Enemy

make allegations of an orchestrated plan that *the people* are intentionally kept ignorant of:

> *In this land where the plan is to blind the mind / We go wild and understand the grand design* ("Rebirth of a Nation," 2006, independent).

Here, Public Enemy assert that *our* oppression stems from not unintended consequence or coincidence but rather a plan. Furthermore, the filtering of "the truth" by social institutions is conceptualized as intentional project to keep *the people* ignorant. Kanye West ascribes the actions of the Reagan Administration with a similar notion of intentionality:

> *How we stop the Black Panthers? / Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer* ("Crack Music," 2005, corporate).

Here, Kanye West presumably refers to the cocaine revealed by Senate hearings to have been smuggled and sold in the U.S. to fund the (U.S.-backed) Contras in their counter-revolution in Nicaragua. Much of this cocaine ended up becoming "cooked" into crack and sold in inner-cities during the 1980's crack epidemic, which decimated Black communities and hampered much of the Black resistance of the previous decade.

Kanye West represents this open secret as then-President Reagan's *intentional* project to stop the Black Panthers. Thus, an incident with a basis in historical fact becomes set in a narrative and embedded with a particular intention. The drug-smuggling which funded the Contras in Nicaragua is represented as an intentional move by the Reagan administration to take down the Black Panthers, not as an unintended consequence of drug smuggling. Also interesting with respect to the research question at hand is that when such a seemingly subversive alternative narrative such as one overtly referencing President Reagan and the Black Panthers is presented in the corporate analysis group, it lacks the detail and nuance that frequently characterizes the

claims of the independent analysis group, as illustrated by the independent examples invoked in this section.

Thus, the alternative narratives—the more descriptive and nuanced of which tend to characterize the independent analysis group—present claims that *they* intentionally did and do *x*, *y*, and *z* to keep *us* down. Furthermore, at times *they*, the ruling class elite, are even conceptualized in terms of a unified, secretive global organization. There are claims that *they* work together and plot and manipulate global events. Such claims move beyond sociological understandings of a power structure and assert that there is a specific group of people, composed of particular individuals, who act as the puppet masters pulling the strings and manipulating global events to further consolidate their power.

Secret societies and a consolidation of power

There are instances in both analysis groups in which *they* and *their* plan are conceptualized in terms of covert groups who covertly manipulate world events to serve their interests and consolidate power. There are references to and the identification of a secretive, elite group that quite literally runs the world. For example, Nas alludes to such a group that he claims manipulates major world events to serve its interests and agenda:

> *Where presidential candidates / Is planning wars with other nations / Over steak with Masons* ("Queens Get the Money," 2008, corporate).

Here, Nas represents the Masons as a group that plans wars alongside the highest ranking political leaders. The implication is that it is the Masons that actually are manipulating politicians into planning wars to satisfy their mutual interests.

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Consider Paris's take in which he alleges that such covert groups intentionally try to destroy the black community:

> *And now I'm hopin' you don't close ya mind - so they shape ya / Don't forget they made us slaves, gave us AIDS and raped us / Another Bush season mean another war for profit / All in secret so the public never think to stop it / The illuminati triple 6 all connected / Stolen votes they control the race and take elections / It's the Skull and Bones Freemason kill committee / See the Dragon gettin' shittier in every city / What would you do if you / knew all of the things we know / Would you stand up for truth / Or would you turn away too? / And then what if you saw / All of the things that's wrong / Would you stand tall and strong? / Or would you turn and walk away / Now ask yourself who's the one with the most to gain (Bush) / 'Fore 911 motherfuckas couldn't stand his name (Bush) / Now even niggas wavin' flags like they lost they mind / Everybody got opinions but don't know the time / 'Cause America's been took - it's plain to see / The oldest trick in the book is MAKE an enemy / Of phony evil so the government can do it's dirt / And take away ya freedom lock and load, beat and search* ("What Would You Do," 2003, independent)

Here, Paris names the Illuminati, Skull and Bones, and Freemasons as covert groups in power that manipulate events behind the scenes. Furthermore, he specifically alleges that AIDS was intentionally unleashed upon the black community, as well as the Bush administration being behind the 9/11 attacks for the purpose of rallying support for its domestic and foreign policy agendas. Paris fully, bluntly, and specifically fleshes out his ideas in a way in which Nas does not. These examples represent the glaring contrast at times in the nuance and detail of conspiratorial descriptions—and alternative descriptions more generally—of social life between the corporate and independent analysis groups.

Speaking of the 9/11 attacks, in considering the representation of an elite, covert group manipulating world events to serve its own interests, there was no more significant of an event for the rappers to address during the time period of the sample than these attacks on New York City and Washington, DC. Accordingly, this event

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maintains a significant place in the alternative narratives. Yet interestingly, the extent to which these claims are elaborated in the independent analysis group is unparalleled in anything in the corporate group. Consider some of Immortal Technique's claims about the 9/11 terrorist attacks in "The Cause of Death"—a representation of an alternative narrative of which there is no basis for comparison in the corporate group. In this narrative, George Bush and Osama bin Laden are described as part of the same elite group working together to advance what is in their mutual interests:

> *My words'll expose George Bush and Bin Laden / As two separate parts of the same seven headed dragon / And you can't fathom the truth, so you don't hear me / You think illuminati's just a fuckin conspiracy theory?* ("The Cause of Death," 2003, independent).

Interestingly, at the outset he critiques the pejorative dismissal as conspiracy theory notions of covert groups such as the Illuminati manipulating world events to serve their interests. First, he claims that in addition to the U.S. sponsoring the rise of the Third Reich, a controversial claim in and of itself, the 9/11 hijackers were trained by the CIA:

> *See the world for what it is, beyond the white and the black / The way the government downplays historical facts / 'Cuz the United States sponsored the rise of the 3rd Reich / Just like the CIA trained terrorists to the fight / Build bombs and sneak box cutters onto a flight* ("The Cause of Death," 2003, independent)

Furthermore, he argues that the US government funded Al-Qaeda:

> *Now here's the truth about the system that'll fuck up your mind / They gave Al-Qaeda 6 billion dollars in 1989 to 1992* ("The Cause of Death," 2003, independent)

Furthermore, he claims that America, presumably the U.S. Government orchestrated the 9/11 attacks in the form of a controlled demolition, forged tapes of Osama bin Laden taking credit for the attack, leading to the rise of what he calls the New World Order:

> *But you act like America wouldn't destroy two buildings / In a country that was sponsoring bombs dropped on our children / I was watching the*

Towers, and though I wasn't the closest / I saw them crumble to the Earth like they was full of explosives / And they thought nobody noticed the news report that they did / About the bombs planted on the George Washington bridge / Four Non-Arabs arrested during the emergency / And then it disappeared from the news permanently / They dubbed a tape of Osama, and they said it was proof / "Jealous of our freedom," I can't believe you bought that excuse / Rockin a motherfucking flag don't make you a hero / Word to Ground Zero / The Devil crept into Heaven, God overslept on the 7th / The New World Order was born on September 11 ("The Cause of Death," 2003, independent)

Immortal Technique claims that any evidence supporting this alternative narrative is suppressed in favor of that which supports the institutionalized narrative. In particular, video footage of bin Laden claiming responsibility for the attacks must have been forged on the grounds that bin Laden would be in no condition to orchestrate the attack:

Tell me the truth, I don't scare into paralysis / I know the CIA saw bin Laden on dialysis / In '98 when he was Top Ten for the FBI / Government ties is really why the Government lies ("The Cause of Death," 2003, independent)

Immortal Technique clarifies what he means by the New World Order and the motive for staging this attack:

And just so Conservatives don't take it to heart / I don't think Bush did it, 'cuz he isn't that smart / He's just a stupid puppet taking orders on his cell phone / From the same people that sabotaged Senator Wellstone / The military industry got it poppin' and lockin' / Looking for a way to justify the Wolfowitz Doctrine / And as a matter of fact, Rumsfeld, now that I think back / Without 9/11, you couldn't have a war in Iraq / Or a Defense budget of world conquest proportions / Kill freedom of speech and revoke the right to abortions / Tax cut extortion, a blessing to the wealthy and wicked / But you still have to answer to the Armageddon you scripted ("The Cause of Death," 2003, independent)

The ultimate alternative narrative that Immortal Technique advances with respect to the 9/11 attacks, a narrative that many of the other artists hint at and support, is that the Bush Administration orchestrated the 9/11 attacks by framing a controlled demolition of the World Trade Center as a terrorist attack to provide a justification for the pursuit of their political agenda, including a military presence in the Middle East through the Iraq

War, and to provide a catalyst for suppressing the civil liberties of the population in the name of security. The purpose of this entire project is asserted to be the promotion of the intersecting economic and political interests of the covert, elite puppet masters who are described as controlling the government.

There are no comparable alternative corporate-produced conspiracy claims. I can only speculate as to *why* this is the case. Are extended conspiracy theory narratives flagged from corporately produced hip-hop by the record labels? Do corporately produced rappers choose to refrain from alienating their fan bases with such detailed representations of controversial information? Is their absence from corporate produced hip-hop not because the narratives are conspiracy-flavored but rather because they are characterized by extended, nuanced information which does not fit the corporate business model?

Interestingly, one could consider this emergence as further evidence supporting a conspiracy: that *they* will not allow "the truth" to emerge through *their* corporate channels. Yet when we consider the subversive messages that do pass through any potential corporate filtering (see next chapter), it seems that if there was a sizable enough market for such conspiracy theory, it would be represented in the corporate analysis. That being said, locating this song in the context of the rest of the project, it seems doubtful to me that within two years of the 9/11 attacks a corporate recording label would release a song with such a critical take on such a sensitive issue.

There is a notable distinction between such conspiratorial representations of the elite in some of the lyrics in this project and how the elite are represented by more traditional notions of claims-makers. Empirical, peer-reviewed sociological research

makes a very clear distinction between concepts such as the power elite and conspiratorial conceptualizations of a secret society manipulating world events. Scholars who study power tend to be dismissive of such "conspiracy" narratives that conceptualize power in terms of particular groups of people rather than network structures. Domhoff concisely dismisses the logic of conspiracy theory narratives (2005). For Domhoff, conceptualizing the ruling elite in terms of secret societies all working in concert pursuing the unified interest of further consolidating power defies logic. On the contrary, his power elite theory refers to people acting in their self-interest in a particular structure while often maintaining shared interests with other members of the power elite.

The key distinction is that for Domhoff, particular individuals are irrelevant to the continued reconstruction process of the power structure whereas in conspiracy narratives, particular individuals are the puppet masters who pull the strings to manipulate world events to satisfy their lust for greater power. When we begin to think of the cause of social problems in terms of particular individuals, we cease to present a sociologically informed analysis for we are focusing on particular people and not the structure/system. A related, in-depth discussion of conceptualizing rappers as public intellectuals in relation to academics follows in the next chapter.

However, the very fact that conspiracy narratives are advanced as alternative truth claims in progressive hip-hop is in and of itself sociologically interesting. With respect to such claims, Professor Cornell West makes an interesting point during a fascinating exchange with rapper Mos Def on the HBO television show *Real Time with Bill Maher* (2007). In response to Mos Def's denial of Osama bin Laden's involvement in the 9/11

terrorist attacks (among other institutionalized narratives he claims to disbelieve), Cornell West locates Mos Def's lack of trust in the institutionalized narrative in a socio-historical context in which people of color have been and continue to be given a number of compelling reasons to not trust the government's official position (interesting is Mos Def addressing these claims more overtly in the television talk forum than in his lyrics).

In the context of experiencing social institutions such as the education and criminal justice systems working against inner city people of color, should it be surprising that rappers representing this social context and a hip-hop culture that emerged from this context would be distrustful of the position of the leaders of the system that creates these conditions? Is it a surprise that they would be distrustful of a narrative that in the not so distant history dehumanized them as a justification for slavery and colonialism? Following the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study, should claims that AIDS was intentionally spread throughout the black community be surprising? Despite the illogical or untenable quality of these positions, that they are offered as explanations speaks to the extreme distrust of institutionalized narratives, and I read them as speaking to the worldview of a historically oppressed and institutionally unrepresented people. If we contextualize holding conspiracy theory ideas in the context of historical phenomena such as the Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and COINTELPRO, perhaps distrust of the government's official narrative of events can be better understood.

While conspiracy-flavored alternative narratives may be understood when contextualized in historical and contemporary systematic oppression, Noam Chomsky makes an interesting claim with respect to conspiracy theory. Whereas the purpose of this project is not to evaluate the truth claims of the alternative narratives but rather to

note that they exist and describe what they claim, perhaps Chomsky's claim could

inform hip-hop as it pursues a political platform: that such ideas keep people distracted

and "busy on wild goose chases so they wouldn't investigate the serious questions"

(Chomsky, 2005). Furthermore, he alleges:

> One of the major consequences of the 9/11 movement has been to draw
> enormous amounts of energy and effort away from activism directed to real
> and ongoing crimes of state, and their institutional background, crimes that
> are far more serious than blowing up the WTC would be, if there were any
> credibility to that thesis. That is, I suspect, why the 9/11 movement is
> treated far more tolerantly by centers of power than is the norm for serious
> critical and activist work (Chomsky, 2006).

Thus, contextualizing conspiracy-flavored claims in the lyrics may help us to understand

why such perspectives may be offered as legitimate. However, as Chomsky suggests,

perhaps such claims may distract and weaken the impact of hip-hop's political

mobilization, which I address at the conclusion of this project.

Conclusions

Generally speaking, the rappers of both analysis groups represent social problems

as a set of interconnected phenomenon that actively oppress *the people* while

benefitting the elite. I argue that the rappers in both analysis groups present a

sociologically informed representation of social life discussing how society is structured

to favor the interests of an elite ruling class at the expense of the people. As such, the

artists critique social institutions as being set up by and for this ruling class. Moreover,

the artists critique the narrative that pervades these institutions while countering them

with their own subversive, alternative narratives which assert diverging representations

of social life.

There are indeed instances of poignant critiques of the system, institutions, and

ruling class of contemporary American society within the corporate analysis group. This

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in and of itself is an interesting emergence. The culture industry does not completely filter out social critique concerning the contemporary power structure. In the conclusion of Chapter 5, I discuss in depth to what extent this phenomenon represents legitimate critique or rather Marcuse's notion of repressive tolerance. Indeed, a close reading of the corporate produced critiques suggests that they tend to not maintain the same frequency, nuance, or detail characteristic of the independent sample group. While critique of *them* and *their* system is not completely filtered from corporately produced manifestations of progressive hip-hop, they tend to be "safer" critiques. Critique of the system and its elite caretakers in the corporate analysis groups tends to lack the edge and contemporary relevance of much of the independent work.

It has been clear throughout the analysis of this project thus far that there is a qualitative, though at times subtle, difference between the music that comprises the corporate and independent analysis groups. I have explored the distinctions between the lyrics in these two groups in the various facets of the "us versus them" narrative that characterizes all of the music in the sample. The central research question—the distinction between the representations in the corporate and independent analysis groups—has been interwoven throughout this project but now takes center stage as I consider how the artists in the two groups overtly address the state of hip-hop, their mechanism for claims-making activity. I now focus on critique of the hip-hop culture industry in the two analysis groups.

CHAPTER 5
THE WEAPON—CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON HIP-HOP CLAIMS-MAKING

Introduction

Whereas both analysis groups are largely characterized by the same "*us* versus *them*" narrative, and social problems are represented in largely similar terms, a close analysis of the lyrics reveals that the work of the independent analysis group tends to represent social problems in a more overt, detailed, nuanced, and subversive way than that of the corporate analysis group. The focus of this chapter is on the implications of this key trend emerging throughout my analysis. Consider that (1) the corporate/independent distinction between progressive voices in hip-hop is at the heart of this project and (2) the entire project rests on the premise of hip-hop artists' use of substantive song lyrics to make claims regarding social problems.

