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Ethos as Street Credibility:

Defining the Street Artist as a Hero Persona in the Hip-hop Lyrics of Nas

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**Ethos as Street Credibility:
Defining the Street Artist as a Hero Persona in the Hip-hop Lyrics of Nas**

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Dedicated to my brother Keith Hardiman
who convinced me to do a study of Nas.

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ABSTRACT

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Hip-hop authenticity can simply be measured by an artist who is labeled as “real” or as a “sell out.” Using Michael Dyson’s concept of authenticity in hip-hop and Byron Hurt, Nelson George, and Mickev Hess’s examination of the hip-hop persona, this essay will examine how the rapper Nas establishes ethos as street credibility by authenticating his status as a street artist and developing it into a hero persona. In this thesis, we find that in the lyrics of Nas his street artist image provides the foundation for the hero persona. His hero persona is defined by masculine and rebellious characteristics that inevitably assist in identifying him as an authentic pure hip-hop artist. For an appropriate analysis, hip-hop is placed in the rhetorical tradition to identify hip-hop ethos as the “keepin’ it real” concept. The historical account of the musical genre must also be observed to then analyze the importance of consistency and purity and how these characteristics authenticate a rapper’s persona. Last, in a close analysis of Nas’s lyrics, we will observe and define the street artist as hero persona.

Chapter One

Introduction to Hip-hop as a Reputable Study

“To every projects and every street corner,
we gotta get ours now” –Nas (“Rule”)

“Since the beginning of hip hop, artists have always strived to do one thing and that’s keep it real. If you look back in history on those that were exposed for their *‘fake’* personas, you’ll see a long list of one hit wonders” (Kilogramm). Hip-hop authenticity can simply be measured by an artist labeled as “real” or as a “sell out.” Michael Dyson, a prominent hip-hop scholar clarifies the rap debate stating that:

On the one side are purists who stake the future of the form on lyrical skill, narrative complexity, clever rhymes, and fresh beats. On the other side are advocates of commercialized hip-hop, marked by the mass production of records that sell because they are crassly accessible. (133)

Complexity of the genre confuses the debate, but nonetheless hip-hop is subjected to stereotyping as a critic notes in an article, “It is a shame that rap has taken a turn for the worst. With so many wannabes coming onto the scene and just plain stupid about the music, ruins it for the ones who are telling their stories through their music” (Hernandez); this statement is one of the many stigmas of hip-hop. There is more to hip-hop than the “wannabes” and “stupid music.” “Filmmaker Byron Hurt’s *‘Beyond Beats and Rhymes’* made clear that rap music can be as

sexist and homophobic as it can be positive and enlightening” (Chang and Zirin). One method to ensure authenticity is to remain “real” and understanding the belief that “hip-hop artists in many instances are the preachers of their generation” (Dyson 202). This statement enlightens the broad extent and potency of rappers’ influence. Nas is a prominent rapper in the hip-hop community who has been hailed as “nothing less than hip-hop’s boy messiah” (Lazerine 121). His intricate and diverse lyrics have inspired hip-hop scholars Michael Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai to compile one of the first anthologies analyzing a hip-hop record. *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas’s Illmatic* chronicles the various interpretations and meaning behind the rapper’s lyrics on his first album *Illmatic*. Nas uses these profound lyrics to establish his ethos as street credibility. Within the hip-hop community, it is not so much a rapper’s “good moral character” that is scrutinized or praised, but a modification of the phrase, which can be appropriately termed as street credibility. First, there is street credibility based on experience and knowledge of the streets as testified through lyrics. Second, there is street credibility based on an artist’s classification as being “pure” or “commercial.” The popular hip-hop website *Hiphopwired* notes that many rappers have forgotten to “speak the truth” (Weintraub) but Nas aligns his life experiences with his lyrics in which he proclaims in a *MTV* interview to be a “street artist” because he’s “talking to the streets.” Using Michael Dyson’s concept of authenticity in hip-hop along with Byron Hurt, Nelson George, and Mickev Hess’s examination of the hip-hop persona, this essay will examine how the rapper Nas establishes ethos as street credibility by authenticating his status as a street artist by developing it into a hero persona.

Rediscovering Ethos as Street Credibility

Hip-hop enthusiasts and scholars stress that “to confuse commercial rap made by a few artists with how hip-hop is actually lived by millions is to miss the good that hip-hop does” (Chang and Zirin); therefore, rediscovering ethos as street credibility through hip-hop music is essential to the study of rhetoric for the purpose of illustrating the diversity in current works. This analysis provides a glimpse into an art form that incorporates classic rhetorical values with a modern twist assisting in ameliorating the negative misconceptions of hip-hop. The psychological effect of rap music has been studied in James D. Johnson, Lee Anderson Jackson, and Leslie Gatto’s “Violent Attitudes and Deferred Academic Aspirations; Deleterious Effects of Exposure to Rap Music” which explores the belief that hip-hop causes aggressive behavior specifically in adolescents. Although violence and negative references to women may be present in lyrics, all rap music cannot be collectively categorized as promoting negativity. Regardless of raps’ use of derogative language and explicit themes, some records prove to be conscious and positive. Therefore, hip-hop music analyzed in context demonstrates how ethos as street credibility is established through lyrics.

Ethos must be recognized as a critical aspect when appealing to marginalized people because in most cases it concerns sensitive issues such as racism and prejudices that are constant themes in conscious rap music. The ability to relate the same or similar experiences is vital in earning the artist’s believability, acceptance, and eventually trust. Trust is dependent on ethos as Charles Larson points out in his essay “The Trust Establishing Function of the Rhetoric of Black Power” that:

speech texts, though they do not directly discuss trust, usually include trust and trustworthiness under the term Ethos and discuss Ethos and its elements in terms of factors which are somewhat intangible and which relate to an internal sensing of good will or “high” Ethos. (330-31)

However, he goes on to write that “it is difficult to identify why we trust another or what it is that he says or does that justifies our placement of trust” (331). In this essay, our determining factor of establishing and identifying ethos is based specifically on Nas’s lyrical content and how ethos is employed through his image as the street artist as hero persona.

The Practice of Falsifying Personas in Commercial or Corporate Rap

Falsifying personas is a popular occurrence within the hip-hop community in which the rappers’ facades are entirely different from the person they are in reality. In order to be more commercial for mainstream appeal, rap has the tendency to want to play into the stereotypical idealism of what a rapper represents for the purpose of earning more money. The rapper Rick Ross (1976-) is an example of this practice in which he famously claims in his lyrics, “I’m a boss!” He has created and invested in a falsified persona with music that compiles much of the negative stereotypical antics of claiming to be a successful drug dealer a pimp with a long criminal record. In reality, Rick Ross was a correctional officer who attended college at Albany State University studying Criminal Justice therefore destroying his street credibility because of such lies. Although his lyrics are clever and metaphorically enticing, with album reviews stating, “He may rap like he’s out of touch with reality, but with bass lines this deep and synths this huge, you might forget the present era’s woes yourself” (Vozick-Levinson). We must note the

critic's impression that "he's out of touch with reality." His lyrics do not signify the true person behind the persona of Rick Ross resulting in diluting his street credibility. In contrast, William Cobb points out that Nas "has been an MC since he breathed his first" and has been known to be a lyrical genius. Nas chooses to utilize the art as a means to "preach" to society with a rap style defined as "conscious rap," meaning that it reflects real societal issues from a personal aspect. Therefore, commercialized hip-hop is considered to be the complete opposite of what Nas's lyrics represent. Indeed, he was crowned "hip-hop's boy messiah" (Lazerine 121).

