SHOW AND PROVE: THE CINEMATIC AESTHETICS

OF HIP-HOP

By

DAVID SHANE GILLEY

Bachelor of Arts in English
University of Oklahoma
Norman, OK
1997

Master of Arts in English
University of Central Oklahoma
Edmond, OK
2001

Master of Library and Information Science
University of Oklahoma
Norman, OK
2018

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Dissertation Approved:

Stacy Takacs

Dissertation Adviser

Graig Uhlin

Jeff Menne

John Kinder

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Abstract:

One of the most important and far-reaching artistic movements of the 20th century, hip-hop transformed many areas of popular culture, from cartoons to fashion, visual arts to music composition. Its influence upon film and filmmakers is undeniable, and several generations of artists have created film under its banner. The film is not always easily identifiable or categorized. A review of the academic discussions about films rooted in hip-hop culture quickly reveals that no uniform definition exists for hip-hop cinema. Names scholars offer for these films include "Black" (Cripps), "Black City Cinema" (Massood), "Blaxploitation" (Koven), "Hip-hop/rap-sploitation" (Sachs), "Cinema of Nihilism" (Boyd), "Black Action Film" (Reid), and the "Ghetto Action Picture" (Watkins). Despite the various scholarly studies of films specifically influenced by hip-hop, no study of conventions that unify them exists. My dissertation identifies common aesthetic traits among a group of films over a period of approximately 30 years. My goal in doing this work is to define hip-hop cinema as a film cycle that uniquely approaches social and cultural politics. Secondly, I hope my research contributes a new understanding and unique perspective in regard to the cinematic and visual importance of the young discipline called "Hip-Hop Studies." I want to unify a group of films that share a common history, something scholars have yet to do. In my dissertation I locate several aesthetic conventions found within hip-hop film; the most important of these being the sample and cultural syncretism. As a unique addition to film studies and hip-hop scholarship, I examine ways in which cultural cross-over and sampling techniques influence hip-hop cinema's artistic choices; hip-hop culture and its place in mainstream society; and its historical relevance. Additionally, this study works to understand how these elements work throughout the hip-hop film cycle to discuss a variety of popular ideological stances. By identifying conventions used in hip-hop films I hope to begin a discussion about hip-hop aesthetics and offer ideas that foster continued discussion of the genre.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE MESSAGE: HIP-HOP'S HISTORY, ITS CINEMA, AND
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Hip-Hop, Its Ascendency, and its Cinema

In their genre-defining song "The Message" Grandmaster Flash and the Furious
Five's rapper Melle Mel states "I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise/Got no
money to move out, I guess I got no choice." In one rhyming couplet a rap group
captured the feeling of hopelessness many residents of New York City felt in the 1970s
and early 80s. The city was bankrupt, the country was experiencing inflation and gasoline
shortages, and crime was at an all-time high. In the Bronx, blocks of abandoned
buildings, many of them burned by landlords for insurance money, created an urban
dystopia punctuated by poverty and violence. It was from this desperate place that hip-
hop, the subculture that grew into the one of the world's most popular artistic
expressions, was born. Hip-hop sprang forth from the Bronx to influence dance, visual
and graphic arts, fashion, sports, language, music, and technology. There is very little in
contemporary culture that hip-hop has not in some way transformed in its own image.

If Bronx residents could not physically "get out," as The Message yearns for, a
few enterprising young artists found ways to get out spiritually and artistically—

through the burgeoning art form. Hip-hop always had visions beyond its own neighborhood; it is about movement and expression, making connections and performing, showing and proving one's skill. Starting with DJs spinning records at block parties and skating parties, it built momentum and potential, adding rappers to rhyme over the repeated breaks the DJ isolated. B-boys or breakers began following select DJs from party to party, waiting for them to play longer breaks (hence their name) to showcase their acrobatic dancing. Graffiti, however, was the first element of this new culture to travel beyond the inner-city. In fact, one of the main drives of artists was to go "all city"—to have their art on trains that travel through every borough in NYC. It is telling that hip-hop's graffiti writers' preferred medium was not the brick wall, as it was for generations before it, but the subway trains that connected people from the five boroughs, that moved freely throughout the city, and exposed their art to millions of residents every day. It allowed a piece of the writer to travel beyond their confines and have a voice larger than the one they thought possible.

These traveling canvases caught the eyes of both the city fathers, who disapproved of the expression, and Manhattan art aficionados and scene makers who saw it as a fresh new expression. Soon after, the localized Bronx phenomenon moved into the other boroughs, and eventually into Manhattan galleries and exclusive night clubs. People affiliated with the artistic movement began recording its progress, the earliest films being Charlie Ahearn's *Wild Style* (1982), and Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant's *Style* Wars (1983). In what can be described as a cultural landslide, hip-hop's influence rapidly exploded into the mainstream. A multitude of new, cheaply made films looking to cash in on the new youth fad's success inundated America's theaters. Swiss fashion watch maker, Swatch, commissioned graffiti

artist Keith Haring to design a new line of products[1], the New York City Breakers performed

at President Reagan's second inauguration[2], Afrika Bambaataa became friendly with and

inspired punk impresario Malcolm McLaren to produce hip-hop influenced dance tunes[3], and

Run DMC became the first rap group to appear on American Bandstand[4]. Hip-hop rapidly

became mainstream.

Hip-hop matured, and with the maturation came an evolution. As the fad wore off,

kids traded in the parachute pants favored by b-boys for the now ubiquitous street-influenced

baggy jeans. Hip-hop became more integrated into people's day-to-day life via platinum

selling artists' albums and music videos. However, the tone of the artistic movement began

reflecting its acceptance into the marketplace and MTV: background dancers changed from

b-boy acrobatics to scantily clad women or men scowling behind a rapper; graffiti was used

for logos to signify "hip-hop;" and DJs played a backup role to the rapper, which gave a face

and voice to an art movement previously made up of crews. Hip-hop transitioned from an

underground subculture or youthful fad to a lifestyle, which also brought with it endorsement

deals for rappers and clothing marketed to hip-hop youth. As it changed, its influence

became more deeply imbedded in popular culture, and film reflected this change from a

focus on practitioners of specific hip-hop elements to characters who may not practice any art

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[1] Alice Pfeiffer, "Contemporary Design and the Pop Swatch," *New York Times* March 23, 2011.

[2] Emmett G. Price, *Hip-Hop Culture* New York: ABC-CLIO, 2006, 173.

[3] Bambaataa later called McLaren a "culture vulture." Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* New York: Picador, 2005, 164-5.

[4] On August 24, 1985. "Rap Legends Kurtis Blow, DMC Talk the Passing of 'American Bandstand' Host and Icon Dick Clark, Allhiphop.com, April 18, 2012.

but live it as a lifestyle. Hip-hop film is not just a record of a subculture; it is a record of the changing landscape of commerce, art, fashion, race, and myriad other signifiers of culture.

Project Summary

A review of the academic discussions about films rooted in hip-hop culture quickly reveals that no uniform definition exists for hip-hop cinema. Names offered by scholars for these films include "Black" (Cripps), "Black City Cinema" (Massood), "Blaxploitation" (Koven), "Hip-hop/rap-sploitation" (Sachs), "Cinema of Nihilism" (Boyd), "Black Action Film" (Reid), and the "Ghetto Action Picture" (Watkins). Despite the various scholarly studies of individual films influenced by hip-hop, no study of their conventions *as a group,* or their aesthetic and ideological evolution over time exists. My dissertation identifies a common group of films over a period of approximately 30 years that comprise what I call the hip-hop film cycle. I investigate how films change throughout these decades and react to contemporary influences through visual media, primarily film.

Based primarily upon Amanda Ann Klein's differentiation between genre and cycle, I call these film groupings hip-hop film cycles rather than a unified genre. Klein notes that both film genres and film cycles may consist of association "through shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes," but genres become defined through "the repetition of key images and themes" while film cycles "are primarily defined by how they are used" (4). inserted

While film genre continues to repeat images and become consistent and set over an extended period of time, the film cycle has a limited shelf life and soon moves on to new characteristics. The cycle's concerns are twofold: profitability and what Klein calls "public discourse." Obviously, profitability is a film's ability to be financially successful. The cycle begins with a successful "originary film" that acts as the blueprint upon which the other films borrow. Each film after borrows elements from this originary film, such as music, character types, and plot devices. The films that make up a cycle also rely upon "public discourse" about the films, which includes reviews, interviews, and studio generated materials such as press kits and posters (Klein 4). It is this public discourse that often acts as an echo chamber that creates and perpetuates the cycle. If an originary film receives media discussion, critical praise, or large audiences, it "convinces other filmmakers to make films that replicate the successful elements of that film, thus forming a cycle" (Klein 4). These cycles are "financially viable for only five to ten years" before the films must be "updated or altered" in order to stay relevant and profitable (Klein 4-5). What we will see throughout this dissertation is that hip-hop reinvents itself every 5-10 years, and films reflecting this change follow. Early films of the cycle prominently feature break dancing and graffiti, yet after only a few short years films associated with hip-hop feature gangsters as antiheros and more dramatic plots. Each reinvention of the cycle mirrors concerns found in the hip-hop culture of the time; each "provides small, detailed snapshots of that culture at a single moment in time" and has "an intimate relationship with the culture that produces them" (Klein 19).

My goal in doing this work is to locate hip-hop cinema as a series of recurring cycles that uniquely approaches social and cultural politics. Secondly, I hope my research contributes a new understanding of the cinematic and visual importance of the young

discipline called "Hip-Hop Studies." I want to group hip-hop themed films into a series of cycles sharing a common history, something scholars have yet to do. By studying the conventions of the films and cinematic depictions of hip-hop I hope to begin a discussion about hip-hop aesthetics and the expression of these aesthetics in film and visual media. I also want to offer ideas that foster continued discussion of hip-hop film cycles.