In this context, it is interesting to note self-aware claims within the lyrics of both analysis groups regarding what I consider to be the very mechanism of claims-making activity itself—hip-hop music—in the context of its commodification. A key undercurrent throughout both analysis groups is the artists critically reflecting upon the state of contemporary hip-hop music—their culture, their art form, and the vehicle through which they make their claims. The rappers of both analysis groups conceptualize progressive hip-hop music as their medium for claims-making activity and as their weapon in *the struggle*. However, while the rappers celebrate their space within the margins of the hip-hop cultural landscape as their site of legitimate and substantive claims-making activity, they simultaneously critique the larger hip-hop cultural landscape as being a homogenous, inauthentic, mere corporate commodity devoid of the substance that characterizes the "real hip-hop." Thus, according to the artists of both groups, there is a

diversity of hip-hop expression; some hip-hop is a corporate commodity whereas other hip-hop represents a vibrant counter-hegemonic culture. In the lyrics, hip-hop is both lamented as dead and celebrated as vibrantly alive.

Furthermore, and having profound implications for the research question at hand, the artists of both analysis groups extend their critique of contemporary mainstream hip-hop to the media conglomerates that produce its hegemonic imagery. Thus, a fascinating situation arises in which some of the music in the sample which is critical of the implications of the commercialization and commodification of hip-hop music is actually produced and distributed by the very consolidated music groups that commercialized and commodified hip-hop. Yet, paralleling the trend with respect to the representation of social problems, a close reading of the lyrics reveals a subtle distinction between the two analysis groups with respect to this critique. The more detailed, direct, and specific critiques tend to emanate from the independent analysis groups. Moreover, there are a few select documented instances in which the most subversive facets of the work of artists with corporate ties were censored by the corporate music groups. I conclude this project by discussing the implications of the corporate/independent distinction on hip-hop's critical, claims-making potential.

Hip-Hop Lives?

Introduction

In 2006, Nas released an album titled *Hip-Hop is Dead*. With this controversially-titled (and corporately-produced, which I will address later in this chapter) release, Nas injected into popular culture and the mainstream conversation rising critiques about the state of hip-hop following its commodification by multi-national media conglomerates during the previous decade, and he stimulated a dialogue about the current state of hip-

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hop. Nas's critique of the contemporary hip-hop cultural landscape reflects the perception that hip-hop has become disconnected from its roots as an organically emerging cultural activity among inner-city youth while becoming a product hawked by a multi-billion dollar industry.

In the context of their critiques of contemporary mainstream hip-hop which I will discuss shortly, the artists of both analysis groups also construct a space within contemporary hip-hop in which they participate in a legitimate form of substantive discourse. In this space, hip-hop and particularly the lyrics of hip-hop songs are conceptualized in opposition to the mainstream hegemonic imagery as a medium through which they and other like-minded artists educate and uplift *the people* in a similar way as the socially conscious music that characterized hip-hop's golden age. The lyrics are critical of what hip-hop has become and the role of the media corporations that produce it in pushing it to its present place, while at the same time creating and celebrating a space within hip-hop.

"The Real Hip-Hop"

The rappers of both analysis groups represent their work as a version of hip-hop that continues to flourish as a vibrant, subversive culture that empowers *us*. The artists assert that despite the commercialization of hip-hop and the homogenization of the images that characterize its mainstream manifestations, hip-hop as it was classically known continues to function as the voice of invisible, oppressed people. Interestingly, from this marginalized space within hip-hop, progressive artists distinguish their work from the mainstream and speak about the "real hip-hop."

The artists of both analysis groups largely present their work as "real hip-hop," a phrase that implicitly critiques hip-hop as it tends to be presented on mainstream,

corporate-owned radio stations and music video channels. The real hip-hop is defined

in opposition to the commodities of the culture industry and is asserted to continue to

flourish, albeit in a marginalized sector of hip-hop music. Consider Talib Kweli's claim

regarding this substantive hip-hop:

Real hip hop is missin' from the shelf ("Listen!!!," 2007, corporate).

Here, Talib Kweli asserts that while commodified hip-hop produced for mainstream

consumption is ubiquitous, the real hip-hop is not as widely accessible. It is not that real

hip-hop is "dead," but rather that it is not pushed by the culture industries. An

interesting aspect of this particular example is that it represents a corporately produced

critique of the implications of the commodification of hip-hop. I will discuss this

phenomenon and cite more illustrative examples later in this chapter. Yet contrast this

corporate example with Public Enemy's assertion that "the real hip-hop" was

undermined by federal authorities:

I got my eyes on the lies from Washington / I'm a survivor, I know how the
West was won / See a show and tell, the way the COINTEL / undermined
the real hip-hop so the cops can trail ("Rise," 2006, independent)

The subversiveness that tends to characterize the independent analysis group

immediately jumps out from this independent example. Public Enemy assert that not

only has the real hip-hop lost its space in the marketplace but also that real hip-hop has

been undermined and disrupted in an intentional project presumably because of the

threat of hip-hop's revolutionary potential. The difference in the way the "real hip-hop" is

addressed in these two examples is indicative of a trend throughout the sample. There

are indeed instances of corporately produced critiques of the implications of corporate

control of hip-hop. The very fact that such critiques exist is in and of itself an interesting

phenomenon. However, in comparing the critiques of the culture industry between the

two analysis groups, it is clear that the critiques of the corporate analysis group are less direct, specific, and subversive.

As the artists in both analysis groups locate themselves in terms of the real hip-hop which is defined in opposition to the mainstream, hip-hop becomes a contested term that means very different things for underground rappers and for the boards of media conglomerates. Accordingly, hip-hop scholars speak of a struggle for hip-hop (Rose, 2008; Watkins, 2005). Is hip-hop about serving the culture via substantive lyrical content or, is it about generating music that can maximize profits for the corporate interests that push it?

Some artists of both analysis groups, while not necessarily disagreeing with much of Nas's critique of contemporary hip-hop, do reject the notion that hip-hop as an art form and culture is entirely "dead" by promoting their version of hip-hop. For example, KRS-One presents a view countering claims of hip-hop's death in a song whose title (on an album title with the same name) makes its argument:

> *Every year I get brighter / If you thinking Hip Hop is alive hold up your lighter. . . . / This is Hip Hop / We gonna last forever. . . . / Hip Hop culture is eternal* ("Hip Hop Lives," 2007, independent).

Likewise, Wale, on a guest appearance on a Roots song directly counters the claim:

> *Hip-Hop ain't dead cuz the pulse is in us* ("Rising Up," 2008, corporate)

In this song, Wale asserts that hip-hop as it was classically know continues to thrive through a select group of artists in which he locates himself. Like the aforementioned claims of the real hip-hop in opposition to the products of the culture industry, artists of both analysis groups celebrate their space in contemporary hip-hop while acknowledging the precarious state of hip-hop. Some artists legitimize their hip-hop expression by romantically contextualizing it in the legacy of the substance that

characterized hip-hop "back in the day" during its golden age before commercialization. These presentations of hip-hop promote the idea of taking hip-hop back to its old school roots prior to the influx of commercial interests.

Thus, it is apparent that in the context of a music and culture that has become increasingly co-opted and redefined by the culture industries, the rappers of both analysis groups assert themselves in terms of a space within hip-hop that continues to act as a substantive, subversive, organically emerging cultural force. The rappers engage this force and represent it as a medium for disseminating substantive messages and making claims pertaining to the interests of *the people*. They illustrate the substantive quality of (some) contemporary hip-hop music by characterizing it as a way of promoting empowering knowledge.

Celebrate as Underground

Artists of both analysis groups acknowledge and embrace the marginalized space within hip-hop in which they makes their claims as "the underground." This term connotes its absence on corporate-owned, mainstream music video channels and radio stations, and is represented as the site of authentic hip-hop production. Consider how KRS-One embraces his absence in the mainstream but viability in the underground, a site in which he asserts a different flavor of hip-hop flourishes:

> *Welcome to the underground / Don't look for me in the mainstream, this is a whole 'nother sound / Sound set we rock music in the streets / In the schools and over the Internet* (KRS-One, "I'm on the Mic," 2006, independent)

Likewise, Talib Kweli locates himself within the underground:

> *More rap songs that stress purpose / With less misogyny less curses / Let's put more depth in our verses 'til they left on the surface / While we stomp through the underground / The calm don't come around* (Talib Kweli, "More or Less," 2007, corporate)

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Note how Talib Kweli characterizes the underground where he locates his music in terms of a substantive purpose as well as lack of the problematic imagery that characterizes hip-hop's mainstream. He overtly promotes hip-hop songs characterized by the same "whole 'nother sound" championed by KRS-One. Yet interestingly, Talib Kweli embraces and celebrates the underground on an album that was produced and distributed under the Warner Music Group umbrella. How do we reconcile his claim to the underground with his corporate production status?

Despite the fact that his music is corporately produced, Talib Kweli still identifies in terms of the underground and locates himself in the underground based on the implications of his lyrical content. Because his music rejects the hegemonic imagery which characterizes mainstream hip-hop lyrics, Kweli understands that his music does not maintain the same degree of commercial viability as other hip-hop released by the Big Four. Along the same lines, consider the following example in which Kweli is critical of corporate rappers.

> *I give you intimate details so you can get to know me / These corporate rappers like "Why this dude pickin on me?" / You rap your way to the top, but now it's gettin lonely / Kids is hungry and you lookin like a steak from Nick & Tony's / But don't nobody want your jewels, cause your shit is phony / Say word? Your shit is real?! Damn, your shit is corny* ("Holy Moly," 2007, corporate)

Here, Talib Kweli is critical of the authenticity and quality of the work of "corporate rappers." Yet interestingly, this song was released under the ownership of Warner Music Group. Thus, Talib Kweli is technically speaking a "corporate rapper" in that his work is produced under the umbrella of the Big Four. Can music whose production is located within the distributive power of one of the four corporate behemoths be consider underground in the same way as that which is produced by an independent company?

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The aforementioned examples of independent and corporate rappers who celebrate the real hip-hop and embrace the underground are largely similar. There is not a vast qualitative difference between examples cited from two analysis groups. Yet consider Immortal Technique's description of the underground sector of hip-hop:

> *Such is the same in the rap industry. But the major label super powers treat the underground like the 3rd world. When they need new assets, new artists to prostitute a side-ins and put on a shelf to use their songs. When they needed new concepts, music and publishing to steal from the producers, they came to the underground, to the 3rd world, they took our culture, our property and our industry and our resources, even using our own people to help them exploit us* (Immortal Technique, "Open Your Eyes," 2008, independent)

In this spoken word song, Immortal Technique draws a parallel between the relationship between global superpowers and "third world" countries and the relationship between the Big Four record labels and underground, independent hip-hop. Note the specificity and directness with which Immortal Technique describes the exploitation of the underground hip-hop scene by the major labels—characteristics that are lacking in critique of corporate hip-hop in the corporate analysis group. This contrast is indicative of a contrast between the two analysis groups with respect to critique of the hip-hop culture industry. There is an intensity and depth of description of the practices of corporate recording labels in certain independent examples that is unmatched in any examples from the corporate analysis group.

The examples I have cited thus far in this chapter reveal a clear attempt by artists in both analysis groups to define their substantive practices of hip-hop in opposition to mainstream hip-hop and in opposition to the music of the culture industry. They locate themselves in the context of the underground or the marginalized space within hip-hop in which they create their substantive music. However, despite the critiques of artists in

both analysis groups of the corporate cooption of hip-hop and corporate rappers' collusion with this process, it is also important to mention that there are select instances in both analysis groups where the artists represent hip-hop as a broad and diverse but ultimately unified form of cultural expression. At times, artists from both groups resist conceptualizations of the "good" hip-hop and the "bad" hip-hop, locate themselves alongside, and at times even work with mainstream, corporate rappers. Consider how Mos Def is critically of externally imposed dualities such as corporate/conscious on hip-hop:

> *So, stop with the nonsense, like he conscious / I'm just awake* dawg ("Close Edge," 2004, corporate)

Interestingly, Mos Def resists being labeled as a "conscious rapper." Similarly, note KRS-One's overtly declaration that rappers of all persuasions are hip-hop in that they should all be located under the umbrella of the same form of cultural expression:

> *We need unity in the community / KRS, hip-hop is one / Conscious, gangsters, hustlers* ("Hip Hop," 2008, independent)

Here, KRS-One pushes for a unified take on hip-hop that includes both gangster and conscious flavors of hip-hop alongside other song of his that are critical of the legitimacy of these hustler and gangster personas. These examples represent interesting attempts by artists of both analysis groups to question externally imposed divisions on hip-hop artists and the recognition that they all represent various facets of the same hip-hop culture and music. This situation seems to parallel the attempts to consolidate shared interests between the more and less subversive voices of the sample into a single interest group that I discussed in the section of Chapter 3 concerning the resistant facet of the representation of *us*.

Promoting Knowledge

A key claim of the artists in both analysis groups is that "the real hip-hop" which they represent their music as may elevate the consciousnesses of *the people* by promoting empowering knowledge. While promoting knowledge has been an implicit characteristic of many of the claims discussed in the previous two chapters, I now focus specifically on the rappers' assertions of the importance of acquiring knowledge, active attempts to spread knowledge through their substantive lyrics, and the subsequent extent to which we can think of rappers as intellectuals using songs as a medium.

Artists of both analysis groups assert the importance of acquiring knowledge in *the struggle.* Consider how Talib Kweli alludes to the subversive and liberating power of knowledge:

> *Niggaz with knowledge is more dangerous than niggaz with guns / They make the guns easy to get and try to keep niggaz dumb* ("The Proud," 2002, corporate).

Here, Talib Kweli goes so far as to say that as far as weapons in *the struggle* against *them* go, knowledge is more dangerous than guns, a fact that he accounts for why guns are more accessible than knowledge. Note how Paris pushes his listeners to liberate their minds and see the truth:

> *We all unified to fight, keep the message and awake black / Open up your eyes, see the enemy and shake that / Bullshit lyin, free your mind, we combine / To combat the perpetrator of the crime design* ("Raw Shit," 2006, independent)

These two examples both encourage the liberating potential and stress the importance of acquiring knowledge and allude to how *they* intentionally try to prevent *the people* from having access to knowledge. Interestingly, note how they are indicative of the trend throughout this project in which in similar claims offered by each analysis groups,

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the independent example tends to be characterized by a militancy that is absent from the corporate example.

In addition to asserting the importance of acquiring knowledge, artists of both analysis groups to varying degrees conceptualize themselves as intellectuals and assert that their music acts as a medium for the spread of this empowering knowledge. They identify promoting knowledge and presenting *the people* with "the truth" as a function of their roles as MCs. Consider the following lyrics in which Nas and Mos Def assert the role of their music in teaching the younger representatives of *the people*.

> *Any ghetto will tell ya', Nas helped grow us up* (Nas, "Hip Hop is Dead," 2006, corporate)

> *Schooling the young like Rev. Run ("whose house?") / Quote Pac, tell 'em keep they heads up* (Mos Def, "Wahid," 2009, independent).

The rappers of both groups assert a role in helping to teach the youth, and in particular, younger representatives of *the people*. As discussed in the previous chapter, the lyrics of both analysis groups question the colonial and racist foundations of institutionalized knowledge and seek to replace or at least consider these knowledge claims alongside voices from the underside in the tradition of the black intellectual canon. The rappers push *the people* to wake up and think, to understand their lives in terms of structural realities, and they present alternative, counter-hegemonic constructions of social life.

In the tradition of the Afrocentric social, religious, political, and cultural organizations that inspired the earliest forms of progressive hip-hop, the progressive rappers "drop knowledge" to inform the masses about the social realities that largely

dictate their experiences, choices, and life chances[10]. Interestingly, these two examples

reflect a general trend in the sample in which teaching the youth is conceptualized more

overtly as an intentional goal/project by artists of the independent analysis group. The

instances in which a pedagogical function is presented as being fundamentally

intertwined with rapping tend to emanate from the independent analysis group. That

being said, there are instance in which hip-hop lyrics are infused with a pedagogical

purpose in the corporate analysis group. While the corporate artists do represent

themselves as striving to be positive and inspirational forces, a pedagogical agenda is

generally not as central to the lyrics of this group. For example, consider how Nas and

KRS-One overtly present themselves as public intellectuals. First, consider Nas's claim

here:

> *I used to worship a certain Queens police murderer / 'Til I read the words of Ivan Van Sertima / He inserted something in me that made me feel worthier / Now I spit revolution, I'm his hood interpreter* (Nas, "We're Not Alone," 2008, corporate).

