Introduction

A Walk in the Park

"Okay, the entrance to the park is two blocks that way *(pointing)*. Our job is to get there, rolling this deep, without being stopped by the police." And with that, fourteen young adults of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, several carrying backpacks containing forty-ounce bottles of beer, made their way down San Francisco's Fulton Street along the north end of Golden Gate Park. On reaching the park entrance, the collective enthusiasm quickly leveled under the encroaching darkness. Our guides, the two people who had "partied" there before, were quick to assure us that the spot where we were going was better lit. As we proceeded cautiously down the wooded trail, the sounds of a growling dog could be heard coming from a tent about twenty feet off the path. "So that's why all these homeless Haight Street kids have dogs," I thought to myself, "to guard their stuff." After a few wrong turns, we came to an opening and made our way to one of the distant picnic tables, as far as possible from the Park Presidio roadway.

I had come to San Francisco to conduct ethnographic research within one of the most racially diverse hip hop scenes in the world. "The SFC(ity)" is the commercial hub of Bay Area hip hop, which is one of the principal sites of a regional subgenre known as "West Coast underground hip hop."[1] For much of hip hop's thirty-year history as a commodified music form, the moniker "underground" has been claimed by many artists as an index to

street authenticity. However, by the mid- to late-1990s, as the commercial popularity of hip hop (or rap) music began to swell to unprecedented heights—for instance, in 1998, after having six different rap artists hold the top spot on *Billboard* magazine's Top 200 album chart, the Recording Industry Association of America declared rap music its "biggest story of the year" (Watkins 2005, 61–62)—an independent movement specifically referred to as "underground hip hop" began emerging as an alternative to rap music's mainstream appeal. Since that time, underground hip hop has evolved into what is arguably the most dynamic, socially relevant, and racially/ethnically diverse subgenre of music in America.

Within seconds of arriving at our destination, bottles of beer were unpacked, distributed, and opened. Minutes later an impromptu, off-the-top-of-the-head rhyming circle, or what hip hoppers refer to as a "freestyle cypher," commenced. A locally prominent white emcee named Lord Top Ramen (Top R for short) began the affair, and T. Root, a heralded black (specifically Guyanese American) emcee in his own right, supplied a beat-boxed rhythm.[2] I was quick to arrive in the circle with my tape recorder in hand. My presence at several of these freestyle events had taught me that the introduction of a recording device was considered quite usual and, if anything, welcomed.[3]

Two weeks before arriving in the Bay Area, I attended a talk given by New York University (NYU) professor Britta Wheeler on conducting research within art worlds (Becker 1982). During her lecture, the single point that Wheeler most deeply impressed on me was the importance of researchers "putting themselves out there"—that is, displaying their own vulnerability when working among performance artists and similar groups. Clearly hip hop artists and particularly emcees fit this categorization. Yet, despite having written and recited raps years earlier (mostly while in high school), I was reluctant to enter "the field" with aspirations of rhyming alongside the people among whom I intended to conduct research. One immediate reason for my hesitancy was the apparent tendency among more established underground hip hop artists to take offense at the increasing numbers of would-be emcees in their midst. The following exchange between emcee Aesop of the then Bay Area collective Living Legends and journalist James Tai illustrates this:

> AESOP: But now every motherfucker I meet is talking about how he raps. Every motherfucker! No disrespect, I bet you probably rap a little bit too, though.

JAMES TAI: Nah. I make beats though (*joking*).

AESOP: Know what I'm sayin'? That's how it goes though. I could jump from this building and land on a rapper these days. (Tai 1998, 56)

Beyond a general predisposition against embarking on research with such performance ambitions, I specifically did not want to damage the rapport that I had established with artists like Aesop by suddenly announcing that I too had decided to become a rapper.