In this introduction I present a brief overview of texts that investigate topics related to my dissertation. This includes the debates about the definitions of what constitutes black cinema and the evolution from historical to theoretical scholarship. Most black cinema scholars do not address the theme of hip-hop; some of their books were published before hip-hop's origins, and others prefer to focus upon other characteristics of black cinema. A few specifically focus on hip-hop, and I address these works due to their influence upon the scholarship of film, the ideas they raise, and the gaps they leave.

My introduction also addresses critical analysis of technology in relation to the sample. While many studies focus on the historical and contemporary legal ramifications of the hip-hop sample, I mostly avoid engaging in this issue[5]. These studies are relevant to a more in-depth study of the sample specifically. My interest within the dissertation lies in the application of the aesthetics, techniques, and characteristics of the sample and their application to the cinematic representation of hip-hop. Therefore, I limit my discussion to texts that discuss the sample's cultural origins, historical development, and application outside music.

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[5] See Porcello and Wang as example of legal discussions.

African American Cinema, Black Film Theory, and Hip-Hop Studies

The term "black" or "African American" film like other cultural phenomena such as "black" music, "black" history or "black" literature is something of a dichotomy. This is because all of these are simultaneously important to African American culture, and to the larger American culture, but for different reasons. Often, the influence of black culture on American popular culture is maligned and/or ignored. The dual-existence of these works—as both influential and denigrated—reflects DuBois' concept of "double consciousness" in which the identity of the African American becomes fragmented because it must experience the self through cues rampant in the white racist American society. Along these same lines, black culture has been demeaned, stereotyped, and used by the larger white racist culture for its own entertainment, at African American culture's expense.

The earliest nickelodeon releases by the Edison Company presented films depicting African Americans, a historic event to be sure. These depictions, however, were mostly insulting stereotypes produced for white audiences. Shorts such as Edison's *The Pickaninnies Doing a Dance* (1894) featured the "the dancing fool caricature" and *Drawing the Color Line* (1909) featured the "humorous" results of a drunken white man unknowingly having his face blackened (Leab 13, 17). When films did offer positive images of blacks, a backlash stifled the continued production of these films. Many of these ways of maintaining the status quo went to great lengths. For decades boxing was the most popular sport in the world. Movie-goers thrilled at the new cinema technology that allowed them to see prize fights they had only previously been able to listen to on the radio. However, when Jack Johnson defeated

Jim Jeffries for the boxing heavyweight title in 1910, Congress passed a law banning any public showing of "any film or other pictorial representation of any prize fight" (Leab 18). Even greater changes were coming soon after to the cinema, and with it greater dissemination of harmful stereotypes.

D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) negatively changed cinema, its depiction of African Americans, and American culture for half a century. Simultaneously, Griffith's film marked a turning point in cinematic history, as *Birth of a Nation* extended what had previously been a thematically simple, short entertainment to an hours long, operatic and complex art, using a large number of actors and inventive use of editing and tracking shots throughout the over 3-hour film (Thompson and Bordwell 73-75). In addition to charging patrons up to $2.00 for a ticket, Griffith promoted the film with a new kind of media saturation in which advertisements promoted the film based upon the number of cast members, size of musical accompaniment, and exorbitant production cost (Lening 118-19). It became an international success and introduced techniques such as location shooting, long-form narrative, creative editing, music specifically written for the film, and a cast much larger than any other ever seen by audiences (Bogle 10, Leab 25-34). It also exhibited cinema's power to influence the beliefs of its viewers. Based on Thomas Dixon's novel and play *The Clansman* (1905), Griffith fixed racist stereotypes in film for years. As Donald Bogle notes, after *Birth of a Nation,* Griffith's artistry was such that the depiction of the African American as the "Brutal Black Buck," villain, and threat to white America, became commonplace. When they were not being demonized, "blacks were cast almost exclusively in comic roles" (16). Furthermore, Bogle asserts that associating sex and black males was avoided due to white America's fear of black sexuality and the racist connection to rape

placed on it. Bogle notes it was not until Melvin Van Peebles' independent *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* (1971) that black male sexuality was depicted again. Even today, the *Birth of a Nation* continues to be a topic of ambivalence for film critics and historians, as the title to an article in the *New Yorker* attests: "The Worst Thing about *Birth of a Nation* is How Good it is" (Brody).

As Bogle's work attests, film scholars of the 1970s and 80s began to open new avenues of thought about Griffith's influence and historically negative depictions of African Americans by Hollywood (others include Daniel J. Leab, Thomas Cripps, and James Snead). Much of their published studies about black film focused upon the historically negative depiction of blacks in cinema. Some of their work actively called for a rethinking of some of film history's myths, including the cult around D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation.* These scholars publicized texts written at the time of *Birth of a Nation's* release that dealt with the negative reception from Griffith's contemporaries. While the most remembered quote about *Birth of a Nation* is President Woodrow Wilson's comparing it to "history written in lightning," many white and black contemporaries criticized the film. Thomas Cripps notes that the film was the first time for the NAACP to stage a major protest, which it won. The film also spurred black filmmakers to present positive black images (D'ooge). The mayor of Chicago declared the film would not be exhibited in the city; the film was banned in Ohio; many citizens in major cities protested its exhibition ("Topics"). Donald Bogle notes that one contemporary review of *Birth* described its main theme as "hit the nixxxr" (26). These unearthed reviews brought levity and a different historical accounting of the film's importance, one that de-emphasized its artistic advances and promoted greater awareness of

how it promoted vicious stereotypes and served as a catalyst for the rise in membership of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.

In addition to the study of mainstream cinema's historically poor treatment of its black subjects, these scholars also rescued a rich history of early black films and filmmakers, who worked outside the Hollywood system and made films specifically for black audiences. They revived interest in pioneering black filmmakers such as Oscar Micheaux and discussed ways he and other pioneering black filmmakers worked to counter vicious stereotypes found in Hollywood films. In addition to discussions of race and representation by white Hollywood, and alternative black cinema, these theorists also examined roles inhabited by black actors in mainstream films, many of whom succeeded in humanizing roles for African American actors, in the face of often dehumanizing conditions in the film industry, such as Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters, and Sidney Poitier.

African American cinema scholars also utilized a variety of other critical lenses through which to examine black films, filmmakers and performers, including psychoanalytic theory, gender, genre, and post-colonial issues. Snead (1994) applied Eco's (1976, 1984) theory of semiotic codes to Hollywood's black film images, leading him to focus on issues of power, domination, and subordination, as played out overtly and subtly on the screen. Another type of research focusing upon black popular film is its relation to genre. This approach focuses on the common messages or characteristics within a particular film category. Reid (1993) distinguished between black commercial and independent film and then went a step further, dividing black independent film into comedy, family drama, and action genres, applied a Marxist critique, and argued that a film's means of production was a key arbiter in its success at portraying realistic and nuanced black characters. This argument

is limiting, however, as a portion of the films featured in the following chapters as authentically hip-hop films are concerned with the state of black America, made by black filmmakers, and funded and/or distributed by major studios.

One of the most influential topics of film theory in the latter half of the 20th century looks at spectatorship using ideas borrowed from French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Jane Gaines in her essay "White Privilege and Looking Relations" discusses ways in which psychoanalytic theory fails black film analysis, and complicates traditional, dominant (white) feminist theory through the lens of black feminist and lesbian understanding of hegemony. While the notion of spectatorship in relation to gender and sexuality was widely written about, as Manthia Diawara notes in "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," Diawara's influential essay applied it to race and its relation to a number of films. Diawara specifically draws upon the works of Metz, Mulvey, and Heath in his essay, which examines Hollywood films' historical portrayal of race and the ways audiences might identify or resist identification with the film, its message, or its characters. He posits that Hollywood cinema "situates black characters primarily for the pleasure of white spectators (male or female)" (70-1). He uses *Birth of a Nation* and several Eddie Murphy films to deconstruct the dominant reading of the films and the ways they posit the black characters as alien, evil, and forces of chaos. Furthermore, he claims that spectators are manipulated to identify with white protagonists. His solution for this problem of positioning rests on black and female filmmakers "using a mixed form of fiction and documentary" that asks spectators to "question the representation of 'reality'" (76). He notes Larry Clarke, Julie Dash, and Haile Gerima as examples of filmmakers who make this type of film explicitly resistant to Hollywood filmmaking. What Diawara failed to include in his discussion is in the gray area of low-budget cinema. He mentions blockbusters, but not films

made for a fraction of the budget of traditional Hollywood films, hip-hop films included, many that position people of color as heroes. These films focused upon the hip-hop subculture and already utilized a form of documentary fiction to represent a world of black and Latin characters. He also suggests that white spectators must take a resistant, critical stance in order to fully appreciate Blaxploitation films, and must "suspend their critical judgement and identify with the black heroes." In this way, viewers could be made more aware of Hollywood's inherent racism and the reaction against it in Blaxploitation (68). Hip-hop's borrowing/sampling from multiple cultures to create a new art illustrates the movement from homogeneous, white filmic art to an actively created space within a black/Latin art form that welcomes a world of cultures and encourages a more active viewer as participant. Combining fiction and documentary, as Chapter 2 explains, hip-hop film attracted spectators from every race and culture, inspiring people to identify with it and adopt it and make their own contributions to the culture.