Nas conceptualizes himself as the Afrocentric academic Van Sertima's hood

interpreter and constructs himself as a hood intellectual. In these lines, Nas represents

his role as being to take scholarly ideas and present them in an accessible way to the

people of the hood. Yet, contrast this description of a rapper/intellectual with the

clearest example of a progressive rapper conceptualizing himself as a teacher—KRS-

One—who fully embodies this idea. In fact, his rap name is actually an acronym for the

phrase "Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone." He takes the project of

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[10] For a full account of the alternative narratives that stand as the crux of the rappers' teachings, see Chapter 4.

spreading knowledge through his rhymes to the extent that he conceptualizes himself

and identifies as "the teacher":

It's the teacher, overstand / I'm like a preacher, reachin your upper man
("All My Men," 2008, independent).

As the teacher, a title he invokes to describe himself in multiple songs in the

sample, he describes his music as having an educational component to it, describing

his music as "edutainment," a synthesis of education and entertainment

("Whachanoabout," 2008, independent). Much of KRS-One's music is conceptualized

as a way of reaching *the people*, with "truth" and knowledge. Furthermore, following his

mainstream success as a key figure during the rise of the socially conscious raps of hip-

hop's golden age, KRS-One has written a number of books about hip-hop as an

empowering culture, philosophy, and even a religion. As the example of KRS-One

suggests, the independent analysis group is characterized by the most overt attempts to

present hip-hop music as a pedagogical tool, whereas in the corporate analysis group it

is more of a pleasant side-consequence of being a rapper.

Furthermore, as I discussed in Chapter 3, rappers such as KRS-One and Nas

locate their work in the Black intellectual canon. If it is true that the contributions of

Black historical figures and intellectuals, as well as the Black experience, tend to be

unrecognized and absent in schools and other social institutions as the rappers allege

(see Chapter 4), then perhaps progressive hip-hop songs may act as a mechanism to

promote this heritage and hip-hop can function as a contemporary manifestation of the

black oral tradition. As also discussed in Chapter 3, artists of both analysis groups

locate their musical production in this black intellectual tradition alongside black

intellectuals and activists under the same umbrella of what the Perceptionists call "Black

Dialogue" (2005). Indeed, some artists in the sample conceptualize hip-hop as a space in which this non-institutionalized discourse may flourish.

Accordingly, some scholars consider rappers who conceptualize their hip-hop lyrics as a form of intellectual activity in terms of Gramsci's (1971) notion of the organic intellectual, public intellectuals, or what Neal (2003b) calls Celebrity Gramscians. Neal conceptualizes legendary figures of Black music such as Nigerian Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti, Jamaican reggae icon Bob Marley, and American rapper Tupac Shakur as Celebrity Gramscians, artists who created a subcultural space for the exchange of ideas which eventually spread into the mainstream through their celebrity statuses. Moreover, Eyerman and Jamison (1998) push us to conceptualize musical artists who identify with the values and goals of a particular social movement as movement intellectuals.

According to M1 of dead prez in an interview in *The Village Voice*, "My analysis stems from observations I've made. I'm not just pulling remarks out of thin air. I shape my views from studying society. I am a social scientist, so to speak" (Pablo, 2009). Are dead prez social scientists? Are they intellectuals? If progressive rappers are contemporary voices speaking to and for *the people*, to what extent can we think of rappers as legitimate scholars and public intellectuals? To what extent can hip-hop lyrics be thought of as legitimate scholarly arguments?

If we are going to seriously consider rappers as public intellectuals and consider their music as a medium of knowledge production, then we must recognize that hip-hop artists are held to different, unique standards before we consider their arguments alongside those of academic scholars. As alluded to earlier, rappers are not required to undergo academia's rigorous peer-reviewed process prior to publishing their work.

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Artists do not have to pass any examinations, earn any degrees, or otherwise provide evidence of a mastery of a body of knowledge before they offer their perspectives. Their facts and arguments are not approved by a scholarly community prior to their dispersal. Thus, in the discourse of progressive hip-hop, there is the potential for the spread of a diversity of information including perhaps some historically (in the "objective" sense of social facts) dubious facts and suspect claims[11].

On the other hand, hip-hop's lack of an academic peer-review process also implies a lack of gatekeepers that can determine whether or not a voice, perspective, approach, or theory finds its audience, a problem that has often confronted voices of color and their non-institutionalized discourses. For a particularly provocative example of this situation, consider Mihesuah's (2004) description of the contemporary institutional challenges confronting strong-voiced, empowering Indigenous scholars. In this sense, can it be argued that rappers are freer than academics to promote certain ideas and information, particularly subversive ideas and information? Moreover, to what extent do academic gatekeepers preclude these ideas from what is considered to be legitimate scholarship?

Of course, a lack of peer-review gatekeepers does not suggest that rappers are free to say whatever they want, particularly with respect to those of the corporate analysis groups as becomes clear towards the end of this chapter. Hip-hop is a different discourse with different standards, and the demands of both the market as well as their audiences must be taken into consideration. Rappers are held accountable for their lyrics. Perhaps rappers tend to conform to the norms of progressive hip-hop and

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[11] Note the alternative narratives characterized by unsubstantiated conspiracy theory and what Hill (2010) refers to as crude Afrocentricity in Chapter 4.

the demands of the progressive hip-hop market. Perhaps this limits the backlash

against the sexism and homophobia in progressive hip-hop that I discussed in Chapter

3.

Are the factors that condition intellectual activity and expression in progressive hip-

hop fundamentally characteristic of living and working in a market-driven, capitalist

society? Do we have to consider this question alongside the question whether

academics are also subject to similar demands of the market, particularly with respect to

publishing and grant funding? Is it possible to be rid of these demands?

Yet, in considering some of the alternative narratives describing social life that I

discuss in the previous chapter, perhaps rappers have more freedom than academics to

make controversial, inflammatory claims, or claims that go against conventional,

institutionalized thinking. Progressive hip-hop lyrics may be characterized in part by

information that has been silenced and stripped from history but passed down through

the Black historical canon. It seems that to neglect or dismiss this discourse can at

worst represent an elitism on behalf of those institutionalized within, participating in, and

promoting a system that has historically privileged certain forms of knowledge and

cultural production over others. It has been argued (Collins, 2000; Foucault, 2006) that

knowledge can be either oppressive or empowering, or as dead prez claim:

> *I love education, knowhatimsayin? / But if education ain't elevatin me, then*
> *you knowhatimsayin / It ain't takin me where I need to go on some bullshit,*
> *then fuck education* ("They Schools," 2000, corporate).

My analysis suggests the possibility offered by dead prez and other rappers in the

both analysis groups that (some) hip-hop may promote ideas that represent a

marginalized, uninstitutionalized, and empowering body of knowledge. I would caution

that failing to take it seriously because it emanates from rappers, not institutionalized

academics risks failing to consider the voice of the other (Foucault, 2006). The empirical questions that this discussion leaves me with are (1) can and do rappers present non-institutionalized ideas, perspectives and theories that academics cannot, and (2) are rappers, particularly those with larger fan bases, more successful in reaching *the people* with their messages than academics?

One final point that I want to make with respect to the "real hip-hop" and the celebration of a substantive space within hip-hop is to draw attention to the role of lyrics in the project of resistance. As discussed in depth in Chapter 3, artists of both analysis groups represent themselves as being part of a struggle that they conceptualize as a war. In the context of *the struggle*, a key, repeating metaphor throughout the sample is a conceptualization of hip-hop music as a weapon. Hip-hop music is not just about raising the consciousness of *the people* by promoting empowering, uninstitutionalized knowledge; hip-hop represents a tool that *we* may use to fight *them* and *their* oppressive system.

Specifically and of particular relevance to the current project is that the rappers draw attention to the place of lyrics in the conceptualization of music as a weapon. Consider how artists of both analysis groups represent their lyrics as weapons:

> *I use Viacom as my firearm / Then let the lyrics split you / who do you rely upon?* (Nas, "Sly Fox," 2008, corporate)

> *A bullet never lies, it always tells the truth / My words are gunshots that influence the youth / Assassinate presidents like John Wilkes Booth / Put the message in the barrel of your gun then *bang** (Ill Bill, chorus of "A Bullet Never Lies," 2008, independent)

In these two examples, artists of both analysis groups conceptualize a space within hip-hop in which their substantive work flourishes. First, it is interesting to note there is a subversiveness and militancy in the independent example's references to assassinating

presidents that is lacking in the corporate example, which fits a major theme of this project. Yet it is also interesting to note that both artists assert an empowering, resistant, pedagogical facet to their music while drawing special attention to the role of their lyrics. Let us now consider these facets of what the artists in the sample consider to be the "real hip-hop" in the context of their critiques of the broader hip-hop cultural landscape.

Hip-Hop is Dead?

Introduction

Despite the space within hip-hop that artists of both the corporate and independent analysis groups embrace for substantive claims-making activity, these artists are critical of the larger cultural landscape of hip-hop. Whereas they expressively celebrate, honor, and promote the substantive manifestations of hip-hop in which they participate, they simultaneously call into question the authenticity, legitimacy, and quality of contemporary mainstream hip-hop music. Artists of both groups assert that the potential for inspiring positive social change is lost when hip-hop becomes a mere interchangeable pop culture commodity.

Furthermore, the critique of the artists of both analysis groups with respect to the contemporary hip-hop cultural landscape extends beyond a critique of mainstream hip-hop to the companies that act as gatekeepers promoting this sole flavor of hip–hop. The artists discuss the crucial role played by these consolidated, corporate media companies in promoting the one-dimensional, hedonistic, problematic imagery and general lack of substance which they assert characterizes contemporary mainstream hip-hop. Thus, in this section, I address a very interesting basis for comparison between the two analysis groups with respect to the current research question because

the work of the rappers in the corporate analysis group is produced and distributed by these very companies.

Interestingly, the corporate analysis group is characterized by some overt critique of the hip-hop culture industries. However, in what complements the emerging trends throughout this project, when comparing corporate produced critique of the culture industry to that of the independent analysis group, it appears that this is a limited form of critique. Moreover, this point is reinforced when we consider this more palatable corporate critique alongside what appear to be overt instances of censorship of critical messages in the corporate analysis group.

Critique of the Hip-Hop Culture Industry

The contemporary mainstream hip-hop that is produced and promoted by the hip-hop culture industries is asserted by rappers of both analysis groups to be boring, standardized, unchallenging, and pacifying. The rappers seemingly echo Adorno's culture industry critique of mass culture and popular music as they assert that mainstream hip-hop is a repetitive, manufactured commodity and an inauthentic manifestation of the "real hip-hop" which it is defined against. Moreover, in their critiques of the lack of quality and diversity of contemporary mainstream hip-hop, the progressive rappers in the sample extend their critiques a step further and address what they consider to be a structural source of this reality: the corporations that produce and distribute mainstream hip-hop music. The rappers of both analysis groups are conscious of the implications of the hip-hop culture industry on hip-hop's identity and are critical of the corporations that produce and distribute mainstream hip-hop.

Critiquing the quality, authenticity, and imagery of mainstream hip-hop

As I discuss earlier in this chapter, there are some instances in which rappers of both analysis groups promote a unified understanding of all varieties of hip-hop and are critical of externally imposed divisions on hip-hop cultural production. However, the rappers of both analysis groups are often and consistently critical of corporate-produced, mainstream hip-hop music—the music that they define their "real hip-hop" in opposition to. First, there are instances in both analysis groups in which artists are critical of the lack of a place for substantive lyrics—the medium which I consider to be a site for claims-making activity—in the contemporary mainstream music produced by the culture industries. Whereas the artists in both analysis groups represent their lyrics as weapons in *the struggle*, they assert that the contemporary hip-hop cultural landscape is characterized by at best ambivalence toward and at worst a clear rejections of hip-hop songs characterized by profound, deep, or substantive lyrics. Respect and appreciation for wordsmithing is replaced by an emphasis on catchy beats and simple rhymes. As Immortal Technique succinctly notes:

> *The game don't give a fuck if you're lyrical* ("Reverse Pimpology," 2008, independent).

Here, Immortal Technique asserts that quality lyrics are at best irrelevant and at worst an impediment to success in the rap game. Likewise, in an interesting line, Talib Kweli responds to mainstream hip-hop megastar Jay-Z's reference to him[12] and ruminates on the place of lyrics in the contemporary hip-hop industry:

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[12] Jay-Z is generally recognized as one of the premier rappers of the post-golden age era. I would argue that he is the most celebrated rapper post-Tupac Shakur. While his music may be characterized by occasional progressive messages and as a voice detailing street life, I neglected to include his work in the sample due to the fact that his music is largely characterized by the dominant, problematic imagery of mainstream hip-hop (Rose, 2008). While his work is not included in this project, there is an infamous lyric of his which I reference here to fully illuminate Talib Kweli's response:

If lyrics sold then truth be told / I'll probably be just as rich and famous as Jay-Z ("Ghetto Show," 2004, corporate).

The message here is clear. One's lyrics have no place in the quest to reach the pinnacle of success in contemporary hip-hop. Not only are the significance of substantive lyrics downplayed in the corporate realm of hip-hop in which value is based on commercial viability, but lyrics take a backseat to the beat and production of the song.

In this context, it has been argued that all hip-hop is political (Asante, 2008) in that there are implications of artists' lyrical content and what the artists choose to say or not to say on records. Do they tone down substantive lyrics in their songs for the sake of commercial success? Do they provide the culture industries with the images of black men that the companies are looking to market (Light, 2005)? Do they embody hegemonic imagery and in turn reinforce the status quo, or do they resist such imagery?

It seems reasonable that an independent rapper outside of the commercial mainstream would be critical of the value of substantive lyrics in contemporary hip-hop. This is a common assertion in the independent analysis group. Yet, what is interesting here is that the corporate example's critique of the commercial viability of lyrics in contemporary hip-hop is on a corporately produced album. This is not a particularly subversive critique of contemporary mainstream hip-hop or the companies that manufacture it. However, it is indicative of an emerging theme that will be discussed throughout this chapter: critique of corporate hip-hop within corporate hip-hop.

And the music I be making / I dumb down for my audience / And double my dollars / They criticize me for it / Yet they all yell "Holla" / If skills sold / Truth be told / I'd probably be / Lyrically / Talib Kweli ("Moment of Clarity," 2003).

These lyrics represent a profound acknowledgement from rap megastar Jay-Z that he "dumbs down" his lyrics for the sake of commercial viability.

Artists of both analysis groups critique the quality of contemporary mainstream hip-hop music on the basis of the dominant themes and imagery which they assert characterize it. They critique that this music lacks substance, is characterized by imagery with problematic ramifications, and characterize its artists as inauthentic:

> *Fast forward to 2000 and now / You see it everywhere you look, speech, music, fashion and style / It's black dialogue / Go ahead kid, try it on /. It's much harder to master than precision with firearms / Corny niggaz switch it up and rent it to Viacom / But it was taught to me early on by my mom /. Master yourself, for maximum outreach potential / Respect that you get from that will roll exponential / Preferential treatment, brings us heat when / It only goes to those who rock the diamonds and sequence / They invite the kiddies to the video show / To watch the fake titty models all act like hoes / I guess it goes the more ignorance the more press / But everywhere I look I see black people with more stress / But does that mean we should be shucking and jiving / Fucking and knifing just to keep our bank accounts thriving / See I walked the path my elder laid out / Cause acting like a monkey for white folks is played out / I get my own money, on my own turn / Got heat for everybody, watch the microphone burn* (The Perceptionists, "Black Dialogue," 2005, independent).