Nas remains a notable figure in hip-hop and has been recognized for his musical talents maintaining a balance of mainstream appeal yet retaining the label of street artist. Although some critics accused Nas of "selling out" when on his second album he incorporated more music and featured singers that differed from his musical style on his first album, he defends his authenticity as a street artist which he addresses in his 2008 song "Hero":

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

This stanza and the entire song is meant to reassure the audience that Nas will maintain being a "rebel." The rebel, which we will discuss in depth in Chapter 6, is rebelling against corporate hip-hop. The line "the only true rebel since the beginning" is a reference to his debut and his status as "hip-hop's boy messiah." His persona as the street artist is reinforced and therefore not falsified by the fact that he addresses the issue of commercialization noting that while his

lawyers only see “Billboard charts as winning,” he remains the “only true rebel.” In an interview with *FinalCall*, Nas addresses this issue saying:

It’s like everybody’s scared to speak out about what’s in their heart, just because they’re scared of who is going to come down on them. They’re scared they’re going to get “blacklisted.” They’re going to get all their endorsements taken away from them.

He reiterates this statement in many of his songs such as “Hero” rhyming, “I never changed nothing” referencing his fearlessness of against being “blacklisted.” He challenges the corporate side of hip-hop that indulges in falsified hip-hop personas testifying that he has the right to speak what he feels:

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 (“Hero”)

Furthermore, “Hero” addresses the controversy over the initial title of the album *Nigger*, which received much criticism stemming from civil rights activists. In a *MTV* interview to address the critics and those who opposed the initial album title Nas claimed, “I’m a street disciple [...] “I’m talking to the streets” (Nas). He goes on saying:

We’re taking power [away] from the word...No disrespect to none of them who were part of the civil-rights movement, but some of my n---as in the streets don't

know who [civil-rights activist] Medgar Evers was. I love Medgar Evers, but some of the n---as in the streets don't know Medgar Evers, they know who Nas is.

Nas affirms his stance in the hip-hop world by not falsifying his persona but remaining the street artist and talking to the streets. He asserts that “he recorded the album with a balance of education and entertainment in mind” (Crosley 32). However, Nas titled the album *Untitled* (2008) in which he claims he did not change anything due to the controversy in which the 2008 *Billboard* interview quotes the lyric, “I'm hog-tied, on the corporate side blocking y'all from going to stores and buying it/First L.A. and Doug Morris was riding wit it/but Newsweek articles startled big wigs and asked Nas, why is you trying it?” (Crosley 32). Nas eventually changed the album title *Nigger* which was not to accommodate and appease corporate hip-hop but instead to “not jeopardize his opportunity to get his music to the public” (Crosley 32). The debate over commercial versus pure hip-hop is as complex as the debate over whether gangster and party hip-hop can be considered “pure”; the reason may be based solely on the rapper’s experiences of keepin’ it real or not. A rapper does not have to focus all his or her music on sociopolitical ills. Instead, as Michael Dyson writes in *Holler if You Hear Me* about Tupac, “Pac lived everything he talked about” (154). Honesty can ultimately determine the purity of a hip-hop artist’s work. Whether it is party music or the injustices of the political system that you represent as a rapper or an artist, this purity of an artist’s works leads to the debate of how commercialization tarnishes a rapper’s persona. Just as Rick Ross plays into the propaganda of the stereotypical rapper to his falsify his persona, such rhetorical acts depict how it is the criterion of corporate greed.

Why the Analysis: Authenticity Validated by Purity versus Commercializing

The dispute between commercialization versus purity in hip-hop expands to the realm of ethos because commercialization intertwines with the rapper's persona or "moral character." The presence of morality in art is noted throughout history and is the cause for the debate between what is considered "pure" or "commercial." The debate spans into literary art, where literary writing is viewed as "pure" and fiction can be considered "commercial." Money has always played role in the debate; those who are "pure" do not create art for riches but "art for art's sake," and those who are "commercial" do it for the chief purpose of earning wealth. However, there can be a balance between the two. For example, Nas is a "pure" artist but has accumulated wealth by creating his art.

According to many hard core hip-hop lovers, commercial hip-hop is an insipid representation of the art due to the observation that it "neither challenge[s] their audience nor move[s] them to reflect on social, racial, or cultural ills" (Dyson 133). Although hip-hop has been influenced by politics since the beginning, commercialized hip-hop is not typically concerned with sociopolitical issues and is usually created for monetary gain leading to the popular expression that "Hip-hop is dead" a phrase used by Nas for the title of his 2006 album. *Hip Hop is Dead* was reviewed as a "masterpiece of work" (Esling) and an album that appropriated the supposed downfall of the musical genre. The article "Is Hip Hop Really Dead" points out that commercial hip-hop "made the whole world believe that hip-hop was only about the grand hustle and making big dollars" (Esling). Commercialized hip-hop conforms to what mainstream society perceives hip-hop to be: the "grand hustle and making big dollars" mentality.

Thus, many rappers, like Rick Ross, lyrically claimed to be big time gangsters. His reality as a former correctional officer is completely opposite of what his lyrics portray and conforms to the stereotypical persona of volatile lyrics and the drug dealing gangster. This view of hip-hop devalues the entire genre and shuns those who are conscious rappers. By this analysis of Nas's conscious rap lyrics and authentic persona, hip-hop's pejorative reputation will eventually be ameliorated and become worthy of further scholarly study.

Method of Analysis

Using Michael Dyson's concept of authenticity in hip-hop and Byron Hurt, Nelson George, and Mickev Hess's examination of the hip-hop persona, this essay will examine how the rapper Nas establishes ethos as street credibility by authenticating the street artist as a hero persona.

Hip-hop rhetoric has been studied as being an essential component of the Black rhetorical tradition and an important part of the sub-culture of African Americans as Celnisha Dangerfield examines the thematic structure of myths and fantasy in hip-hop artist Lauryn Hill (1975-). Dangerfield asserts that the lyrics display myths and fantasy yet intertwining them with cultural identity. Mickev Hess addresses the issue of identity and the persona artists and how rap artists oppose the corporate hip-hop community. The focus of this thesis will examine Nas as the street artist cultivating his hero persona.

Analysis of hip-hop lyrics can be quite difficult due to diversified perceptions and interpretations. I agree with Dangerfield's theory that analysis "is possible when conducted in a

manner that takes into consideration the role of Black culture and experiences in shaping this particular genre of music” (212). Culture and experience is imperative because “when audiences of particular ethnic characteristics are exposed to messages, their responses will be determined in part by the characteristic experiences which they share with other member of the group and for which they have developed particular frames of references” (Smith 284). Hip-hop is deeply imbedded into Black culture; therefore an analysis of the works of Nas cannot be observed without reference to Black culture keeping in mind that “vocal communication became for a much greater proportion of blacks than whites the fundamental medium of communication” (Smith 296). The emphasis on vocal communication from oral traditions, Black sermons, and poetry has assisted in carving the pathway for hip-hop. The traditional and cultural aspects rationalize the intense connection between the purity and the ethos of an artist. Ethos as street credibility can be studied in multiple ways: the non-commercialization or “selling out” of an artist or by the contextual content in a rapper’s lyrics in which Nas distinctively employs his ethos as the street artist as a hero.