As hip-hop became more popular, film theorists began taking note and started writing about its relationship specifically to film. One of the only book-length studies of black film and its relation to hip-hop, S. Craig Watkins' *Representing: Hip-Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*, investigates hip-hop cinema. Yet the thrust of the book is less about hip-hop as a cinematic phenomenon, than an illumination of the "complex relationship between black youth, the popular industrial image-making landscape, and a rapidly evolving cultural marketplace" (2). While this certainly deserves study, and many of the films Watkins examines are specimens of both hip-hop and African American film, he rarely engages the aesthetics of hip-hop as an influence upon filmmakers. In some ways Watkins talks around hip-hop but does not offer a thorough examination of how it influences the relationship between black youth, race, image-making, or popular culture. Aaron Sachs notes that the title of Watkins' book is misleading. He

points to the limited time frame within which Watkins engages hip-hop and film (1986-1993), and notes that the category of hip-hop film was already established and engaging in image-making and race (193-94). Watkins fails to engage an entire generation of filmmaking working in both documentary and narrative films that captured hip-hop culture, beginning with *Wild Style* and *Style Wars* in the early 1980s.Ultimately, Watkins seems to abandon an examination of hip-hop in his forward, opting to study only Spike Lee and "the ghetto action film cycle," which includes *Menace II Society* and *Boyz n the Hood*. When Watkins discusses hip-hop as oppositional ideology within popular culture in his second chapter, he fails to define exactly what he means by hip-hop, does not engage hip-hop's four constituent elements (rap, DJ, graffiti, breaking), and seems to use the terms hip-hop and rap interchangeably. It is not until Chapter 4 that Watkins engages with film, and thereafter focuses primarily on Spike Lee and the cycle of what Paula Massood calls "Black City Cinema." Later in his book, he does make a logical leap from gangsta rap's popularity to its expression on film but calls the release of the films that follow "swift," after a 5-year lag between the release of N.W.A.'s gangsta rap defining *Straight Outta Compton* and *Menace II Society*. Released theatrically in 1982, *Wild Style*, a film Watkins does not acknowledge, was a much "swifter" response to hip-hop's emergence, coming, as it did, on the heels of the 1980 hit "Rapper's Delight," the song that introduced middle America to hip-hop. Ultimately, Watkins book is a good study of the social factors negatively affecting the African American community in the 1980s, and their expression on film, but it is not the holistic treatment of a category of film as the book's title claims.

Paula Massood's *Black City Cinema* investigates similar films as Watkins, but the city and its meaning within black film is Massood's focus. Massood approaches hip-hop's importance to black film by noting specific films and their influence. In her chapter on Spike Lee's depiction of

the inner-city, she notes in three pages the importance of early hip-hop cinema, and that hip-hop films predate both Lee's films and films from the 1990s like *Menace II Society*, and that these films were already focusing on "urban youth culture" (122). These three pages serve as a jumping off point of sorts for my study. She cites films I include in my first chapter (*Wild Style* specifically), noting the multicultural aspect of the early hip-hop movement. She also mentions the use of actual rappers in many of the films released during this time, the location shooting, and the "blurring of soundtrack and narrative" through the juxtaposition of diegetic and nondiegetic sounds and music. Massood also describes rap as "youth discourse" and says hip-hop film "targets an audience of both urban and suburban, black and white, youth viewers" (123). Each of these elements I expand upon to a much greater detail throughout my dissertation. I discuss the documentary style of filming and casting of rappers and local residents as markers authenticity, specifically of a connection to a community. I also track the use of the sample and the way a variety of artistic expressions are borrowed to create hip-hop; most importantly, I show how filmmakers reflect this technique onscreen. Since music is such an important part of the culture, I also discuss the use of sound and music throughout the dissertation.

In sum, Massood and Watkins both begin to broach the topic of cinematic representations of hip-hop. Both discuss important films that comprise the hip-hop cycles in the 1990s, noting that the strongest examples belong to Lee's films, *Boyz n the Hood,* and *Menace II Society,* thereby creating a filmography of sorts. They also discuss many of the social issues represented in the films such as police brutality, poverty, and violence. That Massood spends only three pages discussing hip-hop culture, however, illustrates the lack of scholarship on the influence of hip-hop on film form and content. While Reid and Massood approach hip-hop cinema, they both pull

back from discussing such films as a cinematic phenomenon with a history before Lee's *Do the Right Thing*.

More recently scholars working within film studies as well as other fields have begun to work with the films as artistic expressions dealing with a broad range of ideas that change both topically and aesthetically over periods of time. Hip-hop is a constantly evolving artform, and authors who capture that sense of change and movement also inspired my dissertation. These authors discuss hip-hop as an artistic evolution that involves a multitude of cultures and influences. In addition to Massood, Tricia Rose's discussion of hip-hop's aesthetics in *Black Noise,* Melvin Donalson's *Hip-Hop in American Cinema* (2007), a short yet extremely thorough look at how movie studios made hip-hop and rappers mainstream, and Jeff Chang's historical account, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, were influential to the ideas I discuss in my dissertation concerning hip-hop's ability to traverse cultures and boundaries. These three texts serve as a philosophical guide of sorts. Chang's book contains many first-hand accounts of hip-hop, and never gives short shrift to elements other than rap. His discussions of graffiti, breaking, and DJing are given as much importance as rap. Each element of hip-hop is important to Chang, and his book demonstrates that hip-hop is a group of pieces, not simply rapping, as many so often forget. He begins his book well before hip-hop was an established art and traces the history of its cultural forms. Chang continually defers to those who were present at each time period, and such first-hand eyewitness accounts offer a great deal of authority to the story he is telling. As I explain later, his reliance on "vernacular theory" provides a model for my own study. Donalson examines a multitude of films and actors in his book, offers explication of plot and casting, and devotes chapters to rappers turned actors. His is one of the only books about hip-hop and film that offers an extensive filmography and list of films featuring rappers. However, he primarily

"charts the progression of the hip-hop movement" and lacks the depth in his discussion of the films, their messages, and aesthetics. Rose's idea about hip-hop as authentically inner-city and black echoes Diawara's discussion of Blaxploitation as an example of cinematic depiction made by African Americans, about black culture. She states that rap "is a black idiom that prioritizes black culture, and that articulates the problems of black urban life [yet] does not deny the pleasure and participation of others" (4). If anything, as we will see in the next section, it is the conversations between others and the artists that make hip-hop such a rich source of inspiration.

Authenticity, the Sample, and the Aesthetics of Hip-Hop Cinema

Films found within the various eras of the hip-hop film cycle are often different in their focus. For example, early hip-hop films, like *Wild Style*, seek to provide a pure expression of the artform and generally feature all four constitutive elements of the culture (DJing, rapping, breaking, graffiti). That film documents the rise of young graffiti writers from the Bronx as they make inroads into the Manhattan art scene. Films representing hip-hop in the early 21st century are concerned with different ideas, and often focus less on the subculture itself, but rather bear the marks of hip-hop's influence. *Afro Samurai* features a mix of science fiction and Akira Kurosawa, but bears a strong affiliation to hip-hop based on links to the Wu Tang Clan (the soundtrack created by RZA, and the kung fu/samurai influence found throughout the Wu's catalog).[6] What both demonstrate, however, is a strong emphasis on themes of authenticity,

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[6] RZA now tours with two other DJs, and scores the *36th Chamber of Shaolin* live as the film plays behind them.

practices of cross-cultural borrowing, and the use of sampling to communicate both of these tropes.

Often, hip-hop films build a sense of authenticity, of being there, by using a documentary style of filmmaking or by communicating a desire to pursue the "real." Because it is difficult to define the term "documentary" in relation to claims of truth and authenticity, this phenomenon brings into question the nature of authenticity and the mutability of the "authentic" image. Chapter one examines the tension between hip-hop's discourse of authenticity and the evanescence of the thing itself by examining two early documentaries. *Style Wars* and *Wild Style* illustrate ways in which hip-hop filmmakers invoke authenticity within their texts and utilize ideas of cultural syncretism.

The preoccupation with authenticity has been linked with hip-hop since the 1970s, and is not likely to end any time soon. Rappers have expressed it as a boast (I "keep it real") or a dis (a rival does not "keep it real"). It has also been a trope to designate others who "jeopardize the genre's realness" (Williams 3-4). Grazian points out that it can refer to a number of characteristics including "credibility, originality, sincerity" and that having it "connotes legitimacy and social power" (177). However, he explains that it is ultimately subjective and is a "socially constructed performance" that "masquerades as facts" (177-78). He also explains that a focus on the "local" can be utilized in the quest for authenticity. Whether fair or not, being from the South Bronx immediately gives a rapper more initial "authenticity" than if she was from Moore, Oklahoma. It would not be a stretch to think of the obsession with "keeping it real" in hip-hop as a meditation on the meaning of the word "authenticity"—who has it and why, how one might acquire it or lose it, and how it relates to "community." Being labeled authentic or not, builds or destroys reputations, gives some people authority in a community and leaves others on

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the outside. The loss of it can be devastating since it removes the person from his/her/their community. Because hip-hop is mutable, it makes a designation more difficult to capture. One can "fulfill one definition of authenticity while contradicting others" and the claim of authenticity may fall into a kind "kitsch or self-parody through overuse" (Williams). Ultimately, I defer to Imani Perry's definition, as it transcends trends and focuses on hip-hop as a community from which a multitude of expressions originate. The definition offered by Perry also does not rely on signifiers of authenticity, but rather looks at the care one takes in representing the community and interacting with others. Perry says that authenticity is "attempting to fairly present a sense of community, of being genuinely caring about the culture" of hip-hop (88-89). It is a commitment to the hip-hop community, and a sense of presenting a personal artistic vision within that community, celebrating "Me and We," instead of I only, and reflects the "significant realities of social inequity" (86-90). This definition allows for a broad range of "authentic" expressions within hip-hop, whether it is a documentary about graffiti writers in the Bronx or a hip-hop influenced cartoon featuring a samurai's quest, and it provides a means of distinguishing between "kitschy" or "self-parodic" performances and those deemed "legit."

The idea of cross-cultural intersection is also questioned and discussed throughout hip-hop, including in its representative films from all eras (See Kitwana's *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop)*. They investigate what Lipsitz calls "the consequences of cultural collusion and collision" (56). These collusions and collisions occurred throughout the life of hip-hop and continue today, whether in a discussion of use of language or participation in the artform. Examples of this includes the use of white heavy metal artists AC-DC and Slayer sampled for songs by Boogie Down Productions and Public Enemy; Dr. Dre's responsibility for white rapper Eminem's wildly successful career; and hip-hop graffiti on the wall separating Bethlehem and Jerusalem acting as

one of occupied Palestine's main forms of protest[7]. As I will show, films associated with hip-hop cycles all examine racial, economic, cultural, and generational concerns in relation to poor and working class black and Latin communities that either "advance emancipatory ends or reinforce existing structures of power and domination" (Lipsitz 56).