Here, the Perceptionists define themselves in opposition to the hegemonic imagery that characterizes mainstream hip-hop. They critique conformity to this problematic, destructive imagery among African-American rappers for the sake of one's music career and subsequent financial and material success. Interestingly, consider the similar claims in Dice Raw's verse on the Roots song "I Will Not Apologize," an analogous example of scathing critique of mainstream hip-hop imagery yet one from the corporate analysis group:

> *For the statements I'm about to make I will not apologize / Niggas talk a lot of shit, really need to stop the lies / Jewels rented, cars rented, homie that ain't authentic / Acting tough on TV but to me you seem a little timid / Don't blame the nigga, blame America, it's all business / Acting like a monkey is the only way to sell tickets / Shit I can dig it, niggas gossip silly digits / White kids buy it, it's a riot when we talking about pimping / Or sipping on old English brew or whatever they think we do / Spraying double Uzis cuz you know they think we live in zoos / The problem is with this everyone seems to be real confused / The niggas on the streets to the old people that watch*

the news / And watch BET and the crazy shit they see / They associate with you do the same shit to me / When you look at me you see just a nigga from the projects / But can't understand this nigga's mind set but still (2008, corporate)

Like the lyric of the Perceptionists, this verse acts as a profound critique of the lack of authenticity in the imagery that characterizes mainstream hip-hop, and the implications of this imagery. Dice Raw also asserts that in mainstream hip-hop, artists are compelled to embody racist historical African-American stereotypes, and he notes the socializing impacts on people of all ages and backgrounds stemming from exposure to these particular images of black men.

These two examples represent instances in which examples from the corporate and independent analysis groups advance the same argument. Contemporary hip-hop is critiqued by artists in both analysis groups as a manufactured, homogonous commodity characterized by a lack of substance that has been co-opted by the culture industries. This music, it is asserted, is not speaking to and for *the people* but it rather embodying the requisite imagery and subject matter to maintain its place as a corporate commodity. Thus, they claim that African-American artists must actually embody problematic, historically stereotypical imagery to succeed in mainstream hip-hop. They voice Asante's (2008) claims that historically the only way for black entertainers to be successful was to cater to and reinforce racist caricatures of blackness that did not question, challenge, or address the structures and reasons for their oppression.

Interestingly, although Dice Raw's verse parallels much of the critique of mainstream hip-hop imagery that is rife throughout independently produced hip-hop, this verse is from an album released by Def Jam under the umbrella of the Universal Music Group, a company responsible for promoting much of the imagery that Dice Raw

is critical of. Interestingly, this verse represents one of the major music groups

releasing a song that is critical of the dominant imagery of the hip-hop that it produces.

This scenario is indicative of a paradox within corporate produced critiques of corporate

hip-hop and hip-hops' commercialization that I will discuss throughout this chapter.

Note that in these two examples, the critique of mainstream hip-hop extends beyond to

the artists who create it to the industry which structures the artistic creation as it funds

and produces it. Interestingly, although the lyrics of both analysis groups are

characterized by largely analogous critiques of contemporary mainstream hip-hop

music, in considering how the artists address the role of the culture industries in

manipulating the content of hip-hop songs, a qualitative difference between the critiques

of the two analysis groups begins to emerge.

Critiquing corporate manipulation of the message

Artists of both analysis groups are critical of the implications of corporate control

on the substantive content of hip-hop, particular lyrical themes. Yet there is a qualitative

difference in terms of the specificity and directness of this critique between the two

analysis groups. Indeed, direct and specific critique of the particular record labels under

the ownership of the Big Four, music video channels owned by Viacom, and radio

stations owned by Clear Channel, as well as asserting the implications of corporate

ownership on the culture of hip-hop are more pronounced in the lyrics of the

independent analysis group. Consider the following Public Enemy and Paris song in

which Chuck D is very critical of corporate influence on substantive content in

corporately-produced hip-hop:

> *Now hip-hop was a gift that lifted up / Loved rap 'til the companies ripped it*
> *up / Now the soul is set, we've been had like jazz / If you down for change*
> *then they take your voice away / And then they tell you the best is white /*

Co-signed by a nigga that pimped the mic / Make the rule the view that the beef is cool / But what it do is fool the few fools who buy the feud / Keep the people all blind and dumb dancing / Never let a record that wreck become rampant / See the street copycat the crap rap and songs / Not knowin "There's a POISON Goin' On" / 'Til the message revealed and I show / But you never get to hear it on the radio ("Hard Rhymin'," 2006, independent)

Here, Chuck D articulates a common, representative critique of the hip-hop culture industry from the sector of independently produced hip-hop. He celebrates the production of authentically subversive hip-hop music, but laments the marginalization of such hip-hop expression in the underground due to hip-hop's co-option by the culture industry and subsequent promotion of a pacifying, commodified version of hip-hop.

This is a very interesting example when we compare it to the corporate examples most critical of the companies that produced mainstream hip-hop. As critical as artists from the corporate analysis group are of the imagery which constitutes contemporary hip-hop, their critiques do not explain why this situation is the way it is to the extent to which Chuck D does. While the lyrics of the corporate analysis group are often characterized by a profound diagnosis of a troubling situation, they lack the historically informed assertion of corporate co-option of subversive Black Music that characterizes this independent example. The corporate example is critical of the imagery and its implications but never directly implicates corporate control of the music as the cause. As pointed as some of the instances of critique of the hip-hop culture industry are in the corporate analysis group, a close reading reveals a contextualized depth of critique and direct implication of corporate interests in some of the independent critiques that is lacking in the corporate group.

That being said, let us consider Lupe Fiasco's "Dumb It Down" (2007, corporate). In this song, Lupe Fiasco ruminates on the implications of being a rapper on a corporate

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record label and the subsequent pressures to conform to the hegemonic imagery. Consider the three varying refrains from this song which are worth quoting in their entirety as they offer three different critiques of his music from the perspective of the culture industry which sees it as problematically deviating from the standard for not being appropriately "dumbed down:"

> *You goin' over niggas' heads Lu (Dumb it down) / They tellin' me that they don't feel you (Dumb it down) / We ain't graduate from school nigga (Dumb it down) / Them big words ain't cool nigga (Dumb it down) / Yeah I heard "Mean And Vicious" nigga (Dumb it down) / Make a song for the bitches nigga (Dumb it down) / We don't care about the weather nigga (Dumb it down) / You'll sell more records if you (Dumb it down)*

> *You've been shedding too much light Lu (Dumb it down) / You make'em wanna do right Lu (Dumb it down) / They're getting self-esteem Lu (Dumb it down) / These girls are trying to be queens Lu (Dumb it down) / They're trying to graduate from school Lu (Dumb it down) / They're starting to think that smart is cool Lu (Dumb it down) / They're trying to get up out the hood Lu (Dumb it down) / I'll tell you what you should do (Dumb it down)*

> *You putting me to sleep nigga (Dumb it down) / That's why you ain't popping in the streets nigga (Dumb it down) / You ain't winning no awards nigga (Dumb it down) / Robots and skateboards nigga? (Dumb it down) / GQ Man Of The Year G? (Dumb it down) / Shit ain't rocking over here B (Dumb it down) / Won't you talk about your cars nigga? (Dumb it down) / What the fuck is goyard nigga (Dumb it down) / Make it rain for the chicks (Dumb it down) / Pour champagne on a bitch (Dumb it down) / What the fuck is wrong with you? (Dumb it down) / How can I get on a song with you? (Dumb it down)*

In this song, Lupe Fiasco articulates the pressures that he, as a rapper on a corporate record label, faces to conform to the problematic, one-dimensional imagery that characterizes mainstream hip-hop. He speaks to the reality of sanctions resulting from promoting substantive, empowering music in the vein of "the real hip-hop" celebrated by the progressive artists. In these choruses, Lupe Fiasco invokes the persona of the hip-hop culture industry to conceptualize and describe a deliberate attempt to dumb down hip-hop and promote harmful imagery in lieu of empowering

imagery because of the consequences that it will have on both the marketplace and *the people*.

At first glance, this example seems like a scathing critique of the hip-hop culture industry and presents another compelling paradox. This song was released by Atlantic Records, owned by Warner Music Group with an accompanying video for air on (and still available to watch on the websites of) MTV and BET, both owned by Viacom. Why would Warner release a song critical of itself and promote it with a single and a video? Is Lupe Fiasco not biting the hand that feeds by rebelliously making a song about how these companies pressure him to construct songs about certain topics rather than others?

Yet interestingly, unlike in the independent example, a careful reading of the song reveals that Lupe Fiasco neglects to directly and specifically speak to who is behind the curtain. Who is telling him to dumb down his music? While this song represents an unusually compelling critique of the homogenization in corporate, mainstream hip-hop music from the corporate analysis group and suggests that such music is part of an intentional project to keep *the people* down, for the purposes of the research question at hand it is interesting to note the lack of specificity in addressing the powers that be as we find in some independent songs. For example, consider how Chuck D overtly discusses the consolidation of ownership of record labels in the following Public Enemy song:

> *Four major corps bought your support / Check the fine print- that CD you bought / Sony, Time Warner, Universal, notorious BMG / No lie, know what? / They just got EMI / 3 radio corporations / Own all them so called Black stations* ("54321 . . . Boom," 2002, independent).

In discussing what is and what is not said in the artists' critiques of the culture industry and the corporate manipulation of the parameters of acceptable hip-hop expression, it is interesting to consider how in this example Chuck D not only asserts that four major companies control the majority of American popular music, he overtly names the companies that comprise the Big Four. In other songs, Chuck D speaks to the implications of this consolidated ownership on the substantive content of the hip-hop that they produce. It is interesting with respect to the research question that this "backstage" discussion of the inner-workings of the music industry are featured on an independent example, and there is no analogous comparison in the corporate group.

This contrast in the specificity in which hip-hop's puppet masters are discussed supports the emergence in other facets of the analysis in which the lyrics of the independent analysis group are characterized by a level of detailed description that is absent in the corporate analysis group. The question then that is raised by the Lupe Fiasco example is to what extent do such corporate produced songs allow the Big Four to sell, market, and profit from not only the mainstream varieties of hip-hop but also songs that are seemingly oppositional to the mainstream. This question should be considered in the context of the following two points: 1) There is a great disparity between mainstream, corporate produced songs that cater to the hegemonic imagery and those in opposition to it and 2) my analysis suggests a qualitative difference between the opposition in corporate-produced songs and those of the independent analysis group.

Critiquing corporate exploitation of artists

Another facet of the both analysis groups' critiques of hip-hop culture industry is the relationship between the artists and the corporate record labels. The artists in both

analysis groups discuss how rappers are victimized in exploitative economic arrangements between them and the Big Four record labels. Consider the emphatic critique of this situation presented by Pharoahe Monch on a corporate release:

> *A&R's a house nigga, the labels the plantation / Now switch that advance for your emancipation / MC's are the field like pick cotton for real / I pop blocks like beat street with a notch n' a kill / They take the strongest of slaves to compete in a track meet / For the King of the city sang songs of back streets / Choruses of cocaine tales and black heat / Only to trade niggas like professional athletes! / Don't take that merchandising, snatch that publishing / Practice that black ass, ship you to London / By way of France, Germany, Dublin / A railroad to underground like Harriet Tubman / While ya'll stay strugglin' we smuggle MC's through the streets / Till we bubblin' on mix CD's, hustlin' / Clans see me on the block n' say freeze / I say Fuck You! I'm a man, I'm Free!* ("Free," 2007, corporate).

   Here, Pharoahe Monch invokes a slavery metaphor to describe the relationship between corporate recording labels and hip-hip artists. This verse represents a profound critique of the exploitative relationship between record labels and the artists who are signed to them. Again, we may notice a paradox in which a song which is critical of the practices of a corporate record label is released under the umbrella of Universal Music Group, a corporate record label. Yet, before we celebrate such expression in the corporate analysis group, let us compare it to an example from the independent analysis group. Compare this example to an Immortal Technique song:

> *Yeah, 100 percent independent, I'm the fuckin boss / I sold 80,000 off a quotable in The Source / The hood is not stupid, we know the mathematics / I made double what I would going gold on Atlantic / Cause EMI, Sony BMG, Interscope / would never sign a rapper with the White House in his scope / They push pop music like a religion / Anorexic celebrity driven financial fantasy fiction* ("Watchout," 2008, independent)

   In his music, Immortal Technique speaks of the third world both literally as he speaks to a third world experience but also metaphorically as he compares the underground space where independent progressive hip-hop is ghettoized as the third

world of hip-hop. Here, he speaks to the economics of the rap industry and asserts how it is his own financial interest to remain independent because he receives more profit from selling his music despite that his record sales are far less than they could be if he had corporate backing. Moreover, he claims that the major record labels would never sign, produce, and promote music that does indeed at times present imagery in which the white house in his scope.

Two key points arise from this example. First, Immortal Technique doesn't just refer to "the majors" but rather actually identifies the names of particular companies. Despite the intense imagery of the corporate example, this critique that characterizes it follows the emerging trend throughout the analysis as it lacks the specificity to the extent exhibited in the independent example. Whereas Pharoahe Monch ambiguously speaks of the labels, he does not specifically and explicitly identify particular labels as does Immortal Technique here. That being said, referencing particular corporate record labels is not solely a feature of the independent analysis group however. However, we must consider the nuances between how these references are made in the two analysis groups. First, let us consider Talib Kweli's critical references of particular record labels:

> *More blacksmithing, def jerks less Geffen / and the rest cause the rest suck*
> */ they got the shit all messed up* ("More or Less," 2007, corporate)

In the song, Talib Kweli condescendingly refers to Def Jam as "def jerks" and critiques Geffen while celebrating his Blacksmith Records imprint which was at the time under the Warner umbrella. Here, he does critique two record labels by name in a way that seems to be similar to that of Immortal Technique. However, note the distinction between his and Immortal Technique's critical referencing of particular corporate record labels.

Immortal Technique's critique implicates the entire corporate hip-hop sphere. Talib Kweli critiques two particular corporate labels owned by the same company (Universal) while actually promoting his own, which happens to also be owned by a corporate music group (Warner). On the other hand, Immortal Technique implicates all of the Big Four: Sony, EMI, Warner (parent company of Atlantic), and Universal (parent company of Interscope). An analogy that I would make to describe this situation is that Immortal Technique's critique is like an attack on the soft drink industry, whereas Talib Kweli's appears to be more like a Coca-Cola brand critiquing Pepsi brands— one corporate flavor attacking a competitor while promoting itself, rather than a broad critique that undermines the entire corporate soft drink industry.

Another interesting fact of Immortal Technique's references to the corporate music groups that we do not find in the lyrics of the corporate analysis group is his assertion that because of his subversive lyrical content his music is outside of the parameters of the Big Four. Moreover, he asserts that because he operates outside of the corporate model, he is able to control his own content, express precisely what he would like to, and represent his music as authentically independent. This is a crucial claim that distinguishes the artists in the independent group from those in the corporate one. After describing the exploitation of the music industry, Pharoahe Monch claims that he is free. Likewise, at the end of "Dumb It Down" Lupe Fiasco offers a claim of agency with respect to artistic freedom:

> They told me I should come down cousin, but I flatly refuse I ain't dumb
> down nothing ("Dumb It Down," 2007, corporate).