For an appropriate analysis, hip-hop is placed in the rhetorical tradition to identify hip-hop ethos as the “keepin’ it real” concept. The historical account of the musical genre must also be observed to then analyze the importance of consistency and purity and how these characteristics authenticate a rapper’s persona. Last, in a close analysis of Nas’s lyrics, we will observe and define the street artist as hero persona.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ethos of Hip Hop within a Rhetorical Viewpoint and the Concept of “Real”

Defined as “the good character of the orator,” the ethos of a rapper can appear non-existent due to the misconceived perception of hip-hop having “a negative effect on today’s youth.” For this reason ethos is placed in the context of street credibility which is defined in the *Urban Dictionary* as: “commanding a level of respect in an urban environment due to experience in or knowledge of issues affecting those environments.” Street credibility is an aspect of the hip-hop generation that is inevitably valued. Nas discusses his growing up in the projects and the streets of Queens, New York in many songs such as: “Rule,” “Revolutionary Warfare,” and “I Want to Talk to You” in which we hear how the ghetto played a major role in his perception of society. This fact, as we will observe in his lyrics, undeniably makes him conscious of social and racial class distinctions and injustices. His real experiences of the streets are the foundation for establishing his ethos. Mickey Hess explains this feature of relating real experiences in hip-hop stating, “In recorded rap lyrics themselves, power to speak is often negotiated through rhetorical claims to realness and through narrative evidence that those claims are rooted in lived experience” (299).

An orator, or in this context a rapper, has to make an emotional impact on an audience established by the content of a speech or composition or lyrics. Similar to other literary or oral discourse, hip-hop operates to impact an audience. In Black oratory tradition, the orator had to find a formula in which he had to “defend his humanity, to agitate for minimal rights, and to soothe the raw emotions of his mistreated brethren, the black speaker was often forced to

develop articulate and effective speech behavior on the platform” (Smith 295). Aristotle’s doctrine of copulated notes in the *Rhetoric* provides instructions of how to employ this development. Aristotle “defends rhetoric against claims that it simply flattery” (Triadafilopoulos 744) and results in creating a complex conceptualized theory in the ways of the art of persuasion. The *Rhetoric* merges reason, emotion, and performance “which provides us with a unique alternative to both agnostic and rational/deliberative conceptions of the public sphere” (Triadafilopoulos 744). In the oral tradition, ethos is the appeal based on the character of the speaker while it has also expanded to composition. The reputation of the speaker is an important factor in which the listeners may determine if they are to be persuaded and if the speaker is trustworthy. As in oral or the composition traditions, rappers must establish their credibility. Some may do this by other means, perhaps by their manners or dress. But the most valid approach is explicitly through their lyrics. As in classical rhetoric, rappers must “find the needs necessary to persuade the audience of the truth” (Berlin 768).

In classical rhetoric establishing ethos was impersonal in the sense that “until a speaker established his own ethos, usually through community service or previous rhetorical success, his own experiences were not important to the discourse” (Clark 250). The concept remains that discourse “could be shared by all members of the polity” meaning that it was a common discourse relatable to a certain community (Clark 250). Unlike classical rhetoric, ethos in today’s society has been reconceptualized as personal experience and familiarity ensures the ethos of a speaker or in this essay a rapper. “Simon Firth explains the popular music listener’s judgement of authenticity as ‘a perceived quality of sincerity and commitment. It’s as if people expect music to

mean what it says'” (quoted in Hess 299). This statement is the most important aspect of the ethos of hip-hop because it explains the audience’s expectations of a rapper and determines his or her ultimate classification in the hip-hop world. We will eventually examine how Nas presents reality and a sense of consistency through his hero persona. In hip-hop, the community is a people who share cultural identity or experience. Scholar Richard L. Wright elucidates on the concept of cultural identity and its relation to rhetoric stating that:

for African Americans, given their history of struggle against the individual and institutional forces/structures of exploitation, marginalization, isolation, degradation, and annihilation, one might conclude that the primary work of the rhetoric produced by African Americans has been essentially in protest against such conditions. (85)

This statement is not restricted and can be applied to any marginalized and dispossessed people. Wright concludes that the word was their defense and offense, devices in order to express their social and cultural conditions. This is why “hip-hop’s concepts of realness form a discursive spectrum founded upon standards of authenticity to narratives of hip-hop cultural origins within poor urban neighborhoods” (Hess 299). The concept of “keepin it real” is depended upon authenticity, consistency, and purity which are key elements of hip-hop ethos.

CHAPTER THREE

A Glimpse into Hip-Hop's History

“[I] inspire them to be real in their life. 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.” (Nas)

Hip-hop history must be assessed in order to demonstrate the juxtaposed perceptions of “pure” versus “commercial.” To the surprise and perhaps dismay of many, hip-hop has weeded its way into mainstream American culture, from cheesy movies of the 80s to commercials and now to the suburbs of White America. The art is eclectic offering a genre of music that is poetically expressive. Hip-hop is identifiable yet subjective because the art carries a different meaning for each individual. One of the deemed “Godfathers” of hip-hop DJ Kool Herc (1955-) defined his hip-hop as something “with a meaningful message to it.” Hip-hop has been a thriving force of music since the 1970s and has been a staple in the subculture of black communities (Davey D). Disc Jockeys or DJs for parties and clubs were on most occasions accompanied by their “sideman” who began rhyming words over the DJ’s music. Rhymes of hip-hop were originally “crowd friendly” as Cameron and Devin Lazerine explain as some of the first productions of rap were “crowd pleasing, dance-floor-friendly grooves of disco inspiration” (9). So how did this “lighthearted escapism” art become conscious focusing on sociopolitical ills? Hip hop as we know it started as a “response to systematic violence” in Bronx, New York (Hurt). Some of the first rappers to set the standard of this form of rap were Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five who embarked on a new feat and message in the legendary hip-hop song released in

1982 called “The Message.” The song passionately explicated the realities of the impoverished and lower class. “The Message” was the blueprint for many conscious rappers and permanently altered the dynamics of hip-hop. Between jazz and rock, hip-hop is the most controversial and misunderstood musical genre. From “feel good party music” to socially aware lyrics, hip-hop is the most diverse in which some rappers chose to create lyrics that go beyond the rhyme forming a profound meaning. Like “The Message,” Nas proves that hip-hop music can be an outlet to communicate cultural and sociopolitical issues as well as being “feel good” music. From gangster rap to hard-core hip-hop, hip-hop cannot be confined to one style.

Nas within the History of Hip Hop

Nas’s 1994 debut album *Illmatic* was hailed as “one of the greatest hip-hop albums of all time” (Lazerine 121) and revived the state of rap with its pure hip-hop style by communicating his life experiences. His style is viewed as pure but encompasses a mixture of various types of music from the jazz sounds of the “Bridging the Gap” (2004) to the heavy instrumentals of “Hero” (2008). Nas is a lyrical genius possessing the talent by preaching against the times and by sharing his personal experiences. Cameron and Devin Lazerine write that Nas “was heralded as nothing less than hip-hop’s boy messiah, a preternaturally gifted lyrical prodigy who’d save the genre” (121). His debut album returned hip-hop to its authenticity, because at the time many critics felt that “conscious rap” was over shadowed by commercialized hip-hop.