To open a discussion about how hip-hop influences image making and cinematic representation, my dissertation draws upon a multitude of theoretical stances and disciplines. When thinking about how hip-hop works, it is important to understand its most used artistic device—the sample. The sample in hip-hop consists of a DJ or producer using small parts of a song and repeating them. Often samples are mixed with other samples, creating a collage effect, whereby bits of previously established sounds are removed from their original form and used to create something new. This technique subverts traditional ways of thinking about music. Instead of thinking of music as "linear" and self-contained as in most Western Music, sampling placed a premium on "pleasure arising from a process rather than satiating a goal-oriented desire" (Williams 140). As art, hip-hop places a premium on authenticity, while simultaneously splicing bits of music from older works of art, dance, and music. Sounds associated with the sampling process, including the sound of worn vinyl and scratching, connotes an authenticity—a sense of "being there"—and affirms the DJ's familiarity with a history of music in general, and hip-hop traditions in specific (Williams 153-55). It is a distinctively inner-city, black and Latin expression, that has now given voice to a multitude of cultures, from suburban white youth in Canada to Palestinians living under oppression. As Rose notes, hip-hop has "facilitated a cross-neighborhood, cross-country (transnational)

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[7] In addition to the Church of the Nativity, one of the most popular sites in the West Bank are the many Banksy murals and the Banksy-sponsored Walled Off Hotel.

dialogue in a social environment that is highly segregated by class and race" (9). These cross-cultural interactions are vital to hip-hop, specifically in the form of the sample. The sample is the engine that has driven the art since its inception.

In *Black Noise* Tricia Rose discusses the ways hip-hop affects economics, gender, history, technology. Much of this influence happens when artists create new works using familiar, established objects in unexpected ways, taking pieces from disparate sources to create a new work. Often, things seen as cast-off or unimportant are refigured. Inner-city youth, with limited resources, are able to "translate their skills into opportunities for upward mobility," finding new ways to express themselves with what they have available to them (Lipsitz 147). Rose notes graffiti artists use comic book characters as part of their murals, and as we see in *Style Wars,* such references are juxtaposed with Pop art and slogans decrying crime in the city, which serves to speak to other artists and the city at large. The sample is also a conversation with history. For example, DJs use snippets of sampled drums from multiple songs, many of which are decades old, to create a new drum pattern. These samples create a link with the history of music. My dissertation shows how samples consistently appear throughout the history of hip-hop film cycles and argues that filmmakers tell stories using a variety of sampling techniques to address contemporary issues while simultaneously referring to the past or other arts. The noise of sampling is what makes it multivocal; it allows "hip-hop composers the ability to consume and (once again) recontextualize their own musical history" (Albert and Goldberg 125). The sample knits cultures and texts as well as history together.

Because hip-hop has always been, in some form, sample based, it is, therefore, polyvocal in nature, utilizing whatever technology is available for this purpose. This

definition is at somewhat odds with "purer" views of the sample, such as Ahmir "?uestlove"

Thompson's. In his essay "Giving up Hip-Hop's Firstborn: A Quest for the Real after the

Death of Sampling," Wayne Marshall outlines Thompson's claim that sampling is not as

important as some hip-hop aficionados might believe and that live instrumentation is as

important and as ubiquitous as the technological sample. Thompson, who is the drummer for

rap group The Roots, notes that the "sample" has not always relied on the mimetic

reproduction of the original source material. While early hip-hop classics such as Afrika

Bambaataa's "Planet Rock" (1982) and Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" (1979) have

often been cited for their use of samples of Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express" (1977) and

Chic's "Good Times" (1979), but were not sampled from records. The true origins of the

"samples" in these songs came from live musicians playing parts of the original (Marshall

874). Thus, the argument is less about reproduction of an artists' work than the technology

utilized in capturing the sample. I contend the idea of sampling is complex and covers a

number of techniques where an artist takes a selection from a complete text, whether through

live instruments or mimetic reproduction.

According to Rose the sample is less about the technology and instead a black

diasporic artistic aesthetic, and this is the source of my own definition. In *Black Noise,* Rose

explores sampling's relation to community, postmodernity, and African American aesthetics

within the chapter "Soul Sonic Forces: Technology, Orality, and Black Cultural Practices in

Rap Music." She states that "rap's volume, looped drumbeats and drum frequencies" and its

"use of repetition in rhythm and sound organization" using "looped rhythmic lines . . . (is) a

by-product of the parameters of industrial production" (63-4). She further defines elements

of the sample as centering on "the quality and nature of rhythm and sound, the lowest, 'fattest

beats' being the most significant and emotionally charged" (64-5). As to the technology of the sample, Rose makes no distinction between the sounds created by a formal computerized sampler machine or "turntables, tape machines, and sound systems" (65). She specifically explains the use of the sample or loop as an extension of patterns found in African American music, where more focus is placed upon "rhythm and polyrhythmic layering" rather than "harmony and the harmonic triad" of Western classical music (64-68).

This African American aesthetic becomes an argument against an exclusive, racist, and classist society, according to Mark Dery. He explains that "rap by definition, is political music. Fabricated from stolen snatches of prerecorded music by smash-and-grab producers who frequently thumb their noses at copyright laws . . . (c)reated by musical illiterates whose instruments are samplers, turntables, and wide-ranging record collections . . . [rap challenges] the Eurocentric definition of the word 'musician'" (408). In an interview with members of the legendary rap group Public Enemy, Dery notes that the ideological and aesthetic motivation of the sample is more than the technology with which it is created. Rapper Chuck D comments that the samples featured in rap music, whether from DJs or machines, are links to the syncopation found in the history of black music and an example of African American artistic traditions making interventions in how technology is utilized (Dery 410). Chuck D also elaborates on the importance of the cross-cultural nature of using a few bars of songs from various genre or clips of speeches. He explains that the message of the samples combined with the words, construct a message that is "not about black guy to black guy" but is rather "filled with bites (sic), bits of information from the real world, a real world that's rarely exposed. Our songs are almost like headline news" (Dery 415). On the song "Jackin' for Beats" on his platinum selling EP *Kill at Will* (1991), rapper and former member of

N.W.A. Ice Cube boasts about stealing (jackin') portions of other artists' music in order to utilize them in his own artistic endeavors. He says:

> Ice Cube will take a funky beat and reshape it/Locate a dope break
>
> and then I break it/And give it that gangsta lean/Dead in your face
>
> as I turn up the bass/I make punk suckers run and duck because/I don't try
>
> to hide cause you know I love to/ jack a fool for his beat and them I'm
>
> Audi/so when I come to your town don't crowd me . . . /So you think
>
> you're protected/Well you are till you put a funky beat on a record/
>
> Then I have to show and prove and use your groove/Cause suckers can't
>
> fade the Cube.

Quite possibly one of hip-hop's greatest contributions to the post-industrial global culture, the sample continues to bring together the past with the present, as well as different cultures' histories, musical or otherwise, into a bricolage of pre-recorded or recreated sounds. While Thompson and Marshall take a narrow view of the sample, the crux of the sample rests on a historical link with other artists' works. Other artists, such as graffiti writers, sample other artists as well, through direct reference in their works. The sample is an intention and acknowledgement, a forging of a link to others.

But how does it do this? There are various methods used to sample another source for a new work. By and large the most favored by the hip-hop community is the sample from an original recording of a composition. The art of digital sampling builds upon the DJ method, using computers and keyboards to capture seconds of sounds, not just extended drum breaks as performed by the DJ. This method creates a dense sonic landscape where the producer layers many song parts and sounds together simultaneously, often with words or phrases that

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directly related to the rapper's message. For example, Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" samples James Brown's "Funky Drummer" in its verses and during the chorus, Chuck D chants "Fight the power/fight the powers that be," a pitch shifted, yet original recording of, Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sherriff" punctuates the message of trans-African solidarity against oppression. In addition to the heteroglossic references obvious within the sample, such as using Marley's song in a song about fighting against racial and cultural injustices, the ambient sounds lend a patina of history to the song. Pops and clicks on vintage albums, while not necessary, are markers of the history of popular music, a signifier of the history of other black performers who have "fought the power," as well as an audio cue that the DJ or producer is a legitimate "crate-digger," a music aficionado who spent hours digging through boxes of old albums for one particular sound perfectly fit for the composition. Alas, this method of sampling has become prohibitively expensive as more artists, composers, and record companies began collecting royalties on mere seconds of music as if the whole song was being used[8].

The second method of sampling is interpolation where an artist uses live instruments for musical accompaniment. Dr. Dre, for example, used beats and keyboard melodies that rely heavily on the signature sound of Parliament and Funkadelic on *The Chronic* (1992) and Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle* (1993), yet rarely if ever was anything from the Parliament/Funkadelic catalog used. Dr. Dre features live footage of Parliament in the video for "Let Me Ride," with a shot of his own face transposed over Parliament/Funkadelic's front man and producer George Clinton, explicitly connecting Dre's musical copies to Clinton's

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[8] After several high-profile lawsuits, most notably lawsuits against Biz Markie and De La Soul, artists were forced to pay for even very small pieces of music recorded by other artists (Wang).

music indicating he is keeping funk in the Clinton style relevant, even if it sounds almost identical to the recordings made by Clinton in the 1970s.