Yet, Immortal Technique is able to represent the substance of his music as "100% independent" in a way in which the artists of the corporate analysis group are

fundamentally unable to. Whereas corporate artists such as Lupe Fiasco may critically

speak of the limitations they face vis-a-vis being produced by corporate music groups,

independent artists may do the opposite and celebrate their artistic freedom. Here,

independent artists celebrate their independent status both for 1) the artistic freedom

that it entails and 2) for being able to receive a larger share of the profits generated by

the sale of their music. Note how in a different song, Immortal Technique illustrates

both of these points:

> *40,000 records sold, 400 grand / Fuck a middle man, I won't pay anyone*
> *else / I'll bootleg it and sell it to the streets myself / I'd rather be that than*
> *signed and stuck on a shelf / And because of this executives try to diss me /*
> *Racism frozen in time like Walt Disney / And now they say they wanna get*
> *me signed to the majors / If I switch up my politics and change my behavior*
> */ Try to tell me what to rhyme about over the beat / Bitch niggas that never*
> *spent a day in the street / But I repeat that nobody can hold my reigns / I*
> *put the truth on tracks nigga, simple and plain* ("Freedom of Speech," 2003,
> independent)

To punctuate his point, the song then invokes for the hook a sample from *Pinocchio*

featuring the title character singing:

> *I got no strings, so I have fun / I'm not tied up when we need one / They've*
> *got strings but you can see / There are no strings on me!*

Whether the strings are in fact pulled on corporate artists by the major record labels and

their artistic expression and the substance of controversial critique is limited and/or

censored, it is worth noting that having "no strings on me" is an argument that only

rappers who are produced and distributed by independent companies can make.

Perhaps this adds a degree of legitimacy to their critiques of corporate hip-hop as they

are not working for, generating profits for, or connected to the industry that they are

being critical of.

It seems that it would be more ideal for the project of conceptualizing hip-hop as revolutionary activity to not be dependent on a multinational corporation to spread the music. Can hip-hop critical of the system maintain the same perceived legitimacy if it is produced by the system, particularly with respect to Marxist-flavored critiques of economic oppression as I discussed in Chapter 3? Independent hip-hop does not have to be accountable to a corporate record label, and its critiques of the major labels do not increase the capital of these companies. In hip-hop, where perceived authenticity is a crucial prerequisite to perceived legitimacy, only the artists in the independent analysis group can represent their work as authentically independent. Releasing one's music through independent channels allows independent progressive rappers to fully represent themselves as "underground" in a way in which corporate rappers can't, and in turn doing so enhances their claims with a certain authenticity.

Although Pharoahe Monch asserts his freedom, he is not able to represent his music as authentically free in the way in which rappers such as Immortal Technique can and do. Here is a key difference between the artists in the two analysis group with respect to how authentically they are able to represent themselves as independent, revolutionary voices outside of a corporately controlled industry. With respect to the research question, my analysis of the lyrics supports Immortal Technique's claim that independent artists are "freer" to express controversial, subversive ideas in their lyrics than corporate artists. This claim is further substantiated by examples of the apparent corporate manipulation of subversive messages, which I will elaborate on shortly.

Having duly noted this important distinction between the perception as well as reality of authentically free expression in the lyrics of the two analysis groups, that

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critical messages relating to the corporate control of hip-hop emerge in the lyrics of the

corporate analysis group may still be somewhat surprising. Though there are

observable differences between these critiques and those of the independent analysis

group, primarily that the corporate examples are more ambiguous and less specific, the

fact remains that there are corporately produced songs that are critical of the various

problematic implications of corporate ownership on artists and the music that they

make. Though this critique may not be as direct as that of the independent analysis

group, in an era of corporate control of hip-hop, it seems paradoxical for Sony, Warner,

Universal, and EMI to release records characterized by songs critical of the imagery of

mainstream hip-hop, the role of these companies in limiting the parameters of this

imagery, and these companies' treatment of artists.

One answer to this paradox becomes clear when we analyze it along with another

seemingly paradoxical situation. In releasing music that critiques the economic

arrangement between the Big Four record labels and the artists signed to them on

record labels owned by large media corporations, the claims-making activity and critique

of the culture industry ironically generates revenue for the very companies they critique

and in turn provides the companies with capital to subsidize the production of more of

the very hip-hop that the artists are critical of. To what extent does the profit motive

provide an incentive under the corporate umbrella for such critical (but not as

subversive as some of the independent manifestations) music? By offering a few Lupe

Fiasco "Dumb It Down"s, Warner Music Group profits not only from the one-dimensional

mainstream hip-hop that it produces and distributes, but also from the marginalized

music that is critical of this music. In this way, the same entities control and profit from

the dissenting, minority opinion in hip-hop. I discuss the implications of this with respect to Marcuse's concept of repressive tolerance later in this chapter. That the work of progressive voices in the corporate analysis groups generates profits for these companies presents an important distinction between the two groups, a distinction that is not lost on the claims of the artists in the independent analysis group.

One explanation for the apparent paradox of Big Four-produced critique of the Big Four may be that the message is irrelevant to the market. Perhaps the subversive examples from the corporate analysis group reflect a certain cynicism associated with the power of song lyrics historically associated with "low culture" to present critical messages? Perhaps limited critique is tolerated because "it's just music." If there is an audience of consumers willing to support messages critical of the hip-hop industry and the contemporary power structure discussed in Chapter 3, then perhaps profit-oriented companies will offer this variety of hip-hop despite its critical messages. I will consider the implications of these ideas at the conclusion of this chapter. However, let us first consider evidence of the limitation of corporately produced subversive and critical messages.

Corporate Censorship?

Consider that Nas's infamous *Hip-Hop is Dead* album, an album critical of the implications of hip-hop's commercialization, was released under the umbrella of the Universal Music Group, a company involved in this commercialization process and one that profits immensely from selling the commodified, mainstream hip-hop which Nas critiques as being liable for hip-hop's "death." Nas laments the consequences of the commodification of hip-hop as his thesis in the album's title track:

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Everybody sound the same / commercialize the game / Reminiscin' when it wasn't all business / It forgot where it started / So we all gather here for the dearly departed / Hip-hop is dead ("Hip-Hop is Dead," 2006, corporate).

There is perhaps no better example illustrating the inherent paradox of corporate produced progressive hip-hop. Consider that Nas's influential critique of commercialized hip-hop was a commercial success, debuting at #1 on the Billboard charts, and it was released by one of the companies that played a substantial role in hip-hop's commercialization. In the context of this apparent paradox, consider the chorus of the "dirty" version of the title track, which is only available on underground mixtapes:

> *If hip-hop should die before I wake / I'll put an extended clip inside of my AK / Roll to every station, murder the DJ / Roll to every station, murder the DJ* ("Hip-Hop is Dead," 2006, corporate).

Yet interestingly, on the album version[13], these militant lyrics that characterize Nas's violent depiction of overtly murdering the DJs who play one-dimensional mainstream hip-hop are slightly modified:

> *If hip-hop should die before I wake / I'll put an extended clip and body 'em all day / Roll to every station, wreck the DJ / Roll to every station, wreck the DJ* ("Hip-Hop is Dead," 2006, corporate).

The changes are subtle, with the name of a specific type of gun replaced and significantly, Nas's persona does not "murder" but "wreck" the DJ. On the version officially released for mainstream consumption, Nas's intentions and actions are more vague and less militant than that which characterizes the version on the underground mixtape. There is something exceedingly ironic and very telling in that the very song in which Nas declares hip-hop to be dead due to the implications of commercial interests

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[13] The modified lyrics on the officially released album track should not be confused with the edited version, which in accordance with common practice aired on radio stations and music video channels absent of profanity and references to violence, drugs, and sex.

on its substantive content is marked by a difference in lyrics between the version of a song released as a corporate commodity and the version that emerged on an underground mixtape. The contrast between the more subversive version of this "dirty" chorus and the "cleaner" version that was selected for wide release is indicative of a key distinction between the two analysis groups throughout this project: the censorship of subversive, offensive, or copyright-violating content of corporate rappers by the corporate music groups.

Indeed, a key emergence throughout this project thus far is that the representation of social problems and critical messages relating to the culture industry are more overt, detailed, and subversive in the independent analysis group. That being said, it should be duly noted that the critical messages that I have discussed throughout this analysis are not entirely filtered from the corporate analysis group. Perhaps surprisingly, there is evidence of corporately produced critique of corporate influence and the contemporary power structure with respect to social problems.

Thus, perhaps a better metaphor than filtering to describe the qualitative difference between the constructions of social problems in the two analysis groups is a sanding down of subversive content. It is not that critical messages are completely removed from corporately produced manifestations of progressive hip-hop, it is that the roughest, most subversive edges of the critical messages that characterize the independent analysis group tend to be sanded down in their presentation within the corporate analysis group, resulting in a more palatable version for mainstream consumption. However, in addition to this general trend, I will now consider some instances that

suggest a more overt notion of filtering of certain messages in the corporate analysis group, which I would argue can be framed as corporate censorship.

Corporate censorship of subversive lyrics?

In the aforementioned lyrics discussed earlier in this chapter, Immortal Technique serves as an excellent example of an independent rapper who celebrates his artistic freedom vis-à-vis his independence from the confines of corporate production. His first album was self-released, and his later albums were released through an independent company for which he serves as the Executive Vice President. Considering his claims celebrating his artistic freedom, the question then becomes to what extent do corporate rappers maintain such artistic freedom? This is a somewhat challenging question to explore because of the limitations of my data. I can only analyze the lyrics of music that has been released and do not have access to what artists would have liked to assert in their lyrics but did not because of the potential flak that it would cause, nor do I have access to any ideas that may have been censored early in the creative process.

However, there are a few key instances of apparent censorship of subversive lyrics in the corporate analysis group, which has profound ramifications on the research question. One such example is a song from the corporate analysis group that is overtly critical of the powers that represent the hip hop culture industry. Mos Def overtly, directly, and specifically critiques the corporate influence on hip-hop and hip-hop's white, corporate ownership on "The Rapeover":

> *Old white men is runnin this rap shit / Corporate force's runnin this rap shit / Some tall Israeli is runnin this rap shit / We poke out our asses for a chance to cash in. . . . / MTV, is runnin this rap shit / Viacom is runnin this rap shit / AOL and Time Warner runnin this rap shit / We poke out our asses for a chance to cash in* (2004, corporate)

These lyrics appear to be a scathing critique of corporate ownership of hip-hop on a track produced by a corporate record label (Rawkus/Geffen, owned by Universal Music Group). This track represents perhaps the qualitatively most direct, overt, and in-your-face critique of the corporate influence on hip-hop released by a Big Four company. This example stands as a major exception to the qualitative difference that has emerged between the two analysis groups. However, consider the interesting back story to this song. Due to its controversial lyrics, the record label reportedly removed this song from its second pressing (Asante, 2008).

The official reason provided for the removal of this song from the album was its use of an uncleared sample of the Doors song, "Five to One." The beat behind Mos Def's lyrics on "The Rapeover" was produced by Kanye West, and this beat was originally used on a Jay-Z song three years earlier called "The Takeover." In fact, "The Rapeover" is a clear nod to "The Takeover" in which Jay boasts that Roc-A-Fella Records, the record label that he cofounded as a subsidiary of the Universal Music Group, along with its lineup of artists, "is runnin this rap shit." Mos Def recreates the song (on an album also under the Universal umbrella) but presents different forces that are actually "runnin this rap shit."

Considering that Kanye West also produced the beat for another track on the album featuring the "The Rapeover" and that Mos Def has appeared on tracks on two of Kanye West's albums suggests a working relationship between the two artists and not an unauthorized use of the Kanye West-produced beat (though presumably use of the sample may have to be cleared and paid for again). If an uncleared sample was in fact the reason for the track's removal from the album, then the question is why would there

be a problem getting a sample cleared for this track when the same sample was cleared

by the same producer on an album released by the same music group three years

earlier? Thus, there is speculation that the issue was not the backing track but rather

Mos Def's lyrics, including particularly the "tall Israeli" line (a not so subtle reference to

CEO of Warner Music Group Lyor Cohen, a tall Israeli who has also previously worked

for Island Def Jam, another subsidiary of Universal Music Group) as well as references

to Viacom, MTV, and AOL/Time Warner.

Furthermore, according to M. K. Asante, an anonymous "music executive at a

major label" stated that the removal of "The Rapeover" was "nothing more than a routine

instance of censorship—corporate censorship by the labels. It's unfortunate but it

happens. It's effective because it sends a message to all artists on the label about what

the label will tolerate" (2008, p. 108). If this is in fact the case, then this situation

provides profound evidence for the direct manipulation of the message by the culture

industries. Interestingly, on the Rhapsody music service, which I used to access the

vast majority of music of the two sample groups, this track is the only track on the album

that is suspiciously unplayable[14] (see Figure 5-1).

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[14] However, this song does currently appear to be available for download on the Amazon and iTunes websites.
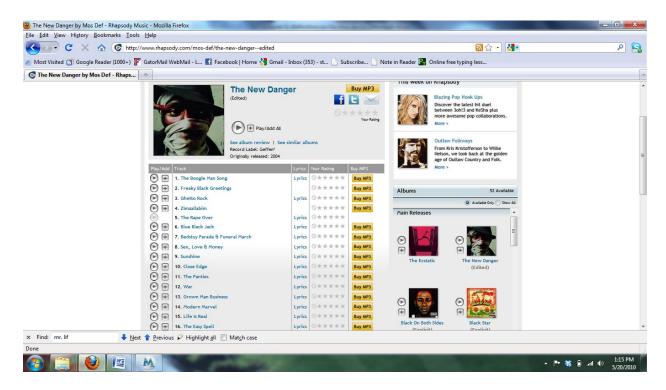
Figure 5-1. Screen capture of inability to play "The Rapeover."

Contrast the alleged corporate censorship of Mos Def's critique of the hip-hop

powers that be with Paris's "Get Fired Up," another critique of contemporary

mainstream hip-hop and the culture industries that produce and promote it. What

distinguishes Paris's track from the familiar critiques of the imagery that characterizes

mainstream hip-hop are the particular individuals in the corporate hip-hop hierarchy who

are identified and critiqued by Paris:

> *I'm knowin all about devil-ass Jimmy Iovine / And all of the rest of the killin machine / Debra Lee and the BET hoes and demons / Dealin dope through the radio and video screens* ("Get Fired Up," 2008, independent)

> *Real talk, somebody best tell Russell / Fo' street niggas catch his ass up in a tussle / Drop squad in effect man, deprogram / We throw his pink wearing ass in the back of the van* ("Get Fired Up," 2008, independent)

> *For that Def Jam scam pushin poison to kids* ("Get Fired Up," 2008, independent)

In this song, Paris threatens and critiques by name record executives Jimmy Iovine and Russell Simmons, as well as Debra Lee of BET. Interestingly, this song was released by Paris's own independently-owned record label, Guerilla Funk Recordings, which according to its website was founded to counter "the corporate stranglehold of censorship currently plaguing the entertainment industry" (Guerilla Funk Recordings, 2010). In comparing the flourishing of such specific and direct lyrics on this independent track to the alleged censorship of Mos Def's "The Rapeover," the reality of overt censoring of the lyrics of Big Four produced music becomes clear—a situation with which rappers who are independently produced may not have to contend.

Another potential case of corporate censorship involves Nas's "Be a Nigger Too." A single and video for this song were released in anticipation of his upcoming album, which he controversially announced would be titled *Nigger*. As discussed in Chapter 1, this song features the following inflammatory chorus:

> *I'm a nigger / he's a nigger / she's a nigger / we some niggers / wouldn't you like to be a nigger too? / To all my kike niggers / spic niggers / Guinea niggers / chink niggers / that's right, y'all my niggers too* (2008, corporate)

This song was immediately greeted with controversy and criticism due to its liberal dose of various racial and ethnic slurs. Interestingly, following the public uproar surrounding the release of this single prior to the release of the actual album, this song was excluded from the album due to "sample clearance" issues stemming from its chorus which loosely borrowed the melody and theme of a 1970's "Be a Pepper Too" Dr. Pepper commercial.

Was an uncleared sample the cause of the song's removal or did it have more to do with an attempt by the record label to minimize flak that Nas's racially charged content was already causing? Unfortunately, less information is available about the

behind the scenes issues involving these lyrics than the situation involving "The Rapeover," and while I could not come across any direct evidence of corporate censorship, I am skeptical of the sample clearance explanation for two reasons. First, I find it difficult to fathom that the issue of an uncleared sample would not have been addressed prior to the release of a single and video of the song. It seems suspicious that it only became an issue after the fact of its release as a single and video in the context of the critique this song faced due to its use of inflammatory racial slurs.