So, on my second night attending a weekly hip hop open-mic event at Haight Street's Rockin' Java Coffee House, when Top R approached me and asked if I was writing rhymes, I was very direct in clarifying that I was, in fact, writing field notes. Top R was neither the first nor the last person to inquire about my being an emcee or hip hop participant of some sort. Initially, I treated each of these inquiries as an opportunity to introduce my research. Furthermore, by mentioning my past experience writing raps, but explicitly saying that I no longer aspired to be a rapper, I felt that I was separating myself from the perceived masses of Johnny-come-latelies who had recently jumped on the underground hip hop bandwagon. However, the importance of Wheeler's words never left me. They, in fact, led me to make a deal with myself: that I would never be the only spectator in a group. More specifically, given my direct interest and past experience rhyming, I would not allow myself to be the only nonparticipant in a rhyming cypher. If such a situation were to arise, I would simply feel compelled to "put myself out there" and join in.

Back at the park, in his characteristically overbearing manner, Top R had taken it upon himself to orchestrate the sequence in which each person present that night would participate. On this particular evening, he was so dictatorial that at one point he even called out an emcee who was seated outside of the circle contemplating having to travel to his grandfather's funeral and bullied him into rhyming—which he somewhat reluctantly did. As one by one each individual took a turn holding the floor, it became clear to me that I was the only member of the gathered circle who had not yet rhymed; recalling my pledge, I felt a sudden urge to take part. Top R's failure to call on me was no personal snub. From our very first meeting, I had made it clear to him that I was an anthropologist, not an emcee.

Courtesy does not get you very far in a rhyme cypher. Under normal conditions, it is difficult to claim a turn without feeling like you are (at least to some extent) cutting someone else off. With the exception of cases like Top R's calling people out, typical transitions between emcees in cyphers feature either a definitive end to one emcee's freestyle verse, after which

the next emcee to speak claims the floor, or a situation in which an emcee is struggling to maintain an appropriate vocal rhythm or "flow"—often acknowledged by the voice beginning to taper. At this point another rhymer will jump in with a louder voice that refreshes the sense of rhythmic punctuality. Sometimes two or more voices jump in simultaneously with the louder and more persistently forceful voice winning out.

When I finally did find the opportunity to grab the floor, Top R gave an approving yell of "Old Schooooooool!" into the San Francisco night. From there he proceeded to put his arm around my shoulder and bob his head rhythmically to my less than spectacular rhymes. Obviously this reaction was as much a response to who I was (the hip hop anthropologist) as to how I sounded. Minutes later Top R had reclaimed the floor and again had his arm around my shoulder. This display of support by the dominant persona in this cypher unmistakably marked my acceptance. I ended up taking a few more turns during the hour-long rhyming session. Interestingly, once the forty-five-minute tape was exhausted, and the tape recorder was put away, I felt much more at ease.

By local underground hip hop standards, the group that had assembled in Golden Gate Park that night was impressive: during my year in the Bay, I saw both Top R and another European American emcee, Dore One, perform in front of crowds of well over a thousand people at the Maritime Hall; a Filipino American emcee/producer named Destined released his own CD, which made a good bit of noise within particular underground hip hop circles; DJ Marz, who is also white, although not an emcee, was a popular deejay and member of the Bulletproof Scratch Hamsters/Space Travelers (a Bay Area deejay crew whose body of work was familiar to me well before my arrival); and T. Root was recognized by many as one of the best "unknown" (meaning he did not have a product out) emcees around.

When the rhyming had finally ended, one of the other cypher participants—a light-skinned African American producer/emcee named Dejá—immediately approached me and began explaining that he was in the process of putting together a compilation album and was interested in knowing if I "would like to be involved." Dejá might never realize the significance of this gesture. Beyond the possibility of being on his album, for even with my limited experience I knew enough to know that often nothing comes of such proposals, it was the fact that amid this group of talented artists someone had taken me seriously as an emcee and not just as an academic interloper that was so meaningful.