Whether direct sampling of an original source or an interpolation, sampling continues to remain one of the most important aesthetic markers of hip-hop, fostering a link with the past and simultaneously creating new art. Hip-hop films also utilize sampling as an aesthetic, and it can be found throughout the cycles of films in multiple ways. The films may combine elements found in other genres, especially documentary film techniques, where a quasi-fictional film uses members of hip-hop culture to play fictionalized versions of themselves, while mixing in other members who play themselves. For example, many characters in *Wild Style* are actual graffiti writers but act under different names with slightly different backstories, yet rappers and breakers in the film play themselves. Films also utilize the sampling technique by combining many smaller elements from other media and genres to create a new cinematic world. *Afro Samurai* does this well by combining Japanese influences, like anime, Ukiyo-e painting, and Akira Kurosawa films, African American influences, like the afro hairdo and a hip-hop soundtrack, science fiction elements (robots, cyborgs), and aspects of the spaghetti western (the protagonist "Afro" often lights up a cigarillo blunt and gives his enemies icy stares through the smoke a la Clint Eastwood in his Sergio Leone films). Often, films use news footage to underscore a sense of place and the mood of the residents, such as the use of news footage of the Watts and Los Angeles riots in *Menace II Society* and *Straight Outta Compton* or the use of news footage of New York to set the scene for Baz Luhrman's *The Get Down*, a film about the birth of hip-hop. Regardless of how the sample is used, it is almost uniformly overt and an obvious aesthetic choice by the filmmaker.

As my discussion of the sample demonstrates, when approaching hip-hop, it is important to listen to the often-marginalized voices of the artists themselves. Hip-hop practitioners and aficionados are not mindless robots but thinking creatives; they can offer vital critical insights. Critical theory, while important intellectual work, tells only part of a story. Art is of the heart as much as of the head. I use critical theory from a variety of disciplines in my dissertation, but I also utilize vernacular theory, and take seriously the ways non-academics analyze and historicize hip-hop. In his insightful discussion about the uses of vernacular theory, McLaughlin notes that street-level theorizing is a method of resistance where those who experience culture apart from the mainstream use their distance to "question authorized versions" of history and society (21). He also points to African American scholars who adopted a kind of vernacular theory in their own work. Both Houston A. Baker and Henry Louis Gates use the vernacular black culture to inform their own work. Baker is especially important, as he calls rappers "vernacular theorists" and expresses admiration at how hip-hop acts as a form of "media resistance and deconstruction" (qtd in McLaughlin 21). Furthermore, the vernacular theorists of hip-hop, from the beginning have had to prove their worth as artists to others who could not or would not see the value of their creative activity. Vernacular theorists, using their own words and experiences, explain "the basic values of the practices…in terms that make sense to outsiders" (McLaughlin 23). My conclusion is that distinctions between academic and vernacular theory are more based in ways society values "authoritarian" language over the concepts expressed through it. Since this is the case, I will often defer to those practicing the art or involved in the culture of hip-hop for insight into a specific time, place, or methodology.

Chapter Summaries

The dissertation consists of four chapters that delineate a series of film cycles through a study of recurring aesthetic choices and subject matter. While scholars have examined most of these films, they have yet to examine the entire group as a series of cycles based on aesthetics, financial motivation, and artistry. As a unique addition to film studies and hip-hop scholarship, I examine ways in which cultural cross-over and sampling techniques influence hip-hop cinema's artistic choices, examine hip-hop culture and its place in mainstream society, and reflect on its historical relevance. I examine various hip-hop films chronologically and show how they relate to changes in hip-hop as it has evolved, both aesthetically and ideologically.

The first chapter begins with the earliest film and televisual examples of hip-hop. Chapter 1 examines the "documentary impulse" within hip-hop cinema, how hip-hop's first cinematic representations foregrounded the cultural and geographic origins of the artform and then took it to other geographies and cultures. Films in this cycle trace the origins of hip-hop, chronicling its movement between cultures, specifically from the South Bronx to the avant-garde and underground punk cultures in Manhattan, and finally to popular American culture. They also work to preserve the culture's history and its claims to authenticity. Many scholars have noted that hip-hop's concern with authenticity is its guiding ethos (Ogbar 38-9, Chang 138, Perry 76-90, et al). Found within the ethos of documentary film and photography is a sense of revelation of an existing, unvarnished truth. They capture moments of a seemingly authentic truth. Documentary film carries with it the aura of truth, and authentic representation—the documentary impulse to establish a "congruence" between the images on film and lived reality (Nichols 168—70) The documentary impulse reflects hip-hop's earliest

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chronicles by Henry Chalfant. Chalfant first premiered his documentary photographs of subway train graffiti in a 1980 gallery show in New York and later in a 1981 show in Canton, OH. Chalfant compiled these and other photographs into the photography book co-authored with Martha Cooper called *Subway Art*. Shortly after, he witnessed breakdancing and asked a graffiti artist about it; the artist introduced him to two legendary breakers the day after (Delerme). Filmmaker Tony Silver had seen Chalfant's photography and was intrigued by the new culture (Delerme). After introductions were made, Chalfant teamed up with Tony Silver and began capturing the burgeoning hip-hop community for film. Filming stopped in 1981 due to funding shortages, however, the filmmakers were undeterred and eventually continued filming what eventually became the documentary *Style Wars* (1983). By 1989 graffiti as captured in the film was over and moved to other media such as canvas and wall murals (Delerme). To create a sense of authenticity Chalfant and Silver used members of the local hip-hop subculture to communicate a tie to the specific location and community. They see this sense of "rootedness" as the catalyst of consistent innovation and artistic motivation. Each artist wants to stand out as original, to not be seen as a "biting" another artist's style. Therefore, an understanding of the ways in which filmmakers portray authenticity and reality is important to understanding the film cycles.

The second chapter examines the rise of the sample as the primary production method for creating melody, atmosphere, and beats in hip-hop music, and the ways in which filmmakers interpolated this technique within their films. Chapter two considers how sampling enabled a form of cultural syncretism that came to define hip-hop as a larger culture. The sample expands upon cultural intersections and transcends the documentary style of early hip-hop films. This "Golden Age" of hip-hop was marked by verbally

dexterous rappers, socially conscious lyrics, and the use of the sample as a form of artistic expression. Originally, a DJ created a sample by isolating a specific musical section on two identical records and using the crossfader on a mixer to create one long loop of a musical passage. As imported technology became cheaper and more available, samplers such as the E-MU SP-1200 were utilized to create something more than repetitive beats. In the hands of producers like The Bomb Squad, Prince Paul, and The Dust Brothers, sonic collages were created by utilizing several passages of music from several different songs, often from vastly differing genres. The sample thus made interventions in the text to open a dialogue with the audience about both historical and current events. It became the cornerstone upon which hip-hop was built; through this technique, hip-hop eagerly gobbled up influences; and, with its birthplace in one the most international cities, New York City, hip-hop had a world of cultural influences from which to choose.

Like the hip-hop music produced at the time, films of the Golden Age reflected a greater sophistication and artistry. When early hip-hop films addressed historical social injustices and cultural intersections, this was often done with a heavy hand and a lack of depth and sophistication. Both *Do the Right Thing* and *Menace II Society* exemplify ways in which the hip-hop film cycle moved from discussing hip-hop as participatory art to using it as a cultural and generational signifier. The second generation of hip-hoppers were inheritors of the culture as a worldwide phenomenon, rather than an insular community of artists. The films reflect this influence upon youth culture where hip-hop acts as a generational signifier of youth popular culture, rather than an esoteric practice of artists, as is portrayed in hip-hop's earliest cinematic representations. Films from this era integrate the culture in such a way that it is almost taken for granted that characters will use the slang, dress, and music of

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hip-hop. Filmmakers also sample historical items such as news footage and media (*Menace II Society*) and "throwback" baseball jerseys (*Do the Right Thing*) to connect the African American struggle for equality with the present-day struggles. Being freed from a need to promote an artistic movement, The sample allows for the collision of the past and the present, and wrestles with generational divide, the historical ways in which systematic racism hobbled the black community, peaceful and violent ways the community reacted to that racism, and contemporary effects of racism and reactions to it.

Chapter three continues an interest in the performance of authenticity and the sample but examines hip-hop film after the form has become a significant consumer product obeying the laws of late capital. Specifically, films in this cycle examine how identity is created and transmitted in the Bling Era. Using the rhetorical theories of John Ramage and Kenneth Burke as a lens, I investigate how post-Golden Age hip-hop films and media reacted to the culture's global media saturation. Released at the tail-end of the Golden Age, *CB 4* (1994) predicts that image will replace substance, and nihilistic gangsterism will act as a substitute for artistic vision. In it, Chris Rock portrays a young man who wants to be a rapper so bad that he is willing to adopt a gangster's persona as his own, thereby putting his life in danger and ruining every stable relationship in his life. While Rock's rap group satirizes N.W.A. specifically, the message behind it points to the changing definition of authenticity in rap, and the idea that image is becoming more important than substance. I contrast this prediction with the career of 50 Cent and the various media in which he presents himself. I propose that 50 Cent crafted the image of an indestructible, hyperreal superman, and leveraged this character for maximum financial gain first and artistry second. For 50 Cent, image is the beginning and the end; every medium that features the rapper works to promote his brand

rather than an artistic message. Ultimately 50 Cent is the culmination of hip-hop's movement from artistic endeavor to pop culture phenomenon exploited to create wealth at all cost.

Finally, chapter four discusses the ways television and film address hip-hop in the 21st century. *The Boondocks* and *Afro Samurai* position animated hip-hop media as the culture's conscience in the 21st century while films like *Straight Outta Compton* and series like Netflix's *The Get Down* nostalgically look to hip-hop's past. As Chapter 3 argues, rap became a cultural and market force in the post-Golden Age era, often to the detriment of its artistry and social conscience; the other three elements of hip-hop culture (break dance, graffiti, and DJing) retreated mostly underground. The texts in this new 20th Century Nostalgia cycle remind viewers just how well hip-hop's disparate elements work together. Simultaneously, they criticize image-making in the industry and its current consumerist pathology. I begin by surveying several critics' opinions about rap's move to violence and consumerism *as* authenticity, but ultimately turn to Cornel West's discussion of nihilism and the politics of conversion as a way of explaining the return to hip-hop's principles as seen through the animated series.