Born and raised in Queens, New York, Nas witnessed many social and racial issues that plagued his community; for a young Nas, it was either rapping or being subjected to the streets. At a young age, Nas displayed his talent for music and with a jazz musician for a father, he

mastered playing the trumpet at three years old opening the door to his appreciation for music. Though a high-school dropout, Nas developed a great interest in African history, religion, and poetry. Considered “street smart,” he focused on his culture and community while the themes became viable to his music (Lazerine).

Musically, Nas emphasizes not only on the long history of repression towards African Americans but the prejudices within various communities and other cultures and races. On and off the mic, Nas stays constant is his message; whether it is every song on an album or just a few, Nas never fails to emphasize political and educational awareness in his lyrics. Many similar artists have encountered criticism when it comes to politically based songs because it is “self-reflective in a way that only mature art will risk” (Dyson 133). Therefore, Nas’s “mature art” relates his experiences not only for example but to persuade and inform hearers as he relates in a *MTV* interview:

At this point, I'm looking at the whole world differently. I'm looking at how politics could really be effective for people today, how me as an artist could be more effective. ... I listen to the radio sometime and I like the vibe of that. I go to a club, and my favorite sh-- is Soulja Boy [“Crank That”]. I wanna get down with them joints, but ... [my records] do not come out like that.

Nas has been called a revolutionary with lyrics by cultivating a street artist as hero persona through clever lyrical devices. He creates a discourse similar to that of a preacher’s sermon by teaching and informing the people while often aiming to persuade. Nas’s style exemplifies the purity of hip-hop by not being commercial. His distinct use of ethos is visible

through his lyrics because he gains his listeners' trust by upholding his street artist as hero persona.

Spoken Word Predecessor: Influence from The Last Poets

In Adam Bradley's *The Book of Rhymes*, he explores the Black rhetorical tradition through hip-hop where the poetics of the genre in the lyrics of Nas contains "intricate poetics" (21). Bradley analyzes Nas's lyrics and outlining personification, similes, metaphor, and storytelling aspects explaining that out of many rappers of today, Nas experiments the most when it comes to poetic devices. Bradley summarizes hip-hop as a rhetorical tradition:

Between the street life and the good life is a broad expanse of human experience. Rap has its screenwriters, making Hollywood blockbusters in rhyme with sharp cuts, vivid characters, and intricate plotlines. It has its investigative reporters and conspiracy theorists, its biographers and memoirists, its True Crime authors and its mystery writers. It even has its comics and its sportswriters, its children's authors and its spiritualists. It is high concept and low brow; it has literary hacks and bona fide masters. It has all of these and more, extending an oral tradition as fundamental to human experience, as ancient and as essential, as most anything we have. (158)

This essential part of exploring and explicating the "human experience" requires the use of "intricate poetics" as Bradley suggests, but it also calls for an artist to be reliable or trustworthy. Any rhetorical tradition is "communication between artists and audience" that calls for the

writer, orator, or in this case rapper, to establish ethos. Establishing ethos is fundamental for an artist in which it bonds the relationship especially when relating human experiences. Hip-hop “values a discourse of lived experience, and has roots in oral traditions of testimony and bearing witness” (Hess 297). For this reason, “artists have always strived to do one thing and that’s keep it real” (Kilogramm). Hip-hop’s genealogy of “keepin’ it real” is heavily influenced by poetry. Hip-hop has the reputation of being the “new Black poetry” (Smitherman) and similar to poetry, hip-hop can be used as a reflective device to portray a person’s culture, class, and gender oppression. The development of rap has been called “the single most important influence on Black poetry at the turn of the century” (Salaam). The Last Poets exhibited this reflective spoken word poetry. In the late 1960s, The Last Poets advocated for social and racial equality during the Civil rights era specifically through spoken word poetry. Similar to rap music, their poetry “merged street smart poetry that rhymed, set to musical backgrounds” (Frazier) by illustrating the long history of “keepin’ it real.”

This long history of “keepin’ it real” that The Last Poets reflect counteracts the many stereotypes and misrepresentations of personas that overwhelms hip-hop culture; and with the “wannabes” playing into the hype leads to the portrayal of the hard core, misogynistic, and even racist rebel feeding the belief that rap confines black culture. Some believe that “by reinforcing the stereotypes that long hindered blacks, and by teaching young blacks that a thuggish adversarial stance is the properly ‘authentic’ response to a presumptively racist society, rap retards black success” (McWhorter). In analyzing the non-stereotypical side to hip-hop, by analyzing Nas, it will prove that “authentic” rap is not a hindrance but advances hip-hop culture.

He goes on to write that, “hip-hop ethos can trace its genealogy to the emergence in that decade of a black ideology that equated black strength and authentic black identity with a militantly adversarial stance toward American society. In the angry new mood, captured by Malcolm X’s upraised fist, many blacks (and many more white liberals) began to view black crime and violence as perfectly natural, even appropriate, responses to the supposed dehumanization and poverty inflicted by a racist society” (McWhorter). The Last Poets exhibit the notion of Black pride, but instead of appropriating violence in hip-hop, they originated the importance of relating real experiences transferable through art. McWhorter attempts to provide an account of the relation between violent responses and hip-hop, but Nas offers an entirely ameliorated view of the diverse musical genre. Through Nas we will see how the hip-hop ethos is illustrated in the street artist as hero persona and how “keepin it real” is evident regardless of the practice in commercialized hip-hop personas.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Study of Authenticity

Consistency of the Street Artist Persona

Since he stepped to the mic in 1994, Nas has continuously provided hearers and fans with his “street disciple” motto and image. Mickev Hess claims, “a consistent performed identity [...] seems crucial to credibility” (298). This statement is true in the sense that consistency depicts a rapper’s dedication, motivation, and also his stance in the hip-hop world. Many artists along with rappers constantly change their personas. For example, the pop music artist Beyonce (1981-) is now also known by her alter ego “Sasha Fierce,” a ruse which did not originate with her original musical debut. Although she is not accredited as being a street artist or with street credibility, she exemplifies the tactics that many artists utilize in order to revamp their mainstream appeal. Similar artists distinctively create new identities that are completely different from their real on and offstage identity. Hess asserts that “none of these [in reference to the personas] is an entirely separate persona as much as an aspect of the same MC” (298). In the case of the artist mentioned, the identity was created over time during the course of her career meaning she did not initially claim this certain image or persona. This can inevitably discredit an artist, especially in hip-hop unless the explanation is accepted as being an expression of their artistic development.