Furthermore, other Nas tracks ("Shoot 'Em Up," "My Country," "Street Dreams") feature him rapping along to familiar melodies. Yet here, on an album to be inflammatorily titled *Nigger* the song that was removed happened to be the most overtly racially inflammatory. Could the sample have been cleared? Why does it seem that there is a tendency for sample clearance issues to arise in songs with inflammatory lyrics, preventing these songs from being included in the widely-released albums? Are sample clearance issues invoked by the corporate record labels in the guise of preventing the release of songs that would open them up to critique?

That being said, there are other controversial messages involving racially charged content on Nas's album that were not censored. Are steps taken to attempt to silence only the most intense messages that may produce the most flak? Whereas controversy may often be good for album sales, flak against the corporate entity that releases it and any issues that may cause investors to remove funds and affect stock prices may be problematic.

Moreover, consider that DJ Green Lantern produced and released Nas's "Nigger Tape" underground mixtape which featured a remix of this song, but with a different

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chorus. The offending and allegedly uncleared sample of a chorus was not found on the mixtape remix of the song. If in fact, the song was left off the album (and the mixtape) because of copyright issues (or due to offensive lyrics), then this situation also challenges the notion that corporate artists may somehow use underground mixtapes as a way to evade their corporate gatekeepers and release whatever substantive music they want. That said, I do leave open the possibility that artists may be freer to say something on a mixtape that may otherwise be censored or create flak. Consider that under the name "dpz," dead prez released a song with the following lyrics on a 2002 mixtape:

> *Know your enemy, know yourself / That's the politic / George Bush is way worse than bin Laden is / Know your enemy, know yourself / That's the politic / F.B.I., C.I.A., the real terrorists* ("Know Your Enemy," 2001, independent).

I find it difficult to believe that Sony, the company that owned the production of their music at this time would release a song with such lyrics a year after the 9/11 attacks. Although dead prez's corporately produced albums contain much subversive lyrical content, in my view there is nothing in their corporate work characterized by this degree of overtly inflammatory subversiveness. I suggest that this presents some evidence that the mixtape avenue *can* act as a freer way for artists signed to corporate record labels to express controversial and subversive messages that may not be corporately approved.

However, it is difficult to generalize about the mixtape scene because of the degree to which the major record labels are complicity involved with the mixtapes. It is recognized that the Big Four have their hands in the mixtape world (Bell, 2007) and tolerate them as a promotional effort to allow an artist to generate buzz on the streets

where perceived legitimacy in hip-hop is ultimately determined. Yet at the same time, the relationships between particular record companies and particular mixtapes vary, and it is thus difficult to generalize about them. My analysis does not seem to suggest that corporate artists use mixtapes to reach *the people* with what they would like to assert in their lyrics but the corporate music labels won't let them. An interesting related avenue of inquiry would be to consider mixtapes more in depth and perhaps compare the content of mixtapes of rising independent artists to that of their corporately produced debuts.

Even if we assume for a moment that both "The Rapeover" and "Be a Nigger Too" were excluded from their respective albums due to having uncleared samples and not because of their controversial lyrics, then this raises another interesting basis of divergence with respect to limitations on artistic freedom between the work of the corporate and independent analysis groups and a different form of corporate censorship. Independently produced and released underground albums and mixtapes regularly feature uncleared samples (see Talib Kweli's "Ms. Hill") and "stolen" beats (see dead prez's "Hip-Hop (RBG Mix)") in which rappers flow over familiar beats (Bell, 2007). Although such techniques are unrelated to how social problems may be represented in the lyrics, they highlight an element of how artistic freedom in the independent analysis group may be less obstructed than in the corporate group.

Finally, my research revealed an interesting alleged instance of corporate censorship that highlights the importance of considering the nuances that characterize music production and distribution. According to Yvonne Bynoe (2002), dead prez's verse was deleted from an album called *Hip-Hop for Respect* spearheaded by Talib

Kweli and Mos Def. This album was conceptualized to act as a statement about police brutality in response to the shooting of unarmed West African immigrant Amadou Diallo by four New York City police officers, who infamously fired forty-one rounds and were later acquitted of all charges against them. Yet, *Hip-Hop for Respect* album was interestingly released by Rawkus Records, an independent company. Is this a case of subversive content lyrics of an artist being censored by an independent company? Do potentially inflammatory lyrics face potential censorship regardless of their produced status?

This example forces a reexamination of the notion of a strict corporate/independent duality. Indeed, the situation involving this dead prez verse speaks to the grey area that exists between music that is produced and distributed by an independent company and music that is produced and distributed by the Big Four. The year prior to the release of *Hip-Hop for Respect*, Rawkus Records had just established a distribution deal with Priority Records, owned by EMI. There are a variety of such relationships that independent companies enter in with the majors to tap into their large distribution networks.

This example speaks to how all independent companies, particularly the larger and more prominent ones with distribution deals with the Big Four, may not be on the same level with respect to tolerance of subversive content. However, despite these interesting, complicated nuances with respect to various distribution arrangements beyond a strict corporate/independent duality, I maintain that this strict distinction provides an ample degree of insight into the research question.

Other causes for flak

Although my primary data throughout this project is song lyrics, an interesting

emergence in the analysis is instances of apparent corporate censorship of subversive

messages in progressive hip-hop that have more to do with how the music is packaged

and presented to the marketplace than the actual lyrical content of the songs. To a

certain extent, it appears that more superficially and easily accessible imagery such as

album titles and cover art can be perceived as more of an impetus for flak and thus

more likely to face censorship than subversive lyrics. Consider the original,

controversial title of Nas's most recent album.

Following a public "burial" of the word "nigger" by the NAACP, Nas announced

during a 2007 concert that this controversial word would be the title of his new album.

He and his crew wore shirts emblazoned with the word "Nigger" to the Grammy Awards

and were featured on CNN. As word of his upcoming album title spread, Nas drew a

great deal of media attention and criticism from members of the Black community

divided on the issue. While some supported Nas, with respect to this issue, Reverend

Jesse Jackson critiqued, "I wish he would use his talents to lift up and inspire, not

degrade, making mockery of racism" (Reid, 2007).

There were also concerns from the retail sector related to how comfortable a white

person would be to ask for the album by name in stores. For his part, Nas claimed that

this album title was an attempt to start a dialogue about the contemporary meaning and

use of this word, how Black folks could take the sting out of the word by co-opting it,

how it can signify ignorant people of all races, and how it could extend to other

oppressed social groups. It seemed that for better or worse, this dialogue was initiated,

with strong opinions of support and critique being directed toward Nas and his intentions.

This album title was originally supported by Def Jam record executives as well as numerous fellow artists. Then, the situation became more complicated. A Brooklyn Assemblyman named Hakeem Jeffries contacted the state's comptroller to remove $84 million of the state pension fund that was invested in both Universal Music Group, the company that owns Def Jam and Vivendi, the company that owns Universal unless the album title was changed. Lo and behold, the *Nigger* title was removed and the album was released without a title. This appears to be a clear instance of the interests of the corporation that owns a hip-hop record label colliding with the creative freedom of an artist, with the record label prevailing. Consider a song on the album in which Nas speaks to the controversy surrounding the album title:

> *This Universal apartheid I'm hog-tied, the corporate side / Blocking y'all from going to stores and buying it / First L.A. and Doug Morris was riding with it / But Newsweek article startled big wigs / They said, Nas, why is he trying it? / My lawyers only see the Billboard charts as winning / Forgetting – Nas the only true rebel since the beginning / Still in musical prison, in jail for the flow / Try telling Bob Dylan, Bruce, or Billy Joel / They can't sing what's in their soul / So untitled it is / I never change nothin' / But people remember this / If Nas can't say it, think about these talented kids / With new ideas being told what they can and can't spit / I can't sit and watch it / So, shit, I'ma drop it / Like it or not / You ain't gotta cop it / I'm a hustler in the studio / Cups of Don Julio / No matter what the CD called / I'm unbeatable, y'all* ("Hero," 2008, corporate)

This verse is interesting in a number of ways. First, a listen to the song reveals that the name "Doug Morris" (Chairman and CEO of Universal Music Group) is overtly censored. According to a number of resources that I consulted, the lyrics here read "Doug Morris." Yet on the official release of the album, at this point in the song, the vocals conspicuously mute while the beat continues to play. This appears to be a clear

instance of over censorship of a direct critique aimed at, to use Mos Def's words, one of the "old white men" who "is runnin' this rap shit" in a corporately produced song. This situation may be sharply contrasted with the Paris song mentioned earlier in this section which directly critiques such individuals by name. This situation seems to provide compelling evidence supporting the thesis that the most specific and direct lyrics critiquing the powers that represent the hip-hop culture industries are filtered in corporately produced hip-hop

The muting of "Doug Morris" being what it is supports Nas's argument. Unlike Immortal Technique, who celebrates his artistic freedom vis-à-vis his independent production status, here Nas refers to being restricted and creatively limited by the corporation that puts out his music. Although it is a generally accepted fact that his album title was censored by the Universal Music group, in this verse he is critical of what he calls the "apartheid" of Universal, which he mentions by name. He also laments that white music giants such as Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and Billy Joel would not be confronted with the same issues as a legendary Black figure in rap music.

Nas then raises a crucial point. He is universally recognized as a rap legend. He is arguably the most well-known artist in this project, has the most mainstream success and recognition, and the highest record sales. His debut album, *Illmatic*, is celebrated as hugely influential for both his vocal delivery and as a poetic, ethnographic account of the urban ghetto underclass experience. In fact, this album is the subject of book-length academic inquiry (Dyson and Daulatzai, 2010).

Nas argues that if a rapper such as he lacks the music industry capital to be able to release an album with the title of his choosing, then what does this say about

younger, lesser-known rappers with a message to bring to the masses. If Nas is not

above corporate hog-tying, then what rapper is? He tries to spin the situation in a

positive way and asserts that despite the change in the album title, the music remains

unchanged and thus his message is still able to get out. Yet whereas independent

rappers such as Immortal Technique can and do relish in celebrating the artistic

freedom that comes with their independent production and/or distribution, in this song

Nas alludes to the corporate censorship he faces.

Consider the dynamics at work here: Nas's album title was censored, yet the

album includes a song critical of the company that owns his record label for said

censorship but in this critique the name of Universal Charmain and CEO is censored.

Furthermore, consider these lines alongside another example from this same album in

which he acknowledges the reality of corporate censorship and the pressure put on

Universal to force a change in the album title:

> *They're going to try to censor my next verse / Throw them off the roof neck*
> *first / While I'm clicking my cursor / Reading blogs about pressure they put*
> *on Universal* ("Sly Fox," 2008, corporate).

Here, Nas describes the pressure put on the company that owns his record label to

modify controversial content, a scenario that independent rappers do not have to worry

about. Yet, whereas the title of the album was censored, as was his overt implication of

the Chairman and CEO of the company that owns his record label, much of his

commentary about the situation regarding the censorship of his work remains. This is

fascinating.

Before I attempt to tease out the implications of this scenario, consider a couple

more examples of corporate censorship that contrast with examples from the

independent analysis group with respect to how the music is packaged and presented

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to the marketplace. Another facet of corporate censorship of controversial/subversive

content relates to instances in which the controversial cover art of albums in the sample

was modified while incendiary lyrics remained on the album. One such example of this

is the Coup's 2001 album, Party Music, released by an independent label 75 Ark though

distributed by Warner Bros. Records (then owned by Time Warner). The cover art,

completed a few months before the 9/11 attacks, featured the artists superimposed over

an image of exploding World Trade Center towers eerily similar to actual images of the

9/11 attacks ingrained in our collective memory (See Figure 5-2). Making the image

more controversial is that Boots Riley, member of the Coup, is pressing a button on

what appears to be a digital tuner or metronome, seemingly detonating the explosion.

Figure 5-2. Original cover art of The Coup's *Party Music.* (Source:
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/1/19/TheCoupCoverLarge.jpg. Last
accessed January, 2011).

Considering the sensitive national climate in the fall of 2001, 75 Ark made the decision to stop production of the album cover and change the image; however this decision was allegedly made in the context of a distributer threatening to not release the album with the original image. Furthermore, 75 Ark made the decision to change the cover image despite the objections of Coup founder Boots Riley who wanted to keep the cover image which is "supposed to be a metaphor for the capitalist state being destroyed through the music" while acknowledging that not only foreign terrorists but also the US have committed horrible actions (Wired, 2001). According to the Coup's manager Chris Funk, "Ultimately, they reserve the right to use whatever cover they want because they're the label" (Wired, 2001). This controversial image was replaced with one of a flaming martini glass being lifted from a bar. This example is akin to the aforementioned censorship of a dead prez verse as it suggests a varying degree of artistic freedom among the record labels independent of Big Four ownership. Also interesting is that these two examples of censorship of work in the independent analysis group represent albums that though produced by independent companies were distributed through relationships with entities under the umbrella of Big Four ownership.

Compare the recall of the Coup's cover art to another cover image that alludes to the 9/11 attacks. The cover of Paris's 2003 album, *Sonic Jihad,* features a low-flying plane headed straight for the white house, an intentional and unambiguous reference to the 9/11 attacks (See Figure 5-3). This album was released by independent company Guerilla Funk Recordings, a company whose website implores people to "help support Guerilla Funk and preserve truth and rawness in hip-hop!" as well as to "say 'no' to the corporate rap machine!" Considering other cover/title controversies progressive rappers

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in the sample have faced, it seems incredibly unlikely that a Big Four company would have been willing to release an album titled "Sonic Jihad" with this cover imagery two years after the 9/11 attacks.
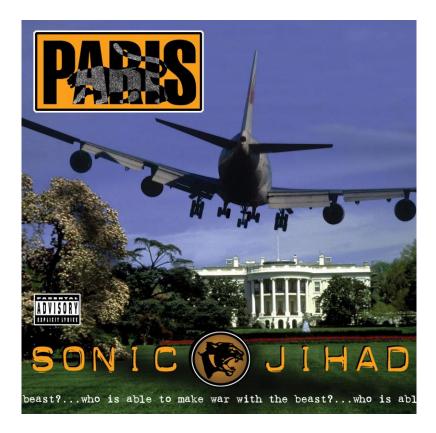
Figure 5-3. Cover art of Paris's *Sonic Jihad*. (Source: http://www.guerrillafunk.com/press/sonicjihad.jpg. Last accessed January, 2011).

For example, consider dead prez's 2000 album *Let's Get Free*. This album represents a corporate album with an arguably less controversial image that was censored by its record label. The cover of this album features an image of schoolchildren celebratorily raising guns in the air during their clash with police during the 1976 Soweto uprising in South Africa (See Figure 5-4). Their record company, Loud Records, owned by Sony, elected to place a sticker over this image.
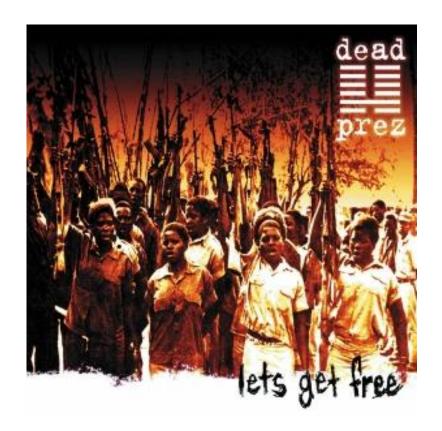
Figure 5-4. Cover art of dead prez's *Let's Get Free*. (Source:
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/9/99/DeadPrezLet'sGetFree.jpg.
Last accessed January, 2011).

Consider this instance of corporate censorship of cover art alongside an example

of controversial cover art put out by an independent company.   The cover of Immortal

Technique's 2003 *Revolutionary Vol. 2* features a picture hanging crooked on a wall

riddled with bullet holes (See Figure 5-5). The cover insert opens up to reveal that this

image is a part of a larger scene: the oval office featuring George W. Bush, Dick

Cheney, and other members of the Bush Administration depicted as laying dead,

bleeding, and full of bullet holes. As Immortal Technique mentions in a song on his next

album: *Vol. 2 shot up the president like a guerilla* ("Lick Shots," 2008, independent). I

consider it to be incredibly doubtful that a corporate record label would release an

album featuring this image. Furthermore, note that both the Paris and Immortal

Technique albums featuring controversial cover art were independently produced, and neither had distribution arrangements with the Big Four, unlike the cases in which there appears to have been censorship of subversive imagery.