After being in the Bay close to four months, I came to realize that between the time demands of my employment at a popular in-scene record store (see Chapter 2) and the relative inaccessibility of some of the better-known underground hip hop artists (like Aesop), my research was gradually orienting itself toward the lesser-known strata of underground recording artists. Even Top R's and Dore One's Maritime Hall performances were as opening acts for Aesop's Living Legends. The value of this bottom-up perspective, particularly as an alternative to the top-down approach typically found within (cultural/media studies–influenced) scholarship on hip hop, was easy enough to rationalize. I was also finding that, for the most part, these up-and-coming artists, unlike Aesop, were not nearly as resentful toward newcomers in their midst.

One defining characteristic of Bay Area underground hip hop specifically, and translocal underground hip hop scenes (Bennett and Peterson 2004) more generally, is the erosion of barriers that have traditionally separated hip hop performers from audience members, or producers from consumers. As someone who regularly attended open-mic venues and frequently spent time with recording artists, yet insisted on acknowledging boundary lines where others saw none, my behavior was perplexing to many of the people I had come to know. "Why didn't you get up there?" emcees would sometimes ask me at the close of an open-mic. And after spending many evenings hanging out with several up-and-coming artists in their home recording studios, a few had begun to press me about either recording one of my old high school raps or writing some new ones.

Inspired by Dejá's endorsement, that night in Golden Gate Park I made the decision to completely change my approach to ethnographic research and thus to embrace the opportunity to participate in the Bay Area scene as an underground emcee. This meant that the very next Monday, at the weekly open-mic I had attended as an audience member close to a dozen times already, I would get on stage and (as was the underground hip hop standard) attempt to rhyme off the top of my head; and, regardless of how that went, week after week I would continue to do so. I would also approach those up-and-coming artists and insist that they let me experience the recording process firsthand. If ethnography can be thought of as researchers positioning themselves within a stream of unfolding experiences that define life in a given social context, then I had decided to jump from the calm and relatively predicable current of hip hop enthusiast/observer into the rapid waters of an emcee/participant.

Sometime during the summer of 1993, while looking out from a mountain vista at sunrise, I had (half jokingly) announced to a group of high school friends that if I ever came out with a hip hop album, I would go by the name "Mad Squirrel." Initially, this statement was greeted with a good deal of amusement, and for at least the next couple of weeks many of the people who had been there that daybreak would spontaneously say "Mad Squirrel" when in my presence. Shortly after making my decision to become a Bay Area emcee, I resurrected "Mad Squirrel" as my primary performing title.

Hip Hop Underground is an account of the ethnographic travels of researcher Anthony Kwame Harrison and emcee Mad Squirrel through various enclaves of the Bay Area underground hip hop scene. I put these two identities on equal terms because many of the people I performed in front of over the course of my time there knew me first and foremost as the latter, even if most of those I was closest with were introduced to me as the former. The transformations involved in my research experiences illustrate how ethnographic knowledge is a product of a network of situated social relationships and the events (observed or experienced) that they stimulate. Looking back, I can attribute my ability to participate in the scene to the degree that I did to two key factors: (1) the individual I was (an anthropology graduate student who had a background, albeit quite informal, in rapping) and (2) the context and focus of my research (a movement away from the gate-keeping practices that have traditionally defined hip hop participation). Basically speaking, if I had needed to rely on getting a recording contract in order to become a (legitimately received) Bay Area emcee, I would not have had this opportunity.

At the same time, *Hip Hop Underground* is an examination of the changing constructions and constitutions of racial identity among young Americans. By exploring the politics of authenticity and race within the world of Bay Area underground hip hop, this book sets out to address pressing issues of racial identification, interaction, and understanding. Despite the fact that no scientific basis for racial distinctions has ever been shown (Appiah 1986; Brace 2005), race remains a remarkably durable social category. As an organizing principle in American society, race stands on par with gender, class, and age. In fact, with its calls to stay vested in your own kind, racial allegiance can be paramount in shaping life plans and everyday activities. It is of great interest, then, to look at the interpersonal exchanges taking place within the social spaces in which racial heterogeneity appears to be the ideal. *Hip Hop Underground* takes a particularly micro-social focus, one that

could not be achieved without the degree of ethnographic immersion that my forays into performing and recording facilitated. In these pages I share a handful of hip hop biographies, not for the sake of merely telling the stories of these individuals, but rather to present these episodes as illustrative of the social structures, patterned behaviors, and racial dynamics that young people participating in multiracial youth social scenes are perpetually negotiating.