Michael Dyson notes that “hip-hoppers construct narrative conventions and develop artistic norms through repeated practice and citation” (158). Nas consistently uses the narrative

convention of reinforcing his stance as a street artist whom he then uses to form his hero persona. Unlike the previous mentioned artist, Nas does not discharge an extreme persona who has to play into masking his true identity. Nas's persona reflects his outlook and experiences of life that is recognized as his "artistic norm." His unswerving persona leads to his reliability; for example, many of the lyrical excerpts in this analysis were recorded years apart but continue to have similar themes, projecting the street artist image while attesting to Nas's consistency which coincides with many of the rapper's interviews. This small yet consistent detail proves Nas's thematic relevance throughout his career helping to secure his ethos as street credibility. With each of his albums from 1994 to 2008, the themes unfailingly depict the hero persona as well as establish his street credibility. Nas's street artist as hero persona is defined by masculine and rebellious characteristics that are portrayed in his lyrics and the person of Nas.

Authenticating the Street Artist

S. Craig Watkins points out that:

the creation of a street-based intelligentsia [...] drew much of its vitality and credibility from its close proximity to and connections with hip-hop's ghetto trenches. There was something notable and noble about making of this loose band of creative artists and thinkers. They did not propose to simply speak for the dispossessed in hip-hop; they were part of the dispossessed. (239)

As we examine what creates a street artist, this statement clarifies the importance of relatability in earning street credibility, not just speaking and keeping up a pretense but being part of the

reality. That reality is not the same for each rapper, but who a rapper claims to be is crucial when it comes to defining oneself as a street artist. This is due to the fact that a street artist is what the name entails, an artist from the streets who speaks to the streets. In order to do this, a rapper must reiterate his stance in hip-hop and his style. This is similar to how Nas reminds the hearer in the 2001 song “Rule,”

Y'all know that's my style, to hit you at the right time
No other compares to what Nas write down

The above excerpt demonstrates how Nas wants the audience to identify him as the street artist stating “Y’all know that’s my style” and as the street artist whom “No other compares to [him]”; with this lyrical technique, he produces and navigates his ethos in the direction of a street artist. He emphasizes that the hearer knows his style which is “keepin’ it real” as a hip-hop artist. As a result of referring to himself in third person, he is acting as the hearer observing himself which is reflective as he is acting as the audience. Nas addresses the audience creating an unspoken mutual respect and trust. The technique also establishes a sense of consistency with his style, because he states “Y’all know that’s my style” meaning that his style as a street artist has remained consistent. In doing so, Nas categorizes himself as a “purist” of hip-hop, a rapper who focuses “on lyrical skill, narrative complexity, clever rhymes, and fresh beats” (Dyson 133). His main agenda does not focus on the monetary value that hip-hop may bring but on the art. Remaining “pure” is important to Nas which is demonstrated in the above excerpt. He says in the *FinalCall* interview, “It may not be the best chart-topping album, but, as long as I can sleep at

night knowing that's what I really wanted to represent, cool." Nas authenticates his status as a street artist simply by creating music that he wants to present, or that means something to him.

Purity of the "I of Me": Life of the Street Artist

"It's the ghetto life yea I celebrate it I live it" from Nas's "I Want to Talk to You" is a line often repeated but arranged in various ways in hip-hop songs. Nelson George, the author of *Hip-hop America*, asserts that "I" is a powerful word in the vocabulary of the African-American male. In telling his-story brothers are extremely subjective, and we revel in the chance to make others see things our way" (51). Therefore, authenticity is measured by a rapper's tradition of introducing himself as a street artist. Usually through the "I of me" method, emphasis is placed on the rapper's experience which inevitably assists and reinforces the image of his "non-selling out." In speech making, Nick Morgan notes that, "In terms of content, credibility is best established by someone else – the person who introduces you." Unlike speech making, a hip-hop artist's introduction includes informing the audience that he or she is from the streets or the hood which in turn establishes his or her ethos as a street artist. George stresses on the particular account of the importance of the "I" in hip-hop culture. He asserts that with the longstanding demoralization of Blacks, the focus of "I" is "often a system of survival" (50). He explains this rationale stating that "For African –American males, this pride can be an aggressive manifestation of identity" (50). Nas relates his experience and reality of being poverty stricken and dispossessed in which "exposure to experiences desirable or undesirable in which one can only passively perceive events without influencing them is an essential fact of ghetto life, for better or for worse" (Hannerz 312). Nas illustrates this in the rhyme, "This is my hood I'mma

rep, to the death of it” (“One Mic”). Regardless of social circumstances, he still became successful going on to rap that “I owe to it [his circumstances to] my success” (“Rule”). Aiming to prove that he survived through the challenges, he asserts his expertise on being from the streets as he states “The streets upside down, I’m here to represent this” (“I Want to Talk to You”). A rapper secures his street credibility by representing the streets, not being a “sell out” but by remaining true to the streets. As Nelson George writes, “political and social conditions must not, cannot, and will not circumscribe the vision of true artists” (48). Nas’s vision is not limited by any “restrictions” using constant references of his “hood” and the street. He justifies his trustworthiness, therefore, establishing his ethos by allowing insight into the social and political circumstances. This also follows the rule, “if you don’t get a good introduction, then demonstrate your expertise with carefully selected statistics and factoids from your field of endeavor” (Morgan). In this case, Nas provides the hearer with an introduction in the song “Rule” as well as “demonstrate his expertise” and establishing himself “experienced knower” (Hess 297) by relating “essential fact[s] of ghetto life”:

I come from the housin tenement buildings
 Unlimited killings, menaces marked for death
 Better known as the projects where junkies and rock heads dwell
 Though I owe to it my success

Note the self realization of the “I of me” in this stanza in which Nas notes where he is from, “the housing tenement buildings....the projects,” and the living conditions, “Unlimited killings...where junkies and rock heads dwell.” He assures the hearers that he has lived the life

of the streets. He begins and ends the stanza with the pronoun “I” creating the entire stanza centered on his experience. Nas does not rap about being a gangster but relates his trials of his growing up an inner city youth. As well as demonstrating his expertise in the hood, the bolded “I’s” demonstrate Nelson George’s examination of the “I of me” idealization in hip-hop. How a rapper is identified in the hip-hop world is a crucial factor as Michael Dyson points out that the “I” “is a moral imperative in hip-hop” (158). The purpose of the identifiable “I” is used “immediately to disclose the truth of life through reportage” (Dyson 158) in which he examines the “realness” concept in rapper Tupac (1971-1996) and his premise of “What I say is who I am.” Nas reports the tales of his underprivileged youth and in doing so establishes his street credibility as being one who raps about the streets and who is from the streets. He asserts this self-realization (“I”) when he states in an interview that, “I may be a little bit more extreme than a few of the other artists, that’s just me, *it’s who I am*. So all my music has something about me” (*FinalCall*). Emphasis was placed on the phrase “it’s who I am” to illustrate and affirm Michael Dyson and Nelson George’s examination of self-realization. The identity of the self-realization relates to Nas’s position in hip-hop because like he says, “I just have an opinion, I just have an experience to talk about” (Nas), he utilizes this method in order to establish his hero persona.

Identifying a Persona

While authenticity and not being commercial are essential in establishing ethos as street credibility, authenticity is effectively demonstrated through other methods. Nas uses a technique that can be referred to as the hero complex which creates an identity coinciding with his “hip-hop boy’s messiah” reputation as he claims in his 2008 song “Hero,” “I guess that makes me a hero.”