Figure 5-5. Cover insert of Immortal Technique's *Revolutionary Vol. 2*, unfolded. (Source: http://i64.photobucket.com/albums/h192/bootis/immortaltechnique_insert.jpg. Last accessed January, 2011).

While the data and information that I have access to is somewhat limited, the evidence presented by a few visible case studies suggests that there is an element of corporate censorship of controversial and subversive content. I feel comfortable arguing that despite the subversive content that does pass through corporate filters, to an extent the construction of social problems in progressive hip-hop music is characterized by a degree of overt filtering and censorship of the most subversive of messages. This situation has profound implications for the current research question. These select instances of overt censorship should be considered alongside the finding

that the subversive content which does pass through corporate filters may be characterized as having the rougher edges sanded off when compared to the work of the independent analysis group. What does this mean and to what extent can the lyrics of the corporate analysis group be considered to be a legitimate site of the construction of social problems?

On Repressive Tolerance

Let us now consider the implications of 1) the many provocative, subversive, and critical representations of social life, the contemporary power structure, and corporate recording labels that do flourish in the corporate analysis group but 2) that the two analysis groups are characterized by a qualitative distinction such that the most subversive messages are characteristic of the independent analysis group. Is the construction of social problems in the independent analysis group qualitatively "better?" What do we mean by better?

One way of looking at the paradoxes inherent to progressive messages within the corporate analysis group is to conclude that those messages fundamentally represent not genuine critique and subversion but rather the mere illusion of critique and subversion because they tend to lack the overtness, detail, nuance, and subversiveness that characterizes some of the independent work. This view is perhaps best understood by leaning on Herbert Marcuse's conceptualization of consumerism as a form of social control (1964). According to Marcuse, the cultural realm of contemporary society is characterized by various "one-dimensional" choices, which are all analogous and interchangeable in that the potential for resistance or critical thought embedded within these preapproved choices is impossible. Despite seemingly critical messages, rather

than presenting opportunities for oppositional thinking these commodified cultural products actually serve to recreate the existing system.

The work of Marcuse leaves little room for the music of the corporate analysis group, commodities of four consolidated music groups, to be a legitimate site for the critical representation of social problems. Rather, from his perspective, the seemingly critical aspects of the work of the corporate analysis group represent not genuine critique but rather the mere illusion of critique catered to a small market niche that enjoys seemingly rebellious music. The situation is such that the consolidated corporate music groups can offer music as a commodity to both fans of the dominant imagery that characterizes mainstream hip-hop *as well as music to satisfy those who resist the dominant imagery.*

This perspective represents a pessimistic take on the potential for the work of the hip-hop of the corporate analysis group to function as the weapons which the artists represent it to be. Rather, the corporations are happy to cynically exploit "weapons" that are outspokenly critical of them and the power structure they represent as long as there is a market for these ideas. From this perspective, we are offered corporately produced critiques of the contemporary power structure only because such music represents a commercially viable subgenre of hip-hop that reinforces the status quo. While it remains an empirical question that would be interesting to explore, this argument suggests that *the people* don't listen to the music and actually make any meaningful changes of existing social arrangements. In fact, the opposite is true: the music intellectually satisfies *the people*'s frustrations while the system suppresses opposition and recreates itself. If the content of this music ventures into detailed

critique, is too subversive, legitimately threatens the contemporary power structure, or may create a backlash that would reflect poorly upon the companies that own the record labels (and negatively affect stock prices) then these messages are reigned in through the more overt instances of censorship.

Perhaps then only in the margins of the hip-hop landscape in which the work of the independent analysis group is able to organically develop does hip-hop maintain a critical potential. Perhaps hope resides in this music in concert with the organizations that attempt to organize the Hip-Hop Generation. From a Marcusian perspective, corporate hip-hop seemingly fails as a legitimate site of claims-making activity. In this context, consider that Paris asserts that his project is to *bomb on Viacom* ("Make It Hardcore," 2006, independent), the conglomerate that owns music video channels MTV and BET which have both played a fundamental role in commercializing hip-hop and defining the imagery which characterizes mainstream hip-hop.

Paris's words represent a familiar critique of the hip-hop culture industry in progressive hip-hop lyrics, particularly with respect to the independent analysis group. Media corporations are critiqued for shrinking the parameters of what is considered to be acceptable content in hip-hop, subduing artistic expression, and promoting music which pacifies rather than inspires *the people*. However, consider the counterpoint to this claim implicit in how Nas represents his relationship with Viacom:

> *I use Viacom as my firearm / Then let the lyrics split you / who do you rely upon?* ("Sly Fox," 2008, corporate)

Here, commercially successful corporate rapper Nas celebrates Viacom's role in his use of corporate media channels to promote subversive messages. Does he have a point? To what extent can we take seriously the use of Viacom as a "firearm" after an analysis

that strongly suggests that corporate channels may be characterized by a stifling of the subversiveness of such messages? Does Viacom's content represent a genuine firearm or the mere empty, commodified idea of a firearm?

Having elaborated on of the subdued subversive messages in the corporate analysis group, is there an upside to corporate production? Consider the wide reach of consolidated corporations such as Viacom, as well as the Big Four music groups. Indeed, being that Nas's music is corporately produced, this production status affords him the distribution and marketing power that Def Jam/Universal possesses, which allow his challenging lyrics to be more readily available, accessible, and thus more likely to reach *the people* with any substantive content than if he was independently produced.

According to Amazon.com, Nas has sold over 15 million albums in his career (2008). Compare that to Immortal Technique who has sold around 200,000 (Dub MD, 2009). This contrast in record sales is indicative of a distinction between record sales of the corporate and independent analysis groups. Consider that by maintaining access to the largest possible distribution network and the resources of a corporate promotional machine, one may represent social problems to the largest, most diverse group of potential listeners.

Though my analysis suggests that resistant messages in corporately produced hip-hop may be watered down and pale in comparison to some of the most subversive independent examples, perhaps there is something to be said for accessibility and the potential to reach the masses. My analysis does suggest that there is in fact a critical, subversive narrative characterizing the representation of social problems throughout the

corporate analysis group. Could it be argued that reaching a greater number of people

with messages characterized by the roughest edges being sanded trumps reaching less

people with a more subversive message? Does the greater accessibility of the music of

the corporate analysis group provide a better opportunity for its content to reach *the*

people and avoid preaching solely to the converted?

Moreover, does the work of the corporate analysis group call into question

Marcuse's notion of repressive tolerance? Does the progressive hip-hop of the

corporate analysis group—manifestations of hip-hop that critically engage social life in a

largely analogous way to the most subversive of independent examples—force us to

rethink Marcuse's theory? Indeed, an alternative way to represent the findings of this

project rather than by myopically focusing on the subtle qualitative distinctions between

the representation of social problems in the two analysis groups is to celebrate the

critical narrative which characterizes the work of the corporate analysis group.

My analysis suggests that—to follow Nas's metaphor—Viacom may indeed be

used as a firearm, but this is not the most effective weapon in *the struggle*. In my view,

framing Viacom as a firearm neglects the qualitative distinction in terms of militancy,

specificity, and subversiveness between the two analysis groups that emerges

throughout this project. Although corporate entities may promote lyrical bullets, they

control the caliber and lethalness of these bullets. On the contrary, I would argue that

Immortal Technique's Viper Records and Paris Guerilla Funk Recordings can more

legitimately be conceptualized as weapons due to the less restrictive expression

afforded to artists on such independent labels.

However, the argument could be made that the mainstream accessibility of the music of the corporate analysis group is of greater significance than the depth of the message that characterizes the independent analysis group. Further supporting this claim is a final point raised in another Nas lyric:

My queen used the milkshake to bring y'all to my slaughter houses
("Queens Get the Money," 2008, corporate).

Here, Nas presumably refers to his (then-) wife Kelis's smash pop hit "Milkshake." In referencing this lyric and song epitomizing the safe and interchangeable pop music of the culture industry, Nas seems to suggest that the initial use of a palatable pop hit may lure fans to deeper, though-provoking, more subversive music. After being hooked by Kelis's pop-friendly sound, some fans may out of curiosity explore the new album of her famous husband who has appeared on some of her pop tracks and be greeted with a more substantive message. This is an interesting argument that represents a counter-argument to the conclusion regarding the music of the corporate analysis group and repressive tolerance: the use of the corporate pop machine and culture industries as a way to provide the initial step in connecting a large, mainstream audience with a substantive message. However, in celebrating the space within the hip-hop cultural landscape for the artists of the corporate analysis group to make social problems claims, it is important to mention that these artists are outliers. Indeed, there are relatively few artists that are both included under the umbrella of progressive hip-hop and corporately produced.

That said, can we consider such a "gateway drug" relationship of sorts between the work of the two analysis groups? One final point to consider with respect to the limited but more accessible critique which characterizes the corporate analysis group is

that perhaps these more mainstream and more visible progressive voices in hip-hop provide *the people* with the initial exposure to subversive messages. Perhaps the music of the corporate analysis group works in tandem with the militant, independent work and thus serves a purpose in the same struggle. Perhaps initial exposure to the sanded down subversiveness of the lyrics of the corporate analysis group eventually leads some listeners to the more subversive independently produced work. Consider that more subversive artists from the independent analysis group such as the Coup and dead prez have worked on tracks with less subversive artists from the corporate analysis group such as Talib Kweli and the Roots. Just as Kelis's pop hits may lead *the people* to Nas's "slaughterhouses," perhaps corporate artists such as Common, the Roots, and Talib Kweli lead *the people* to the subversive work of independents artist such as dead prez, Immortal Technique, and the Coup.

As I discuss in Chapter 3, there are different flavors of progressive hip-hop. Generally speaking, there are more subversive manifestations which tend to be produced by independent companies and there are less subversive manifestations which tend to be produced by companies under the umbrella of Big Four ownership and those have access to wider distribution reach and marketing opportunities. I conclude that the latter is both more likely to be censored if its contents become too specifically subversive or challenging, and its artists are less able to both be and represent themselves as artistically free but are perhaps more likely to reach *the people*.

Thus, although throughout this project, there is much evidence indicative of repressive tolerance that suggests the sanding down of the most subversive messages in corporately produced manifestations of progressive hip-hop, particularly the nuanced

and detailed ones, I am hesitant to fully dismiss the place of the corporate sector in *the struggle* and claims-making activity. I am not certain that we can safely discount the effect of the few mainstream progressive voices in the corporate analysis group on keeping the idea of substantive, lyrically-based hip-hop alive in the mainstream consciousness. Finally, perhaps we should not think of these two flavors of hip-hop as binary opposites but rather as two branches of the same tree. As KRS-One often alludes to, it is all hip-hop, despite any externally imposed labels. Despite the differences in subversiveness and production status, all of the music of both analysis groups is grounded in the same community of progressive hip-hop expression.

Conclusions

It is fascinating to consider the research question in terms of how artists of each analysis group address the implications of corporate ownership of hip-hop and control of the means of hip-hop production. The artists of both groups generally assert that while hip-hop in the broadest sense of the term is dead in that it has been co-opted by the culture industries, hip-hop continues to thrive in a marginalized sector where it is characterized by subversive, empowering, and educational lyrics. The artists of both groups are critical of the problematic imagery and lack of authenticity which characterizes mainstream hip-hop, as well as the corporations that produce this music. At the same time, the artists celebrate the marginalized space within hip-hop where they engage in the substantive work that they frame as the real hip-hop.

The first interesting conclusion that can be drawn from this discussion is that having music released by a Big Four record label does not necessarily preclude the existence of messages critical of the implications of these companies owning and controlling hip-hop. The same critiques of corporate, mainstream hip-hop that

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characterize the independent analysis groups are also present in the corporate analysis group. However, my analysis suggests that there is evidence that these critiques within the lyrics of the corporate analysis group are limited. In addition to a few noteworthy instances of apparent corporate censorship, the critiques of the hip-hop culture industry in corporately produced music tend to be less specific, overt, and direct than those from the independent analysis group.

I found it interesting that controversial album titles and cover art often seemed to be more of an issue related to corporate censorship than the actual lyrics of these albums. Perhaps a controversial album title or covert art would produce more flak due to its very accessible position in the totality of a piece of recorded music. Album titles and covert art make the rounds in press releases and can be spotted easily, whereas the actual lyrics are buried deep in the music and are not presented to the audience until after an album is released. Whereas one can easily picture a conservative commentator speaking on television with an image of a controversial album cover over his shoulder and/or an album title emblazoned across the screen with some alarmist faux-outrage text, lyrics are not as visible to create the same superficial, knee-jerk, emotional reaction.

The lyrics of the two analysis groups seem to represent a tradeoff between artistic freedom and access to a large audience. If independently produced, an artist can represent his music as truly independent, which perhaps provides the music with a certain credibility and authenticity as "underground" as it is truly located outside of the sphere of corporate production. Such rappers can fully locate themselves in opposition to mainstream hip-hop. These artists may be able to create hip-hop without corporate

restrictions on artistic creativity; however, it is more difficult for these artists to reach the audience size afforded to those affiliated with corporate record labels.

Additionally, there is also the financial incentive to independent work suggested by the artists. Making music for a Big Four recording label, artists typically do not own the master copies of their work, and they are minimally compensated for creating music compared to those whose music is released by independent companies. Although independent artists may have access to a smaller audience and sell fewer records, they may see a larger share of the profits of the records they do sell, while simultaneously do not contribute to an increase in the revenue of the Big Four.

If an artist is able to secure a corporate production and distribution deal, the most subversive or inflammatory edges of an artist's work may be sanded down, and the sale of his music may increase the revenue stream and power of the very music companies that he is critical of. However, these artists are granted access to a larger music market and may be able to avoid merely preaching to the converted by reaching this mainstream audience. If an artist truly has a substantive message to spread and a desire to spread it to a large number of people, corporate channels can provide a large distribution network in which the music is more likely to reach the masses. Perhaps a radio hit and a moderate level of fame can cement an artist's name in the mainstream consciousness and pop culture lexicon, providing further access to spread substantive music.

Should an artist strive to present nuanced, detailed, subversive, and unfiltered ideas to a smaller, already tuned-in audience or aim for a larger audience with subversive ideas that may be watered-down? Negotiating these two options is a

dilemma that I take from my analysis. There are pros and cons to both avenues of production, and the rappers in the sample each seem to represent their particular method of cultural production as the superior option.

Another issue to consider is the role of corporate distribution of albums produced by independent companies. I conclude that it is difficult to speak too generally about the grey area in between music that is fully corporate produced and fully independent. There are instances in which independent artists in the sample were confronted by issues with their distributers due to problematic content, and there are also instances of particularly subversive constructions of social life being corporately distributed. Yet perhaps this is an ideal middle ground in which subversive progressive rappers can have greater artistic freedom than that which may be offered by the Big Four recording labels, as well as see a greater share of their profits, but also have access to the larger network afforded by corporate distributers.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS

Mobilization of the Hip-Hop Generation

This project illustrates that progressive hip-hop music at times provides powerful critique of the system. However, it is less characterized by a concrete platforms or mechanisms for social change. The music may uplift and inspire; however, a sociological critique would be that changing individuals does nothing to change the social system, power structure, and institutions that give rise to these individuals. While progressive hip-hop can be a powerful way to inspire and excite the emotions of its audience, it seems that pragmatic social change would require this energy to be directed towards policy issues and changing society at the institutional level.