Scenes oriented around hip hop music are pungent in their racial symbolism. The Bay Area's progressive politics and tremendous diversity make it a particularly fruitful location for exploring the contours of interracial accord and tension at the start of the twenty-first century. Yet, as the United States undergoes an unprecedented demographic shift and a post-post-soul generation (George 2004) comes of age in a world shaped through possibilities for audio, visual, and interpersonal communication that their grandparents could have hardly imagined, narratives of racial boundary crossing and issues of racial ethics and integrity will become more frequent aspects of all Americans' everyday lives. In this way, the subjects of this study can be viewed as young pioneers at the leading edge of a multiracial frontier.

Within the world of Bay Area underground hip hop, a professed color-blind mantra is celebrated. This ideal is upheld even in the face of frequent race-based assessments of hip hop legitimacy. In the chapters that follow, I contend that by looking at where and how race is of consequence within this local music scene, one can glean many of the evolving dimensions and emerging understandings of racial identity and American diversity that are occurring at a nationwide level. This position is premised on the notion of a fundamental relationship between hip hop "culture," demographic change, and racial and ethnic *performativity*.[4]

Strolling through a multiracial metropolis (Staiger 2006)—through cities like Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Washington, D.C., or even places like Holyoke, Massachusetts, and Durham, North Carolina—it is obvious that young generations of recent immigrants are expressing both their Americanness and their experiences of growing up in America in no small part through the music and expressive culture of hip hop. Filipino American emcee Geo Logic (of the group Blue Scholars) aptly captures the essence of this young, interethnic, urban existence when he describes people in the neighborhoods of southeast Seattle as speaking "in the Beacon Hill[5] slang with a wonderful blend of black language and immigrant accents" (Blue Scholars 2005). Hip hop, fashioned through the experiences and outlooks of young members of a black (and brown) 1970s New York City underclass (Chang 2005; Perkins 1996; Rose 1994), has today become the canvas upon

which young people the world over craft their identities, voice their perspectives, and give shape to their politics. As America undergoes a dramatic demographic shift, the places and spaces that comprise the world of underground hip hop offer an appealing vantage point from which to survey the multiracial frontiers that lie ahead.

Before presenting the layout of *Hip Hop Underground*'s five chapters, I should clarify a couple of points. The first concerns the time frame of this research. In one of the few ethnographic studies on hip hop in America (*Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*), Joseph Schloss explains that for Americans studying American popular music, "there is no formal beginning or end to our research; our participant observation (i.e., experiencing popular music within the context of American society) covers our entire lives, as do the relationships that we rely on to situate ourselves socially" (2004, 8). Although in the second chapter of this book I give a detailed disclosure of my twenty-five-plus-year relationship with hip hop music, in terms of this immediate project a fitting starting point would be 1998—the year when I first met the Living Legends and began an intense online correspondence with their webmaster, Mystik Access, regarding many of the ideas that are presented here. My official field stay in the Bay, which forms the initial context of many of the experiences I discuss, occurred between April 2000 and May 2001. As with many academic texts dealing with the rapidly changing world of popular culture, but perhaps even more pronounced in this case, some of the examples given by the people I interviewed may sound tragically outdated. Since that official period of residence, I have returned to the Bay nearly every year—sometimes more than once a year—and although these are usually short visits, during each trip I have been fortunate enough to be welcomed to resituate myself within many of the key relationships and activity patterns I participated in before. For instance, on many of these return visits I have continued to record music with the same circle of artists (see Chapter 2). I have also been invited to recording studios, video shoots, hip hop radio shows, deejay battles, and b-boy/b-girl (aka breakdancing) events. In addition to participating in the usual open-mic events and around-the-house rhyme cyphers, I have been on stage at various hip hop shows (including a few in which my own group headlined) and even once performed as part of a San Francisco State Ethnic Studies Conference. In the summer of 2004, three Bay Area hip hop artists visited me in my East Coast university home, where together we hosted a two-day hip hop event featuring lectures, workshops, panel discus-

sions, and performances. Throughout all these activities, there have been observations, experiences, and critical discussions that have furthered my evolving thinking on many of the issues presented here.[6]