The “I” assumption as Nelson George theorizes “must be expressed with style” (51); the hero persona represents the stylized manifestation of self-realization. In this context, the hero complex relates to ethos as street credibility because it establishes a character or persona that is based on real experiences. “Each artist has adopted a ‘persona’ that is developed in his music”, or in some cases, “a hybrid narration [is] based on mimicry” (Hess 306). Rick Ross who was mentioned earlier is the epitome of “mimicry” because his persona mimics that of another person’s life resulting in labeling him as a fraud in the hip-hop community. He based his persona on the real “Rick Ross,” a notorious drug kingpin who was serving a life sentence but released from prison in 2009. Not surprisingly, the real Rick Ross is not enthused about the rapper’s stage persona or name in which he comments saying:

After seeing all the stuff that has been going on with the Correctional Officer (William Roberts) that stole my name, [it] makes me think back to a year and a half ago when we spoke, Freeway Ricky Ross explained to *AllHipHop* in a previous interview. I tried to talk to him like a big brother and let him know to be you, and that he couldn’t be me. (*Bossip*)

The real Rick Ross was nicknamed “Freeway” Rick Ross in which the rapper “Rick Ross” also alludes to the nickname in his lyrics.

“Rick Ross” raps about the life and experiences of someone else portraying the events as his own Mickev Hess writes, “the successful **commercial** rapper may build his career from narratives of ghetto poverty” (306), or in this case from the narratives of a falsified drug lord. The word “commercial” is emphasized in the former sentence to note that it is only with

commercial rappers whose main aim remains to only build their careers through unauthentic ghetto life narratives. As noted earlier, artists utilize false personas in order to further their careers in mainstream society, but “what a rapper talks about on tracks and in interviews means everything to those fans that are buying into the ‘*person*’ as oppose to just the album” (Kilogramm). This idea is the basis of authenticating a persona by instituting ethos. Nas’s lyrics identify his role as a real hero by using his reputation as a street artist.

CHAPTER FIVE

Defining the Street Artist as a Hero

The Masculine Features of the Hero Persona

The term “street artist” is initially perceived as masculine because the terminology itself screams out the masculine adjectives such as “rough” and “tough.” “Street artist” is applied to Nas as being a rapper who is from the streets and talks to the streets, and inevitably masculine features play a major role in his hero persona. In the documentary *Hip-hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Byron Hurt explores the issue of masculinity in hip-hop and the persona of the “hardcore gangster” by linking it to the history of Black men “wanting to deny their frailty.” The masculine ideal in the traditional sense is determined by certain physical traits as being unemotional, or by other “tough guy” characteristics. This analysis will not examine the masculinity “hero” persona as a braggadocio but will focus on the sense of power and confidence which establishes street credibility based on Nas’s reality as found in his lyrics. The consistent masculine aspect of the hero persona exudes strength and dominance. Nas’s hero persona depends on his “keepin’ it real,” and in hip-hop culture, a person has to be tough by letting his or her strength be known. His lyrics adequately assess this concept in “Hero”:

Can't leave it

The game needs him

Plus the people need someone to believe in

So in God's Son we trust

'Cause they know I'm gonna give 'em what they want

They looking for a hero

I guess that makes me a hero

Although the physical traits of masculinity may not be detected, the power of masculinity is evident in the way that Nas positions himself in the lyrics. Nas places himself in the proximity of being more than the “preacher” of his generation but stands as the dominant hero because “the people need someone to believe in.” He reinstates his status as a street artist and therefore remains a purist while disproving the popular expression that “hip-hop is dead.” The words “people” or “they” encircle him illustrating that the stanza revolves around him, not for braggadocio but because he is “what they want.” This exemplifies the hero feature of being called to duty. In this scenario, it is due to hip-hop’s status of being considered dead; thus, the people need a hero to save the current state of hip-hop. This translates into the people’s trust in him because he will “keep it real,” since he is “God’s son.” Power and strength, although subdued, are apparent because his power and strength in hip-hop are needed. Through this, he reiterates his stance in hip-hop stating “what I stand for speaks for itself” (“One Mic”). Nas’s authenticity as a street artist is noted through his consistency of the variations of saying “What I say is who I am” (Dyson 158). Nas places himself as the one who will provide the audience with real hip-hop. Masculinity is multifaceted being subdued or candidly expressed.

Masculinity: Bold and Ready to Die

As mentioned before, there is a need for the rapper to deny his frailty seen in the lyric “what your weakness is, I have none” (“One Mic”) in which Nas clearly denies his frailty in

claiming that he has no weakness therefore illustrating his strength. Some rappers in their persona may accomplish this by creating overtly sexual or extremely violent lyrics but Nas's approach displays his masculinity by the act of bravery. Nelson George posits that the idyllic portrayal of heroism in hip-hop culture is "not for the timid, the insecure, or the introverted" as seen in Nas lyric, "In Hip-Hop, the weapons are lyrical- to be the best you challenge the best" ("Rule"). Still using power and strength, Nas's masculinity is found by his wanting to challenge and fight for his opinions and rights. And in the traditional sense of a hero, Nas says in the *FinalCall* interview, "when I see things that are unjust, I react," but this time, it is visible in specific words. Hip-hop culture expects certain criteria from their heroes; "We like them bold, we like them to embody our blascularity, and, be they revolutionary or rap stars, we like to know they are ready to die---even though we truly don't want them to" (George 53). Nas illustrates this empowerment and heroism in several songs. In the "The World is Yours," he rhymes "[I] hold **myself** down singlehanded" creating a sense of traditional masculine identity asserting that he is confident and capable of performing a task singlehandedly without assistance. This trend of masculinity continues in "Rule" where he proceeds to place himself in the masculine act of competition stating, "With **survival** of the **fittest** everyday is a challenge... Hopin' **I** reach the world leaders and **win**." Within this lyric, he positions the ills of the world as being one huge challenge in which he is competing and fighting to win against injustices or whatever attempts to hold him back. Nas sums up the ideal of courage and boldness rhyming, "**I'm unbeatable**, y'all" ("Hero") thereby asserting that no matter what the challenge he is unbeatable.

Although in previous lyrics he does blatantly state that he is “a hero,” the highlighted words emphasize and allude to his declaration while attempting to relate the masculine heroism alternative to the word “hero”: “best,” “win,” “fittest,” and “unbeatable” each imply that he is the best and has won, therefore deeming himself as the victor or the hero. He accomplishes this by consistently employing the “I of me” with the line “I’m unbeatable” setting the mood to portray him as being at war illustrating the boldness and ready to die impression. Boldness and non-weakness creates an image of a rapper who is consistent in his stance on issues which assists in shaping his hero persona. The song “One Mic” is the best depiction of the hero complex in which Nas asserts that he is “one man,” but all he needs is “one try” indicating that he only needs “one try” to get something right recalling his “I’m unbeatable” rhyme in “Hero.” Nas rhymes that, “What you call an infinite brawl, eternal souls clashin-War gets deep, some beef is everlasting” (“One Mic”). In this lyric, he addresses the conflicting dilemma of prejudices as the “infinite brawl” signifying the conflict with the dominating words “brawl,” “clashing,” “war,” and “beef” (arguments) that all illustrate a man who is willing to fight. Just as he was called to duty to save hip-hop, once again with his dominance and strength, he is in the position to save the people.