In addition to being the social conscience of a new era of hip-hop, the series I examine update the original artistic ethos of hip-hop by combining music, visual arts, bodily movement, and the voice in one package. Unlike hip-hop's earliest films, each element is more integrated, taking influences from hip-hop and refining them for their own use, much like they do with sampling. They all borrow liberally from actuality, and sample elements from other cultures and artforms, to create a new, vibrant work. *The Get Down* and *Straight Outta Compton* work as vehicles of nostalgia, pointing back to a simpler time when the culture was young, before success supposedly spoiled pure artistry. The two animated series,

however, point a way to the future in which artists use hip-hop as a device to expand on the arts, and revive the artform's original message of authenticity.

As mentioned before, there are similarities between each film discussed in the following chapters. It is important to remember that each era of hip-hop produced a cycle of films unique to that time-period. While *Wild Style* functions as a primer to and document of hip-hop within a specific time and place, a film like *Menace II Society* does not concern itself with hip-hop *per se*, yet absolutely falls within the category of hip-hop film due to its use of various aesthetic choices made by the filmmaker(s) and use of hip-hop elements as a lifestyle. As noted, many scholars have had a difficult time delineating a consistent name for films like the ones I discuss in this dissertation. Just because a film features a horse does not make it a western; a film about criminality in Los Angeles is not necessarily Film Noir; and just because *Are We There Yet?* (2005) includes a rapper as its lead does not mean it is a hip-hop film. *Colors* (1988), whose theme song, "Colors" by Ice T, probably the best rap theme song of any film, is actually a police procedural[9]. However, there are certain elements found within all films in the hip-hop film cycles. Often it is a combination of elements that mark it as such. Subject matter is an important indicator, as it communicates to the viewer a specific artistic and social outlook. The films found in the hip-hop film cycle include stories of youth involved in hip-hop, usually located within the inner-city; race usually plays an important role whether overtly (as in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), or a blending of race, class, and culture (as found in *Breakin'* (1984) in which a wealthy ballerina joins forces with two black breakers). The most remembered early hip-hop films from the 1980s revolve around hip-hop culture. The *Breakin'* (1984) films feature b-boys and b-girls as their main

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[9] Ice T also showcases his talents as a rapper in *Breakin'*.

characters, and their dancing is the activity around which the films are based. *Beat Street*

(1984) and *Wild Style* feature all four elements of hip-hop as important to the culture at large

yet focus specifically on graffiti writers and their artistic pursuits. The barely fictionalized

Krush Groove (1985) relates the story of how Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin established

their rap/heavy metal label Def Jam and signed some of their biggest stars. Some later films

feature the culture as well, not as a burgeoning underground movement, but one that is more

integrated into its protagonists' lives as a cultural object and a lifestyle to be consumed rather

than produced.

Films produced in the 1990s and beyond are often less overtly about hip-hop culture

and fall within the category based upon hip-hop's undeniable influence upon them. Elements

such as a hip-hop soundtrack, the influence of hip-hop in speech and clothing continue to

mark films as members of this cycle. Starting in 1989, Spike Lee used hip-hop to

differentiate generations of residents of the neighborhood in *Do the Right Thing*. Public

Enemy's "Fight the Power" acts as a motif, and the character Radio Raheem, a DJ, acts as the

chorus, reminding the audience of the warring tensions running throughout the film and

foreshadowing the film's climax. Additionally, manner of dress works as a signifier in this

film and others of hip-hop culture throughout the film. Clothing and jewelry influenced by

hip-hop artists signify the importance of the culture upon a generation. Films such as the

Hughes Brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993) and John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991)

may never mention hip-hop or its elements specifically but bear such an undeniable influence

from hip-hop that they must be included. Clothing and dialogue reflect immersion in hip-

hop/rap culture, that goes beyond fandom and points to the embrace of an ethos of rap as a

lifestyle. By the 1990s rap was almost synonymous with hip-hop in popular culture. The DJ

was jettisoned for a producer and the backup dancers were too joyful for gangsta rap's grim lyrics. Breaking, DJing, and graffiti writing continued, but remained largely underground. Such historical transformations are marked in the film, if only as symbolic absences, and rap music punctuates many scenes. That music alternates between diegetic and non-diegetic, acting as a soundtrack to the characters' lives as well as a traditional filmic means of storytelling.

While my project is not as comprehensive a description of hip-hop films as Donalson's text on the subject, my goal is to dive deeper into the films Donalson discusses, take a few representatives and begin to unpack some of the concerns around representation and aesthetics. I believe the ideas I investigate are applicable to the film cycles as a whole and address several ideas that are found throughout the body of films. My last chapter deals primarily with televisual representations of hip-hop as part of a reaction to rap's fall from its artistic and social authority during the Golden Age; a separate text examining television and hip-hop could easily be written. This chapter examines how, through a period of a few decades, hip-hop creates itself, evolves, talks about that creation, and then evolves again as it speaks to the past and puts the present state of hip-hop in direct conversation with it.

CHAPTER II

"YOU HEARD IT ON THE RADIO, YOU SEEN IT ON THE TV SHOW": THE

DOCUMENTARY IMPULSE IN HIP-HOP CINEMA

In this chapter I examine the "documentary impulse" within hip-hop cinema and

the ways hip-hop's first cinematic representations map the cultural and geographic

origins of hip-hop. First, I investigate the difficulty defining the term "documentary" in

relation to claims of truth and authenticity. This discussion introduces the trope of

authenticity and the mutability of the authentic image. It is necessary to understand this

concept due to the documentary nature of hip-hop cinema as well as establish the

importance of authenticity within hip-hop culture. Next, I offer examples from *Style Wars*

and *Wild Style* that illustrate ways in which hip-hop filmmakers invoke a documentary-

like sense of authenticity within their texts. Finally, after establishing how filmmakers

represent the earliest examples of hip-hop, I look at its dispersal through the phenomenon

of sycretism, which takes place between cultures from the South Bronx to the avant-garde

and underground punk cultures, and finally to popular American culture. I will discuss in

greater detail the technical features and aesthetic outcomes of syncretism as sampling in

Chapter 3, but for now I want to emphasize how it acted as a cultural bridge in early hip-

hop. I begin by defining and recounting ideas about the documentary and emphasize its

importance at the beginning of my dissertation for two reasons. The first reason is

chronological. The earliest archival records of hip-hop, that record early graffiti "writers"

and the youth gang culture out of which many of hip-hop's originators emerged, are

documentary photographs and films. Henry Chalfant first premiered his photographs of subway train graffiti in a 1980 gallery show in New York and later in a 1981 show in Canton, OH. Chalfant compiled these and other photographs into the photography book co-authored with Martha Cooper called *Subway Art*. Made in cooperation with teacher Rita Fecher, Chalfant's first attempt at filmmaking was the documentary *Flyin' Cut Sleeves* (2009)[10]. The film featured interviews with youth gangs in the South Bronx only a few years before hip-hop's formal existence. One of the gangs featured in Chalfant's film, the Black Spades, was led by future hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa. Another documentary film that predates hip-hop is Gary Weiss' *80 Blocks from Tiffany's* (1979) which also documents the gang culture of the South Bronx, specifically the Savage Skulls and Savage Nomads. Chalfant aborted his film before he finished it and Weiss' film received very little attention, but both are now considered important texts in the history of hip-hop culture and New York City (Chang 53, 63).

Secondly, I engage specifically with the documentary due to its concerns over the veracity of the image. Hip-hop is a culture of rapid change; however, one aspect that never changes is its concern with authenticity as a guiding ethos (Ogbar 38-9, Chang 138, Perry 76-90, et al). This artistic and personal ideal shapes the goals and practices of hip-hop artists. Authenticity separates interlopers and appropriators of the culture from those who have a genuine investment in it. It is this idea of authenticity that acts as the catalyst of consistent innovation and artistic motivation. Therefore, an understanding of the ways

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[10] The film was filmed in 1971, but was not released until 1993. An updated version was released in 2009.

in which filmmakers portray authenticity and reality is vitally important to understanding

the genre.

Seeing and Re-Presenting Reality: Documentary Impulse and Documentary Intent

A short chapter in Jeff Chang's *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*

features the transcript of a discussion between documentarians working within hip-hop.

The filmmakers mention very little about actual aesthetics within hip-hop cinema. In

often self-serving monologues, they address issues of culture, race, and ethnicity as

popular themes within fiction films. They fail to discuss the aesthetics or techniques

filmmakers use to express these themes (Arnold, Raimist, et al 307-17). Eric Arnold

attempts to discuss the documentary impulse, and specifically mentions *Wild Style* in a

question to the panel of filmmakers, but receives no more than a few sentences in

response before the filmmakers continue their criticism of "mainstream" films and

promoting their films as more "authentic" expressions of hip-hop, without

acknowledging that such film are only a part in a larger culture.

The filmmakers' balk when asked to delineate specific aesthetic properties that

compose "authentic" hip-hop cinema. Their reluctance exemplifies the continuing

difficulty in defining an objective notion of the "authentic" within hip-hop. The

filmmakers quoted above (among many others) take the "I know it when I see it" stance

of Justice Potter Stewart, instead enumerating what authentic hip-hop is *not.*[11] My goal in

this chapter, and in some ways my dissertation as a whole, rests upon finding affirmative

ways to discuss the hip-hop ethos of "keeping it real" as a central theme throughout its

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[11] In Jacobellis v. Ohio (1964) Potter famously said pornography was difficult to define
but "I know it when I see it and the motion picture involved in this case is not that."

representative cinema. I begin by drawing upon the documentary for two reasons. One, because chronologically, the documentary film first represents hip-hop. Second, and more important, because the hip-hop film cycle continually samples some aspects of the real world and inserts it into film, whether fiction or documentary. Finally, the documentary shares a similar ethos with hip-hop in which a level of truth is usually the guiding principal behind the art being produced.