In a 2003 paper presented at the Harvard Civil Rights Project "Color Lines Conference," I specifically talked about the emergence of Filipino Americans as a dominant voice in West Coast underground hip hop (Harrison 2003). Since I gave that paper, the increased popularity of West Coast Filipino artists like Blue Scholars, Native Guns (Kiwi and Bambu), Hopie Spitshard, and Power Struggle have confirmed this observation. While the accuracies of my (more nuanced) thinking regarding racial and ethnic identification are not nearly as cut-and-dry, in the years that have passed since my initial fieldwork, I believe that time and distance, tempered through regular return visits and observations, have enhanced my perspectives and theorizing. These dynamics continue to play out, and they continue to be relevant.

My second point of clarification concerns exactly what I mean by "underground hip hop." This is a discussion I have had with numerous people both inside and outside the scene in which I worked. Within the field of hip hop, the label "underground" can be applied to everything from Grammy-nominated artists like Common and The Roots[7] to groups like The Latter, who once boasted(!) of having sold only two copies of one of their CDs. Being that The Latter was one of the groups I initially worked closely with (see Chapter 2), it may be straightforward enough to locate "my" underground hip hop community somewhere closer to that end of the popularity spectrum. Yet to illustrate some of the complexities of this question, and hopefully work toward a more informed resolution to it, let me share a number of short vignettes.

On several occasions, when speaking with people who are familiar with both San Francisco and hip hop about my work, they have taken the initiative of describing the scene's racial dynamic to me. "It's all black artists and white audiences," the usual depiction goes. For example, an African American friend called me immediately following a Jurassic Five show at The Fillmore to announce that "hip hop [had] officially crossed over"—explaining that he had been there and that the audience had been "all white." During a September 2000 Solesides (Quannum) Reunion show at Bimbo's 365 Club, the nexus of racial and socioeconomic demographics found among the "typical" San Francisco underground hip hop crowd was brought to my attention by a co-worker of mine—who in no way fancied herself as a hip hop aficionado—when she pointed out how odd it was to be at a hip hop

show and to see so many white people talking on their cell phones and a guy doing air guitar to DJ Shadow. A similar observation was made by Filipino American deejay King One, who pulled me aside at a January 2001 Coup show at Slim's to comment on the inconsistencies he saw between the group's revolutionary, Afrocentric politics and the fact that their audience appeared to be a bunch of "white yuppies."

Jurassic Five, Solesides/Quannum (which includes DJ Shadow, Lyrics Born, Lateef, and Blackalicious), and the Coup are all examples of what many of the hip hoppers I spent time among referred to as the "just about to touch the surface underground." When I asked Kegs One, owner of the Below the Surface hip hop shop, about the categories of customers who frequented his store, his immediate response was "I have a few different people that are into the more 'commercial underground' stuff, but then 95 percent of my customers are here for the literal four-track tapes. You know, dirty-sounding, low-budget, in-the-room, in-the-closet recorded tapes."

Clearly, the term "underground hip hop" can mean quite different things to different people. From the various comments presented above, we get a picture of a more commercial underground hip hop stratum in which relatively affluent, mostly white audiences predominate. This characterization is consistent with the observations of (commercially successful underground artist) Common who once famously said, "[At my concerts] all I see are coffee shop chicks and white dudes" (The Roots 1999). I want to juxtapose Common's line, which appeared on The Roots gold-selling *Things Fall Apart* album, with the lyrics of a comparatively obscure song called "Walking Fences," by the one-time Oakland duo Moonrocks (Bizarro and Nebulus): "Is there something about the things we do? / Is it the way we act that makes us exactly the same as you? / But different in a sense, we walk the fence, a thin line" (Moonrocks 1999).[8] This refrain, which is repeated several times throughout the song, was recognized by a few of the hip hoppers I spent the most time among as encapsulating a critical underground ethos introduced above: the idea of a blurring, thinning, almost imperceptible line separating artists and fans. I consider this phenomenon at greater length in later sections of the book (see especially Chapters 1 and 4). For the current discussion, however, it suffices to say that at the lesser-known end of the underground continuum, where audiences often consist largely of friends, family, and other associates, the racial and ethnic demographics of performers and "fans" tend to resemble one another more closely than where record label bureaucracies, copious album sales, and various other