The Rebel in the Hero Persona: The Making of a Rebel

Rebelliousness may be perceived as a negative quality, but in Nas’s case it stresses and adds to his “keepin’ it real” stance in the hip-hop community. Nas rebels against not only corporate hip-hop but also the injustices and sociopolitical concerns that plague society. Mickey Hess quotes Marc Singer stating that, “one of the most definitive and distinctive traits of the superhero, is also one of the most powerful and omnipresent figures used to illustrate the

dilemmas and experiences of minority identity” (306). Nas utilizes the characteristic of the rebel in order to illustrate “dilemmas and experiences” and to have the opportunity to speak out against any issue that he finds unjust or worth pursuing. Nas often claims that he has always been a rebel and in his song “Hero” where he rhymes that “Nas the only true rebel since the beginning.” This rebel status affirms his stance in the hip-hop world as being that rapper who will not conform or do anything without any meaning for him. Nas thrives on rebelliousness against corporate hip-hop: “I’m the young city bandit, hold myself down singlehanded” (“The World is Yours”). Nas’s use of the word “bandit” can be viewed in this context as meaning rebel. Some may interpret “bandit” as Nas referring to himself as being a criminal, but he precedes the word with “young city bandit.” He considers himself to be a bandit because he is not conforming to what mainstream society expects from a popular hip-hop artist. Like many of his lyrics, this excerpt also states that Nas is from the “city.” In other words, he is the rebellious voice for his city reinstating his street artist image. The line “hold myself down singlehanded” can be interpreted as being self indulgent, but on the contrary, it depicts a distinctive traditional component of the hero persona, which is acting alone or in this scenario, singlehandedly rebelling. Nas secures his rebelliousness utilizing radical terminology. The words “challenge,” “war,” and “revenge” form an image of combat coinciding with the assertion that the ideal hero is bold and ready to die in which he rhymes, “To be the best you **challenge** the best” (“Rule”). He confronts and opposes those who challenge him demonstrating his resistance in the line “My heart is racin, tastin **revenge** in the air” (“One Mic”). The rebelliousness of the song lives in the fact that he is urging revenge but his revenge is his success and continuing to speak his mind

regardless of the circumstances and what the critics may say. His boldness is even more prominent in the rhyme:

...we take these bitches to **war**, lie 'em down

Cause we stronger now my nigga the time is now!! (“One Mic”)

This line in “One Mic” is reminiscent of a rhyme on the record “You Can’t Stop Us Now” in which Nas features one of The Last Poets, the radical revolutionaries who influenced the entire spoken word poetry movement (see Chapter 3). In the vein of The Last Poets, Nas rhymes his defiance, “No matter how hard you try, you can't stop us now.”

His radical word choice reinforces his rebelliousness with necessarily stating outright that “I’m rebelling.” Instead he opts for certain “expression[s] [that] seem(...) expertly planned to evoke responses much like a speaker might prepare certain persuasive arguments with an eye toward a special kind of reaction” (Smith 296). In using radical language and rhymes that place him as a man who is unbeatable; the reaction Nas aims for is that of being the radical hero who is “bold and ready to die.”

The Rebel with a Cause: Message through Rhymes

Being a “rebel” provides Nas with the opportunity to articulate his perception of sociopolitical ills. Like in the traditional sense of a hero, Nas assumes the role of preacher who advocates, “justice and freedom, wisdom and understanding” (“Revolutionary Warfare”) and “saving” those whom he considers needing a voice. “All I need is one mic,” a line from “One Mic” claims that hip-hop is all Nas needs to have the opportunity to be one that “speak[s] out

about what's in their heart." This declaration is notable in the song "Rule" illustrating Nas's advocacy for peace:

Call a truce, world peace, stop actin like savages...

Must it go on, we must stop the killin...

These lyrics were released on the album *Stillmatic* in 2001, months after the United States was victim to terrorist attacks. Nas discusses the attacks stating, "When 9/11 happened, everyone felt like they had been duped" (quoted in Nicholson). He rebels against hate, racism, and prejudices as the cause for the violence while advocating for everyone to stand together:

All this hate can't last forever (uh, c'mon)

It's time that we stand together

Nas has publicly announced his opposition to President George W. Bush clearly stating in the lyric "Hopin' I reach the world leaders and win" ("Rule"). "I Want to Talk to You" is a complete political piece in which Nas states that "I wanna talk to the mayor, the governor, the motherfuckin president, I wanna talk to the FBI, and the CIA, and the motherfuckin congressman." He deliberately addresses the government wanting to expose the justice system as an injustice system. Although we live in the "land of the free," he theorizes that what the public sees on the news is censored stating, "The news got it all confused lyin to the public" ("I Want to Talk to You"). Thus, Nas can be recognized as a rebel, pitting himself against those in higher power to provide a varying side to political matters to those marginalized citizens.

In the 2002 song “I Can,” he advocates for everyone to rally together stating “Save the music y'all, save the music y'all.” “I Can” is a powerful message to the youth and adults with the main purpose to arouse hearers to rebel against the stereotypes and supposed statistics of underprivileged youth and to become more than as he rhymes “gangstas and hoes.” Nas contributes a radically progressive attitude on behalf of all marginalized people taking the revolutionary attitude to a new heroic direction.

Ernest Allen speculates that rap with a message “tends to portray, in vivid and urgent terms, the contours of existing social breakdown, and in the best of cases may offer a vision of a new and more just way of life” (160). Nas demonstrates this new direction or “new rhetoric” in hip-hop that is revolutionary and depicts a different attitude towards racial and social tension seen in the essay “The Rhetoric of Black Power: A Street Level Interpretation” which theorizes:

Coexistence calls for a new beginning in the black-white relations. It will demand that white society refrain from reacting in kind to the rhetoric of the black man, who is intent on calling his brothers to rally to the objectives of black culture. A new rhetoric must be initiated based on the kind of self-interest that leads to mutual welfare ending ultimately in mutual respect. (Gregg, McCormack, and Pedersen 282)

While in many of his songs Nas focuses on racial tension or as one article states “Nas’ music is pure blackness” (Esling); he illustrates the theme of unity. Instead of a “social breakdown,” he calls for a racial breakdown by offering solutions in which the issue is not about race, but everyone who is dispossessed in the 1999 song “I Want to Talk to You”:

Now y'all combinin all the countries we goin do the same
Combine all the cliques to make one gang
It ain't all about a black and white thing
it's to make the change, citizens of a higher plane

He politics for a new direction for reconciliation between all races and cultures because he realizes the world needs to change. In this context he advocates not for a distinction between races but unity. Nas exhibits this idea by utilizing his street credibility and demonstrating his knowledge of the particular environment that not only afflicts the Black community but the community as a whole. In a 2008 *FinalCall* interview, Nas is asked why it is important to him to use his voice in order to relate a meaningful rap message:

Well, the ones that say they don't have a message and all that, they're gangsters, man. Let them be gangsters...Not everybody wants to have that responsibility... I tend to see things and I've always questioned things since I was young...And when I see things that are unjust, I react. I may be a little bit more extreme than a few of the other artists, that's just me, it's who I am. So all my music has something about me. I'm not a "specialist on race matters." I just have an opinion, I just have an experience to talk about. So, if one album is about one thing, then that's what I'm thinking about that year, and that's what I'm thinking about musically. It may not be the best chart-topping album, but, as long as I can sleep at night knowing that's what I really wanted to represent, cool. Then I'm good.