Documentary "truth" has always been, and still remains a myth. Robert Flaherty's influential documentary *Nanook of the North* (1922) claimed to capture Innuits in their natural habitat and followed them as they went about their day-to-day existence. But Flaherty's film included staging historical, disused customs, and casting and renaming members of the native population. There was no Nanook. He was played by an Inuit named Alakarialak (Crandall 39). Documentary continued to use staged events, but also later utilized post-production voiceover narration and music. The invention of the handheld camera and portable sound recorder offered a new flexibility for documentarians to intimately observe their subjects. These advances led to the direct cinema of the Maysles brothers, who focused on celebrity, popular culture, and notions of authenticity (Vogels 1-5). Their advances in filmmaking led to documentaries like the ones that introduced hip-hop to the population outside New York City. They desired to "create a nonfiction narrative" that had the immediacy of fiction, emphasized real people, and was "rooted in real-life events captured spontaneously on camera" (Vogels 47). This proximity to its subject, unrehearsed interactions, location shooting and sound, and lack of voiceover were all used in its earliest films to communicate the energy, creativity, and authentic artistry found within hip-hop

I believe the most helpful guiding idea is that the hip-hop film genre and its treatment of reality relies upon what is known as the "documentary impulse." Bill Nichols asserts that a universal theory of documentary is unlikely to ever be agreed upon.[12] Instead he insists that the genre uses a multiplicity of techniques and possesses just as many goals (x-xiv). Focusing upon the *impulse*—the desire to express reality after the fact—alleviates the problem of becoming tangled in tautological definitions. Ultimately, the most important trait that runs through early hip-hop films is just such a documentary impulse: the desire of the filmmakers to creatively transmit truths about their perspective to a larger public.

Valerie Smith notes a "strong documentary impulse" throughout contemporary black fiction filmmaking, including films I discuss in the hip-hop film cycle (57). She claims black filmmakers were influenced by the "convenient and inexpensive techniques of *cinema verité*" (57).[13] Some of these techniques include an emphasis upon the filmmaker's connection to his subject, markers of the urban environment absent from traditional Hollywood film, and references to contemporary sports, music, and news (57—61).[14] Flaherty's wife and co-filmmaker Frances says she and her spouse constructed films "of discovery and revelation" (Ellis 5). The emphasis on observation in order to reveal along with contemporary black cinema's documentary impulse both offer insight into hip-hop cinema's work in defining authenticity.

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[12] As does Renov, Barnouw, Nichols, Ellis and most other authors that examine the genre.

[13] The French version of direct cinema.

[14] I examine this development in more detail in Chapter 4.

Both literal performance, such as documentary footage of a writer painting, or an actor recreating an event serve the documentary impulse. Bill Nichols notes that Italian neorealism is an example of narrative cinema "at the service of the documentary impulse" in which directors attempt to establish a "congruence" between the images on film and lived reality (168—70). Likewise, the filmmakers of hip-hop cinema similarly focus upon capturing the essence of authentic hip-hop and its spontaneous energy. It is this impulse that compels the filmmakers to utilize as much actuality as readily available, including location shooting and the use of actual performers in its attempt to capture hip-hop's artistry at its purest.

Harlem's Dapper Dan and Japan's Techni(Que)Cs: Syncretism and Discovery in Early Hip-Hop

The visual texts I discuss in my dissertation view authenticity within hip-hop as a phenomenon of syncretism in which artists "make do" with available elements from a variety of cultures and time periods, often expressed through the sample. Since authenticity acts as a guiding principle throughout hip-hop and the films that represent it, it has become an important discursive topic. The phenomenon of syncretism refers to the borrowing from, and positive interactions between, two cultures. This contrasts with its opposite, the act of appropriation. Tony Mitchell, writing about global hip-hop, notes that the culture's "perceived" local origins within the United States have become a "syncretic confluence of musical, technological, visual, and dance forms originating from Jamaica and Latin America" (33). Hip-hop culture now operates globally and is a worldwide phenomenon. However, it addresses local concerns. It reflects local issues of "roots,

rootlessness, authenticity, and commodification," thereby transcending the "appropriation of the U.S. musical and cultural idiom" and addresses issues unique to the place artists live and create (33). Mitchell here questions the origination story of the "cultural idiom" from the Bronx, but also notes its integration into world cultures as well. Such circulation does not necessarily negatively affect hip-hop's discourse of authenticity, he suggests. Important to my discussion are the ways in which African diasporic and Latin cultures utilized globally produced technology and elements of popular music, dance, and painting from a multitude cultures and time periods.[15] Patricia Rose says that to explain rap as "Black oral traditions (that) sort of floated over time and dropped into the Bronx" misses the complexity of Black popular culture's aesthetics and the historical context of its creation (223-24). Rose's dual examination of both style and social/historical contexts are important in understanding the breadth of influences from which hip-hop draws.

Claire Light differentiates appropriation and syncretism in a way that clarifies the often-confused terms. She defines appropriation as an "exploitative power dynamic" in which the dominant white culture "raids a subordinate culture for cultural items that it then pulls out of context," without properly acknowledging the source. Appropriators may also change the cultural items to suit their own needs and then attempt to "pass [the result] off as authentic" (Light). Conversely, she defines syncretism as the point when two cultures come into contact, exchange cultural influences, and produce a new, third culture. The difference lies within positive intent and attribution to the ties of cultural origination. Henry Chalfant, an example of someone outside hip-hop who positively

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[15] In his vision for establishing a hip-hop museum in the Bronx, Afrika Bambaataa says that in addition to "artwork, clothes and turntables" he would include musical influences that "predated hip-hop; soul, country-western, rock, all that" (Hershkovits 58).

depicted it, consulted with the hip-hop artists he filmed and included rappers such as FAB 5 Freddy and Ramellzee in his photography show openings.

Syncretism does not deny influences or mitigate a culture's contributions to a particular artistic or social phenomenon; actually, quite the opposite. Syncretism acts as an alternative to the "melting pot" myth of culture in which disparate cultural groups supposedly blend equally in a given society. Charles Stewart predicts that the post-1960s rejection of assimilationist fantasies could lead to greater syncretic interactions (51). He shares the opinion Paul Gilroy holds that these interactions will "proceed from below" and happen organically. The relationships between cultures will happen in places where a variety of populations from differing cultural backgrounds interact with each other as a matter of daily living (54).

However, the second part of Stewart's prediction (physical proximity between people of different cultures) fails to account for the ubiquity of mass media and popular culture and its importance in people's lives. Kim Hastreiter, co-creator and editor of New York fashion magazine *Paper* recounts an example of this sort of popular cultural syncretism from the early 1980s, calling the crossing influences of fashion and hip-hop as "better than fashion" moments. She remembers youth from Harlem and the South Bronx "with no money but tons of style who appropriated symbols of the upper class" and used them in new ways that were modified for the hip-hop culture, creating ball caps and track suits bearing the design houses' logos 60). She cites examples such as Mercedes logo medallions and Nike sneakers covered with the Louis Vuitton logo. These consumer items, which symbolize wealth status, were (and continue to be) out of reach for most youth in the inner-city (possessing neither the capital to buy the products or access to

boutiques that sold these brands). Counterfeit clothing in styles that appealed to inner-city youth that bore the identical logos of luxury design houses soon became popular, for this reason. The style in which the counterfeits were worn by the hip-hop community appeared on runways not long after, as the high-end fashion houses appropriated these vernacular ways of wearing the (admittedly knock-off) designer logos (60-1). Chang calls hip-hop fashion "an expression of the soul, unmediated by corporate money, unauthorized by the powerful" (111). In the unauthorized production and street vendor sales of knock-off branded items, the local businessperson subverts copyright (also an important issue found within DJing) This sort of usage allowed vendors who recognized a street-level demand for items carrying the logos, such as baseball hats or medallions, to brand styles of clothing not produced by the designer. It created an entire new style of clothing, uniquely inner-city hip-hop. Gucci only began creating clothing resembling this style in the 21st century, after hip-hop became not just an underground movement, but *the* music of the youth culture worldwide.

In his book *Buying In* Rob Walker also cites the importance of syncretic relationships relating to fashion within hip-hop. He discusses the custom tailor Dapper Dan and his influence upon the hip-hop community's embrace of logos for high-end labels. Instead of the "subtlety" of the logos on the original items (such as Mercedes' simple silver star, or Gucci's two interlocking, mirror image letter "G"), the Harlem-based designer covered his creations with enormous Gucci logos that spanned the entire backs of tracksuit jackets and stitched the logos down legs of the pants (86-8). Dapper Dan outfitted a large part of the Harlem community who wanted custom-made designer clothing. The couture houses, inattentive to the desires of its potential black customers,

left a niche for Dapper Dan to fill. His clients included local pimps and hustlers, heavyweight boxing champions, and rappers. Dan also used his tailoring skills to sew custom Gucci and Vuitton seat covers for his fans who were automobile enthusiasts. The black inner-city population, most notably hip-hop artists, utilized these logos that signified wealth in new, creative ways that spoke to them, specifically using the logos on clothing by the hip-hop community.

The larger public outside New York City first saw his work on the covers of Eric B. and Rakim's albums *Paid in Full* (1987) and *Follow the Leader* (1988). In what remains the most famous examples of Dan's tailoring, the rap duo's debut album featured the rapper and DJ in matching gold and black leather Gucci jackets with their names stitched on the back. Their second album features them wearing matching black and white tracksuits. The syncretic cultural crossings of elite European design houses, and style from Harlem produced a distinctly hip-hop clothing style. It is hip-hop's adaptation and utilization of these various cultures to represent itself that underscore the importance of syncretism to the culture. Furthermore, the use of the logos mirrors the use of the sample in which a part of a larger work is isolated and used in a new context. Gucci track suits and puffy jackets bearing the MCM logo were sampled and placed into a distinctly hip-hop fashion sense. Dapper Dan was sampling, making do with bootleg couture logos, to fill a niche for the community in Harlem European designers failed to address. While critics might say that the clothing made by Dapper Dan are mere knock-offs of lesser quality, I would argue that the quality was equal or greater. The clothing took weeks to tailor to each customers' specifications. The logo was repurposed and recreated in the unique image of specific rappers, boxers, and hustlers. It was not a generic reproduction

of the original. Thus, the spirit of making do found in hip-hop translates to Dapper Dan's attention to detail, the same way a DJ takes special care to select just the right song to act as a complement to a rapper's message. Like other artists in hip-hop who sampled music, Dapper Dan fell prey to lawsuits over copyright, and went "underground" where only "rappers and hustlers knew where to find him" (Segran).