production-of-culture mechanisms (Peterson 1976) stand between them. Expressed a different way, the general pattern seems to be that as artists grow popular, and their underground hip hop fan base extends outside their more-or-less intimate circle of friends, audiences have tended to grow increasingly more white.[9]

In sum, people who describe Bay Area underground hip hop in general, and San Francisco underground hip hop in particular, as mostly black artists performing for mostly white audiences are not incorrect. The differences between their representations of the core scene and mine are largely a consequence of varying levels of underground hip hop notoriety and the intimacy of the fan bases they tend to attract,[10] although these levels are not entirely exclusive. Kegs One, who catered primarily to the "dirty-sounding, low-budget" end of the spectrum, set what I consider a fair dividing line with the twenty dollar show. In essence, only the more commercial underground hip hop acts had the ability to fill a venue charging twenty dollars or more to get in the door. The Latter, with their two CD sales, certainly were not attempting this.

Book Outline

The progression of analyses put forth in *Hip Hop Underground* is separated into five chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on establishing Bay Area underground hip hop as a valuable site through which to examine the changing integrities of race in twenty-first-century America. I begin this by presenting both Bay Area racial and ethnic demographic numbers and on-the-ground perspectives on racial and ethnic identification. Since the 1970s, California has gone through a "phenomenal demographic transformation" (Tafoya 2002, 102), and nowhere is that better represented than in the Bay. By looking at how these changes have been discussed by researchers and experienced by the people living through them, I situate young Bay Area residents within a wider conversation about U.S. population shifts. In the second part of the chapter, I outline the development of underground hip hop as both a national music subgenre and a local music scene. Through a variety of locally informed practices and sensibilities, underground hip hoppers in the Bay have worked to secure and sustain distinctions between their music/culture and its commercial counterpart. Within such a racially diverse metropolitan setting, where subcultural affiliations are at times more strongly felt than race, one result is an inclusive ideology of hip hop (racial) participation

that counters commercial rap music's near complete reliance on black performers. Contextualizing both the racial and distinctly underground hip hop climates that young Bay Area hip hoppers move within is vital to later analyses and assessments of their actions and inclinations.

Chapter 2 provides a first-person ethnographic account of the Bay Area underground scene in which I immersed myself. Part research methodology, part autobiography, and part arrival story, the chapter paints a multidimensional picture of my day-to-day experiences working at Amoeba Music's San Francisco store (at the time the largest independent record store in America);[11] experiencing the Bay Area hip hop nightlife; attending and performing at what was at the time the largest and longest-standing weekly hip hop open-microphone event in the area; and recording music with a group of emcees and producers who came to identify as the Forest Fires Collective. It was through these distinct yet integrated social arenas that I came to know the world of Bay Area underground hip hop.

The remaining chapters of the book build on one another sequentially. Chapter 3 sets a model for examining the racial ethics of underground hip hop participation. I begin with a survey of the existing literature—and by extension the available arguments—regarding hip hop authenticity and race. After establishing this range of authenticity claims, I move to a more direct discussion of how dynamics of identity and authenticity play out within underground hip hop scenes. I must confess to a predisposition against the idea that what is occurring represents legitimate color blindness. What I propose instead is a race-based hierarchy of hip hop merit that allows underground hip hoppers to conflate dimensions of social and personal identity as a means of negotiating their place on it. Building on Sarah Thornton's (1995) concept of "subcultural capital" and John L. Jackson Jr.'s (2005) notion of "racial sincerity," I argue that a genuine subjectivity, articulated through the amorphous quality of "knowing what's up," becomes the key vehicle through which Bay Area underground hip hoppers maneuver along hip hop's racially symbolic landscape.