Hip-hop began as an organically emerging cultural movement devoid of any semblance of political representation or framework. Nearly forty years later, there are currently organizations actively engaged in attempting to seize the hip-hop moment and provide the necessary framework to harness hip-hop as a pragmatic political force. Indeed, alongside the "where is hip-hop the political movement?" questions, we should consider that there are currently organizations that attempt to organize the Hip-Hop Generation. These efforts are important because they *can* represent the grassroots organizing and political framework necessary to pragmatically address issues affecting urban, inner-city people of color and actualize the social change described and encouraged by the artists in the sample. An optimistic way of considering these organizations is that hip-hop as a sociopolitical movement is catching up to hip-hop the music and cultural movement.

However, a key issue related to the diversity in subversiveness throughout the lyrics is that there are organizations (plural) and not a single, unified organization. In conceptualizing the platform that hip-hop is advancing and the political agenda and goals of hip-hop, we must consider that attempting to locate progressive hip-hop, let alone hip-hop more generally, in relation to a single organization or movement is based on the false assumption that there is a single, unified progressive hip-hop movement to speak of. Moreover, these mobilization efforts parallel the different flavors of subversiveness that characterize progressive hip-hop; of particular interest to the particular research question, these variations in subversiveness appear to be somewhat related to the corporate/independent distinction. However, there is also an overlap between more and less subversive artists and corporate and independent artists in pragmatically addressing social issues.

One notable effort to organize and mobilize the Hip-Hop Generation is Russell Simmons's Hip Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN). HSAN puts on conferences featuring both hip-hop artists and activists, as well as engaging in voter registration, and addressing poverty, education, and disparities in criminal justice. However, Watkins (2005) speaks of "a growing segment of hard-core subscribers" within the hip-hop movement who associate Simmons (cofounder of influential hip-hop record label Def Jam which was later bought out by Universal Music Group) with the corporate takeover of hip-hop and thus take a critical stance toward his being the public face of hip-hop politics.

HSAN has been critiqued on the grounds that Russell Simmons does not properly represent *the people* but rather represents the black elite who often do not share the

same interests as some progressive rappers. The question asked of Simmons is whether he represents the concerns of *the people* or his own economic interests and delivering votes for the politicians he aligns himself with. In an example I cited in Chapter 5, Paris critiques Simmons by name and how he has influenced hip-hop politics ("Get Fired Up," 2008, independent).

To assimilate or to challenge? To reform or to revolt? If progressive hip-hop is connected to historical black resistance as I contend, consider that the two general competing positions of assimilation versus freedom have existed since the early days of African slavery. This distinction is represented by the historical conflict of interest between the black middle-class and underclass. Today, the more subversive manifestations of progressive hip-hop represent a worldview counter to the Civil Rights Generation's ideals of inclusion and the assimilation of the Hip-Hop Nation into mainstream American and African-American culture.

In the context of the critique that the more institutionalized members of the hip-hop elite have become part of the system and thus lack interest in the self-identified revolutionary politics promoted by the more subversive artists, Rosa Clemente's National Hip-hop Political Convention formed as somewhat of a response to HSAN. This biannual hip-hop convention attempts to bring a more grassroots movement into the conversation that the HSAN is perceived as lacking. It seems that the HSAN and the NHHPC serve as two attempts at mobilization that represent different (but at times overlapping) political agenda and efforts for using hip-hop in grassroots organizing and provide the frameworks for enacting social change required of a social movement. Perhaps organizations such as HSAN and NHHPC represent the genesis of a political

framework(s) to capitalize on the space created by hip-hop as a cultural movement and the messages delivered through rap music.

To be clear, hop-hop resistance as it is represented in the lyrics of the two analysis groups supports Watkins's (2005) contention that hip-hop is not a homogenous movement but rather reflects a diversity of opinions and ideological directions. There are no clear, universally agreed-upon values, specific goals, or methods but rather various paths all linked by the common themes of activism and positive social change. Towards the one end of the spectrum are more radical calls for overthrowing the system, and towards the other end it is more about raising the consciousness of the people and working within the parameters of the system to improve the life experience of *the people*.

However, that being said it is interesting to consider the artists in the sample who have involved themselves in the activities of these organizations. First, artists' involvement in the events of such organizations adds a pragmatic element to their work; they walk the proverbial walk. Moreover, it is interesting to note the overlap between more subversive and less subversive, corporate and independent artists who have worked for both of these organizations. dead prez and Chuck D of Public Enemy have appeared at events sponsored by both. Despite the lack of a universally agreed upon political platform in progressive hip-hop and the distinction between more subversive and less subversive voices, it is interesting to note such overlap.

While I will not attempt to catalogue all of the various rallies, events, and organizations that the artists in the sample participated in, one example that I will mention is a national student walkout to rally and show support for the Jena 6. This

event was organized by Mos Def, who was able to enlist the support of fellow artists Talib Kweli, dead prez, Common, and Immortal Technique in addition to a number of hip-hop grassroots organizations (Davey D, 2007). Despite the varieties in subversiveness, corporate/independent distinctions among these artists, and differences with respect to goals, agenda, and paths to achieving social justice—all which are important to be cognizant of when generalizing about a collective such as progressive hip-hop— it is worth mentioning the solidarity that is indicated by this example despite the differences.

The effectiveness of the resistance as represented in the music in the sample on actual social change and in the mobilization of *the people* is an empirical question beyond the scope of the current research. Are hip-hop songs effective in inspiring activism and social change? Do the rappers preach to the converted or does their music plant seeds in new minds? Who composes their resistant "armies?" Is there a distinction between the rappers' intended and actual audiences? How "objectively" real are these hip-hop social movements? All of these are interesting empirical questions suggested by this research and would be worthwhile to further explore.

Yet the artists agree with scholars that this project of resistance is indeed bigger than hip-hop music, and concrete social change and improving the oppressive living conditions of *the people* requires more than catchy, though subversive songs. The music of both analysis groups could be better described as serving a diagnostic function rather than a problem-solving one. Time will tell if the Hip-Hop Generation will be able to mobilize into a legitimate political force. Yet at the very least, hip-hop has carved out a space in the cultural landscape for otherwise unrepresented and invisible people to

dialogue. It now seems that a number of grassroots organizations are attempting to seize the hip-hop moment and organize *the people*. Considering the demographic trends that suggest that the United States is projected to become a majority minority country by the middle of the twenty-first century, it will interesting to see what role hip-hop plays. Will hip-hop cater to the interests of *the people* in the context of cooption by media corporations?

Summary of Findings and Limitations

My analysis of the lyrics of key, representative figures of corporate and independent manifestations of progressive hip-hop music suggests that 1) social problems are represented in largely the same way in both analysis groups but 2) a close reading of the lyrics reveals a subtle qualitative distinction such that the corporate songs lack the same specificity, detail, and overt subversiveness that characterizes some of the independent work. The artists of both analysis groups represent themselves as claims-makers and locate their claims within *us*, an oppressed and resistant collective located primarily at a particular intersection of race and class but also in more expansive and inclusive terms. Moreover, these claims-makers critically represent a social system that they conceptualize as being set up to privilege the interests of *them*—the elite ruling class—at the expense *us.* This "*us* against *them*" narrative characterizes the representation of social life in both analysis groups.

In a project that they refer to as *the struggle*, the artists of both analysis groups represent hip-hop music as their medium for making claims while simultaneously critically engaging the state of contemporary hip-hop. Both with respect to social problems claims-making activity and critique of the hip-hop culture industry, my analysis suggests that there is evidence of limitations on critical messages in the corporate

analysis group. Such evidence includes select instances of seeming overt corporate censorship as well as the general subtle qualitative differences in detail, specificity, subversiveness, and militancy between the lyrics of the two analysis groups.

The major limitation of this study is access to data. I was only able to analyze the lyrics of music that was released. I do not have access to any instances of unpublicized rejection of controversially subversive music from the corporate analysis group by the major record labels. Moreover, I do not have access to any lyrics that were self-censored: lyrics that an artist may have liked to have used but refrained from due to the narrow parameters of acceptable lyrical content in contemporary corporate hip-hop.

My analysis only speaks to artists widely recognized to be under the umbrella of progressive hip-hop music and their work released between 2000 and 2009. I am confident that while my sample is not exhaustive, it is representative of contemporary progressive hip-hop music. However, this sample does not reflect the entire hip-hop cultural landscape more broadly understood.

In considering the qualitative distinctions between the lyrics of the two analysis groups, it is tenuous to speak of causation. Do these distinctions stem from whether an artist is produced by a corporate or independent recording label, or are the artists who produce subversive music more critical of the power structure more likely to be drawn to independent labels? My analysis is unable to speak to these questions.

Areas for Future Research

There are a number of potential areas for future research that are suggested by the findings of this project. One such area is to further explore the nuances of distribution. Although reifying progressive hip-hop into general corporate and independent categories yields interesting results, it would also be interesting to

investigate the complexities of distribution arrangements and the implications of these arrangements on lyrical content. Is there a difference in the representation of social problems in the lyrics of independently produced artists whose music is distributed through corporate owned channels and those whose music is independently distributed? Perhaps concepts like independent and corporate can be better conceptualized as two ends of a spectrum.

Another area for future research that would build upon this project would be to connect to sources with experience working in the hip-hop music industry, or even the music industry more broadly to explore if the experience of artists coincides with the conclusions I have drawn from analyzing lyrics. It would be interesting to interview individuals with firsthand knowledge of the production side of music and learn about any content-related issues they have had. Is keeping critical messages within certain "safe" parameters an intentional project?

A third area for future research would be audience studies that would empirically explore the effectiveness of hip-hop songs as a medium for claims-making activity, whether the claims of the artists effectively reach *the people*, and how various audiences engage the artists' claims. It would be particularly interesting to consider such questions with respect to the corporate/independent distinction to inform a contemporary understanding of the relevance of Marcuse's theory of repressive tolerance. Does subversive hip-hop music lead to actual social change? How do audiences engage the claims of the corporate analysis group that I argue have the roughest edges sanded off in comparison to the work of the independent analysis

group? Does such music have a cathartic effect that ultimately pacifies mass audiences and reinforces existing social arrangements?

During the defense of my proposal of this dissertation, it was suggested to me that this project would not be doable in ten years due to the transformation of the music industry through technological innovations. The second decade of the twenty-first century will likely be characterized by continuing changes in music distribution and a lack of reliance on the traditional model of music distribution used throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Technological advancements seemingly provide opportunities for an increasing number of ways to distribute music outside the Big Four recording labels, and the necessity of relying on traditional record deals is being called into question.

In this context, a question that will be fascinating to follow is to what extent will technological innovations democratize the spread of not just information, but music? Consider the distinction between the representations of social problems in the two analysis groups. That said, it is fascinating to consider the potential for independent music to spread not via the structure of a traditional record deal but rather through new ways such as a basement recording uploaded to YouTube and spread on social networking sites.

Yet, as hegemony theory suggests, there will likely be a push by the power structure to accommodate these innovations. Will new technologies present a wave of yet unforeseen ways for artists to independently distribute their music to their audiences or will the corporate interests that control the majority of the recorded music market

establish control of these new technologies? Time will tell, but as my conclusions

suggest, the answer will likely have substantive implications on the content of the music.

APPENDIX A
COPORATE ANALYSIS GROUP

Artist	*Album Title*	Date	Top Billboard Ranking	Weeks in Billboard 200
Common	*Like Water for Chocolate*	2000	16	31
Common	*Electric Circus*	2002	47	13
Common	*Be*	2005	2	27
Common	*Finding Forever*	2007	1	23
Common	*Universal Mind Control*	2008	12	13
dead prez	*Let's Get Free*	2000	73	10
dead prez	*RBG: Revolutionary But Gangsta*	2004	60	4
Jean Grae	*Jeanius*	2008	n/a	n/a
Kanye West	*The College Dropout*	2004	2	74
Kanye West	*Late Registration*	2005	1	37
Kanye West	*Graduation*	2007	1	52
Lupe Fiasco	*Lupe Fiasco's Food & Liquor*	2006	8	13
Lupe Fiasco	*Lupe Fiasco's The Cool*	2008	14	26
Mos Def	*The New Danger*	2004	5	13
Mos Def	*True Magic*	2006	77	5
Nas	*Stillmatic*	2001	5	38
Nas	*God's Son*	2002	12	28
Nas	*Street's Disciple*	2004	5	20
Nas	*Hip Hop is Dead*	2006	1	8
Nas	*(Untitled)*	2008	1	15
Pharoahe Monch	*Desire*	2007	58	2
The Roots	*Phrenology*	2002	28	38
The Roots	*The Tipping Point*	2004	4	13
The Roots	*Game Theory*	2006	9	7
The Roots	*Rising Down*	2008	6	9
Talib Kweli	*Quality*	2002	21	29
Talib Kweli	*The Beautiful Struggle*	2004	14	10
Talib Kweli	*Eardrum*	2007	2	10

APPENDIX B
INDEPENDENT ANALYSIS GROUP

Artist	Album Title	Date	Top Billboard Ranking	Weeks in Billboard 200
Akrobatik	*Balance*	2003	n/a	n/a
Akrobatik	*Absolute Value*	2008	n/a	n/a
Brother Ali	*Shadows on the Sun*	2003	n/a	n/a
Brother Ali	*The Undisputed Truth*	2007	n/a	n/a
Brother Ali	*Us*	2009	56	2
Conscious Daughters	*The Nutcracker Suite*	2009	n/a	n/a
The Coup	*Party Music*	2001	n/a	n/a
The Coup	*Pick a Bigger Weapon*	2006	n/a	n/a
dead prez	*Turn off the Radio: The Mixtape Vol. 1*	2002	n/a	n/a
dead prez	*Turn off the Radio: The Mixtape Vol. 2: Get Free or Die Tryin'*	2003	144	1
dead prez	*Pulse of the People: Turn off the Radio*	2009	n/a	n/a
Ill Bill	*What's Wrong with Bill?*	2004	n/a	n/a
Ill Bill	*The Hour of Reprisal*	2008	n/a	n/a
Immortal	*Revolutionary Vol. 1*	2001	n/a	n/a
Immortal	*Revolutionary Vol. 2*	2003	n/a	n/a
Immortal	*The 3rd World*	2008	99	6
Jean Grae	*This Week*	2004	n/a	n/a
Jedi Mind Tricks	*Visions of Gandhi*	2003	n/a	n/a
Jedi Mind Tricks	*Legacy of Blood*	2004	n/a	n/a
Jedi Mind Tricks	*Servants in Heaven, Kings in Hell*	2006	n/a	n/a
Jedi Mind Tricks	*A History of Violence*	2008	n/a	n/a
KRS-One	*The Sneak Attack*	2001	43	6
KRS-One	*Kristyles*	2003	186	1
KRS-One	*Keep Right*	2004	n/a	n/a
KRS-One	*Life*	2006	n/a	n/a
KRS-One (and Marley Marl)	*Hip Hop Lives*	2007	140	1
KRS-One	*Adventures in Emceein*	2008	n/a	n/a
KRS-One	*Maximum Strength 2008*	2008	n/a	n/a
Mos Def	*The Ecstatic*	2009	9	11
Mr. Lif	*I Phantom*	2002	n/a	n/a
Mr. Lif	*Mo' Mega*	2006	n/a	n/a
Mr. Lif	*I Heard It Today*	2009	n/a	n/a
Paris	*Sonic Jihad*	2003	n/a	n/a
Paris	*Acid Reflex*	2008	n/a	n/a
Public Enemy	*Revolverlution*	2002	n/a	n/a

Public Enemy	*New Whirl Odor*	2005	n/a	n/a
Public Enemy	*How You Sell Soul to a Soulless People Who Sold Their Soul?*	2007	n/a	n/a
Public Enemy and Paris	*Rebirth of a Nation*	2006	180	1
The Perceptionists	*the razor*	2004	n/a	n/a
The Perceptionists	*Black Dialogue*	2005	n/a	n/a
Talib Kweli	*Right About Now*	2005	113	1
Sage Francis	*Personal Journals*	2002	n/a	n/a
Sage Francis	*A Healthy Distrust*	2005	n/a	n/a
Sage Francis	*Human the Death Dance*	2007	97	1
X-Clan	*Return from Mecca*	2007	n/a	n/a
X-Clan	*Mainstream Outlawz*	2009	n/a	n/a

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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