The song "I Can" (2002) explores the "vision of a new and more just way of life" (Allen 160) as Nas rhymes to the youth saying, "Nobody says you have to be gangstas, hoes," but that they should, "Read more learn more, change the globe." The song served as the theme for VH1's Save the Music Foundation which is a non-profit organization designed to improve the music programs in public schools. Nick Morgan notes that trust enables an artist to establish credibility in which a case study asked audiences what they looked for in a speaker or in this analysis a rapper and poet. Morgan writes that "What came up at the top of the list was trust and credibility. Both trust and credibility have a verbal (content)... component." Morgan adds that "credibility is established by showing audiences that you understand their problems." Nas's reputation as a street artist attests to his comprehension of "their problems" in which he not only proves his knowledge, but his "hero" persona attempts to offer solutions. Morgan states, "Trust in content comes from taking your audience on a journey that changes their view of the world in some meaningful way."

The Hero Persona Summarized

The hero persona represents not for only the people but Nas himself as he rhymes "must it go on, we must stop the killin" ("Rule") while the "we" includes himself in the community. Although he is the hero, he plays the victimizer and victim in some situations. This technique allows for him to establish credibility and honesty in admitting that he is affected as well in that it creates a "high level of honesty through narrative self-disclosure" (Dyson 158). Although self reflection is imperative in "keepin' it real," a street artist may also speak about other situations that may not afflict him personally but the community or a certain group. For instance, Nas

speaks out against gun violence in the 1996 song “I Gave You Power.” Still rhyming in the voice of “I,” he uses personification as a metaphoric reference of being the gun. Although he has never been the victim of a shooting, it is an issue that plagues many communities. By doing so, he establishes his street credibility while indirectly playing the role of the hero. As his hero persona uses stylized rhyming, he continues to explore the “vision of a new and more just way of life” (Allen 160) for the hip-hop community.

CHAPTER SIX

The Future of Hip-hop

The debate of commercial versus “keepin’ it real” emphasizes an ongoing issue in the hip-hop community. Hip-hop scholars like Michael Dyson have examined how the issue affects the genre and the importance of an artists’ classification as being commercial or non-commercial. In examining Nas, we have refuted the notion that all hip-hop is “stripped of politics, history, and racial conscience,” and that “hip hop is little more than sonic pathology and all it does is blast away the achievements of the civil rights struggle” (Dyson). I agree with Dyson as he explains “hip hop music is important precisely because it sheds light on contemporary politics, history, and race. At its best, hip hop gives voice to marginal black youth we are not used to hearing from on such topics” (Dyson). We have examined this in detail in this thesis.

As the article “Rappers Exposed Livin’ a False Reality” notes, “It’s a thin line between ‘real’ and ‘entertainment’.” An artist utilizes personas in diverse ways. Some like Rick Ross use it to portray a fake persona that is dissimilar to his actual reality. Many artists portray the stereotypical rap personas in which they take on the hardcore gangster rapper. For Nas, ethos as street credibility is established and executed through hip-hop lyrics which can bridge many gaps. John McWhorter notes that many believe “hip-hop can be used as a bridge linking the seemingly vast span between the streets and the world of academics.” Therefore, hip-hop can link academia to the streets creating a variety of diverse study. Although hip-hop is imperative to Black culture, “It is precisely the power of the word whether in music or in speeches in today’s black society

that authentically speaks of an African past” (Smith 297). However, as Nas illustrates in his hero persona, hip-hop reaches out to the masses who have been oppressed by wars or social economic issues.

Indeed, hip-hop has played a major role in society as a whole as

the hip hop community has become a dominant African American institution.

Where young black Americans once turned primarily to the church — and to the civil rights leaders that the church produced — to articulate their hopes, frustrations, and daily tribulations, it is fast becoming men like Jay-Z and Nas, [...] who best vocalize the struggle of growing up black and poor in this country.

(Dyson)

This quote illustrates the impact that hip-hop has and will continue to have on society. As noted in the quote, Nas is viewed as a man to look up to and one to “vocalize the struggle.” Nas’s lyrics rebel against the critics’ claim that hip-hop exudes an “irreverence toward African-American civil rights leadership” proving to increase the attentiveness of social injustices (Dyson). Nas says in his interview “when I see things that are unjust, I react.” So not only does the artist portray a hero in his lyrics, he upholds the persona in reality while consistently elucidating on social and political awareness. As Nas notes in the popular song “I Can”:

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

As demonstrated in these lyrics, Nas offers true authenticity as a street artist by talking on the issues that plague his community. This fact is contrary to the stereotypical belief that hip-hop and rappers “retards black success” (McWhorter). This belief stems from the inability to detect conscious rap from the popularized non-conscious and the dispassionate corporate rap with its negative content (derogatory language etc.). Instead, we must realize that “in hip-hop after-school programs, voter registration groups, feminist gatherings and public forums, the future of hip-hop is under discussion” (Chang and Zirin). Hip-hop has made many strides in the music industry with artists such as Nas embodying the true art of hip-hop. There are rappers who are just rappers but there are those like Nas that are authentic lyricists. If the popularization of commercialized rappers who are non-lyricists continues to increase, the sociopolitical genealogy of hip-hop will cease. Therefore, I recommend that we: 1) Promote more conscious rappers versus commercial rappers to provide a variety of hip-hop in mainstream media. 2) Implement more scholarly educational courses that identify and analyze conscious rap lyrics to increase understanding of the historical and social complexities of hip-hop culture. 3) Conduct focused studies based on the psychological effects of commercial versus non-commercial rap instead of focusing primarily on commercialized rap. Until then, the longevity of hip-hop is depended on those artists, like new comer Kam Moyer who is referenced as “one of the last of a dying breed in real hip-hop” (Weintraub), and who utilizes his or her music for meaningful purposes while rejecting the conformity that denies the genre of its value, authenticity, and true heroes.

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Timeline of Important Dates in Hip-hop

1962- James Brown's drumming beats would later inspire the break beat of hip-hop.

1968-The Last Poets form a group of artists to create a mixture of poetry and beats, known as spoken word poetry, heavily influencing the rappers of today

1973- DJ Kool Herc, one of the Godfathers of hip-hop introduced a new way of "scratching" records creating a new sound that is known as the fundamentals of hip-hop

1979-"Rapper's Delight" is released by the Sugarhill Gang becoming one of the first Top 40 rap singles

1982- Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five release one of the first "conscious" rap records "The Message"

1983- Run DMC, also known as the Godfathers of Hip-hop, release their first single "It's Like that/Sucker MCs"

1984- Def Jam became one of the first major hip-hop record labels

1994- Nas's *Illmatic* debuts and is praised as an album reinstating hip-hop's roots

1996- Rap star Tupac is murdered, climaxing a major hip-hop feud between the East and West coast rappers

2002-Nas's song "I Can" becomes the theme song to VH1's Save the Music Foundation

2004-Run DMC are the first acts honored at the VH1 Hip-hop Honors

2008-Nas Releases *Untitled* and sparks political debates and controversy over the original title *Nigger*

2010- *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic* becomes one of the first anthologies analyzing a hip-hop record