Chapter 4 presents various dynamics surrounding this racial maneuverability. Despite its color-blind mantra, the racial politics and scales of awareness that saturate the Bay Area underground scene compel people with different racial identities to engage hip hop in remarkably divergent ways. Throughout the chapter, I discuss how various understandings of, personal relationships with, and sociopolitical investments in hip hop are leveraged as bases for claiming underground legitimacy. The chapter includes specific discussions of African American hip hoppers' inclusive dispositions, Euro-

pean American hip hoppers' heightened racial consciences, and Filipino Americans' embrace of hip hop as a means of fashioning new forms of identities and racial scripts. By narrating the life stories, defining moments, and situational politics of various individuals, I demonstrate the ways in which sincerity has come to trump authenticity as the primary sensibility through which underground credibility and racial integrity are pursued.

Finally, Chapter 5 poses a series of challenges to the optimistic tones that permeate earlier sections of the book. Through an in-depth reading of particular racially loaded episodes, as well as some pointed questions concerning underground hip hop's nexus of race, gender, and privilege, I ultimately argue that in considering the situational bases of contemporary youth identity constructions, there is as much cause for concern as reason for hope. As we embark on this new century, at a historical moment when shifts in the perception and performance of race in the United States appear to be quite monumental, we must remain attentive to the ways in which traditional axes of power continue to function. Underground hip hop celebrates a discourse of racial democracy and egalitarianism, but if the bases of racial distinctions (and possibly the integrity of race itself) are, in fact, becoming less scripted, then who benefits and why?

Notes on Methodology

Customarily, anthropology recognizes the confidentiality of its research subjects. In that many of the people I interacted with are commercial artists who would rather have their participation acknowledged than overlooked, by and large I did not follow this disciplinary decree. In a few delicate situations, I thought it wise to use pseudonyms for artists (these are all noted in the text). In addition, pseudonyms were regularly used for people in the scene who were not hip hop recording artists.

As Mica Pollock (2004a) explained in her wonderful study on race talk within a California high school, talking about race can be a very self-conscious methodological endeavor. Although I conducted twenty-four interviews, and use many of the quotes from them, I also must acknowledge recent methodological critiques of interviews as artificially and hierarchically constructed social exchanges that are secondary to the ethnographic project (Beaudry 1997; Borland 1991; Brand 2007; Kisliuk 1997). Interviews certainly provided me with quotable means through which to make my cases; however, many of my insights were gleaned from conversations and everyday interactions that fell outside the somewhat synthetic interview context.

The issues and understandings presented in this book come first and foremost out of my experience as both an ethnographer and an emcee within the Bay Area underground hip hop scene. Critical questions concern the various ways in which considerations of race impact the subcultural legitimacy and everyday activities of underground hip hoppers in the Bay and what this can tell us about the changing nature of racial identifications within America on the whole. My own position as an African American male[12] within this community allowed me to pursue these questions in terms of both ideological and practical considerations and to negotiate the relationship between what people say and what people do. Accordingly, this project is a product of knowledge gained not only through traditional ethnographic methods (including field notes, interviews, and conversational queries) but also through my participation recording music as part of a collective, performing at open-mic events and underground hip hop shows, and taking part in a variety of rhyme cypher exchanges.

Anthropologists continue to grapple with their prime directive not to intervene in the communities they study. Only recently has a "small revolution" within the discipline advocated the virtues of acknowledging and encouraging the fact that ethnographic researchers share the world with the people they work among (Turner 2007). This project should be looked at as part of that revolution in that it recognizes the methodological benefits of such inextricable involvement (see particularly Chapter 2). Throughout the pages that follow, I maintain that such a fully immersed ethnographic project allows for a more profound exploration of both what occurs within the world of Bay Area underground hip hop and the meanings that underlie and inform these actions.