The DJ's continual push for ways to sample sound reflected ways in which hip-hop was in conversation with others outside the culture. Rose points to the cycle of mutual reliance and innovation between hip-hop DJs and digital technology. DJs use technology, the digital sampler for example, in ways that were not originally meant in order to express a "Black aesthetics," one grounded in repetition and antiphony (Rose 62). An electronics hobbyist, Grandmaster Flash utilized the first beat box by reconfiguring a used electronic drum set at his turntables, and he is credited with inventing the DJ crosssfader now ubiquitous on every mixer (Samuels). This apparatus allowed him to cue up a part of an album on one turntable while another is being played simultaneously over a speaker from another turntable. His original crossfade set-up consisted of the necessary additional switches glued to his turntable mixer (Keyes 59).

Other audio manufacturers, in order to compete with the Technics 1200 (the turntable favored by DJs) and capture a portion of the hip-hop marketplace, updated their products and continue to do so. For example, manufacturers installed target lights on the tone arm of newer turntables to allow the DJ to see grooves in records clearly in darkened clubs. Manufacturers also created more powerful motors in analog turntables in order for DJs to better cue albums. The ways in which black New York DJs and Japanese

electronics manufacturers borrowed ideas from each other is just one of many examples of syncretism in the history of hip-hop.

The particular albums popular with DJs and b-boys emphasize the syncretic nature of hip-hop as well. The songs most prized by early black DJs include the white, American Incredible Bongo Band[16], the white British band Led Zeppelin, black South African singer Miriam Makeeba, Motown, and the black artists of Stax Records backed by multi-racial bands from the American south (Kool DJ Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash qtd. in George 47-50). While many scholars connect hip-hop directly to African and African American traditions, they too often omit what its founders (now also its historians) elucidate here: that culture does not move along a simple timeline. Hip-hop embraces the detours into the under-appreciated, forgotten, or seemingly incongruous, no matter its origin. The ability to remain distinctly hip-hop and create a new work while repurposing other cultural artifacts may be the most workable definition of authenticity. Despite a limited access to resources, hip-hop made do, created lush sonic textures using often the barest of drumbeats and sounds. With an ear to recycle sounds and place them into new arenas, using simple aerosol paint and a train, combining styles of dance with gymnastics and martial arts, all of these examples use what is available to create something new and exciting, and exemplify the driving force of creativity within hip-hop's artistry.

Syncretism and Hip-Hop Cinematic Representation

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[16] Afrika Bambaataa calls the International Bongo Band's "Apache" the "national anthem" of early DJs and breakers (qtd. in George 47).

Style Wars and *Wild Style* are two of the earliest filmic records of hip-hop as a culture. From the first, filmmakers captured images of hip-hop culture and the syncretic cultural crossings that make it what it is. They also document the artists' struggles to define authenticity under these conditions. The form of both films mirrors the syncretism of hip-hop. Both films avoid generic conventions of traditional cinema, especially the tight narrative arcs popular with both narrative cinema and Direct Cinema. In his interview with Ahearn, Michael Zelenko notes that *Wild Style* was neither documentary nor narrative film but a combination that resulted in an "82-minute sonogram of the hip-hop era." Ahearn says he had more interest in producing a film that documented the performance and performers.

Before *Wild Style*, hip-hop did not formally exist. Ahearn, Fred Braithwaite (FAB 5 Freddy), and Bambaataa found similarities between the four elements that became what we know now as hip-hop. Ahearn says that *Wild Style* served as a vehicle to bring these elements of street art into a unified movement (Zelenko). Braithwaite notes an active pursuit of syncretic meetings. He says that, as he made connections with the downtown art scene, he simultaneously connected with rappers, DJs, breakers, and writers in the Bronx, with the vision to unite the four elements as well as the two cultures of downtown and the Bronx (Murphy).

FAB's vision for *Wild Style* consisted of "showing that there was a link between this music, this rapping and DJ'ing,this break dancing and this graffiti art" where none had been previously established (Jenkins). Hip-hop's ability to transcend traditional ideas around race offers a membership, FAB says, that requires a respect of its origins and elements. He specifically compares white Jazz artists Gene Krupa, who aficionados

consider an authentic practitioner of the Jazz culture, with Kenny G, the "lite jazz" saxophonist, who sells millions of albums but is derided as bland by many Jazz fans. FAB saw in hip-hop the making of a new black cultural expression within America. Many African American cultural expressions, rock n roll for example, have been appropriated by the market and sold as a white cultural product. In 1980 FAB and Lee had seen posters for Ahearn's film *The Deadly Art of Survival.* FAB sought out Ahearn at a Times Square art show and suggested that Ahearn make a movie featuring local graffiti artists FAB knew. The two of them began making more inroads into this new scene, getting to know its key artists and representatives (Gale). Their goal was parallel to my earlier definition of the documentary impulse; FAB's movement between cultures, as well as his acting and production with Ahearn, led to texts of revelation and discovery through the depiction of performance, and helped establish it as a black and Latin, inner-city arts movement first, but one that embraced white practitioners respectful of its roots.

Ad-libbed Lines and A Shotgun: Hip-Hop Cinema's Documentary Impulse

Reflecting the syncretism within the culture, hip-hop cinema utilizes a variety of filmmaking styles. Elements of the musical, and the narrative fiction film appear in both *Style Wars* and *Wild Style*. It is the documentary impulse that remains the common characteristic used by the two films, and both include generic conventions of the documentary such as the use of non-actor participants within the hip-hop community, a loose narrative that juxtaposes sequences of static camera shots with quickly-cut montages, and location shooting in an attempt to capture a congruence between image and lived reality. The aesthetics of *Wild Style*, *Style Wars,* and many other films

throughout my dissertation exhibit this image as representation of reality, or at least as close as it can be. Hip-hop as an art form focuses upon the collaborative and is reflected in the collaboration between filmmaker, actors, and community.

Hip-hop emerged from the Bronx in the early to mid-1970s. Like many other black American musical styles, it emerged from a mixture of dire economic and cultural influences. The popular feeling throughout the country was that New York City was a morass of criminality. The sentiment was succinctly emblazoned across the now famous October 30, 1975 cover of the New York Daily News: "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD." Films from the era now labeled as "Bronxploitation" played upon fears of the Bronx as a place of lawless violence and devolution[17]. These films--*The Panic in Needle Park* (1971), *Death Wish* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Warriors* (1979), continuing into the 1980s with *Escape from New York* (1982) and *1990: Bronx Warriors* (1982)--all play upon the increasing violence and urban decay of the city as entertainment and spectacle. Often the urban decay depicted featured black or Latino actors at the center of criminal activity.

Budget cuts to public school programs in music and the arts forced the more imaginative youth to utilize available resources to express themselves, to make do with what was available. This led to the utilization of what was left—turntables, their parents' record collection, and later, inexpensive keyboards and samplers. Max Roach, jazz drummer and early supporter of hip-hop, noted that the particular generation of the late

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[17] In July 2012, The Spectacle Theater presented a retrospective of lesser-known "Bronxploitation" films. The range of films in the series presented a balanced view of the borough in the 1970s and early 1980s as "an area of social, economic, cultural, and commercial exploitation, but also one of enduring spirit and creative renewal" ("Bronxploitation")

1970s and 80s did not benefit from the musical education that once was almost an educational prerequisite (Jenkins). This left more musically-inclined youth, according to Bill Adler, to "transform their parents' turntables and old records into instruments dancers turned to the streets aspiring painters reached for aerosol cans and transformed city walls and subway trains into their canvases (and) would-be performing artists chose not to sing but to rap, putting a sparse beat beneath their lyrics" (10).

Both *Wild Style* and *Style Wars* are texts of discovery that capture this emerging movement of artists and performers. In his authoritative history of hip-hop, Jeff Chang relates the genesis of *Wild Style* as a fortuitous meeting between young filmmaker Charlie Ahearn, artist and promoter Fred Braithwaite, and secretive loner graffiti artist Lee Quinones. Braithwaite was largely responsible for the production of *Wild Style* and exposing hip-hop to a broader audience. FAB saw the young graffiti scene as the culmination of the artistic movements of "Futurism, the Dadaists, the Impressionists, and the Abstract Expressionists into the Pop Artists" (Chang 148). Braithwaite, inspired by a range of styles and depth of artistic influences, made it his goal to expose and market aerosol art to the traditional art world. His vision included linking graffiti with breaking, MCing and DJing, which, according to FAB, was accomplished through *Wild Style's* depiction of a cohesive culture where there had been none before (Jenkins). The union of the four elements appears in both films. *Style Wars* features a culture in which graffiti artists and rappers interact in the same clubs. One scene features two dance crews facing off against each other, each member introducing himself with a brief rap. Before a large rap concert takes place in the film's finale, Lee revitalizes a park amphitheater with his graffiti art in order to make it a space for hip-hop music to be performed.

FAB's plans to "make moves into the art world, but still keep the integrity of what graffiti was" included finding and exposing the new form to like-minded individuals (Chang 148). Ahearn and FAB began networking with rappers, DJs and graffiti artists. Shows for painters such as Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat appeared in new wave clubs and featured music by Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash. This movement eventually culminated in FAB curating a show at the center of New York hip: Mudd Clubb. The show "Beyond Words: Graffiti-Based, -Rooted and –Inspired Work" included photos from Henry Chalfant and canvases by Lee, Zephyr, Lady Pink, and Dondi. Works by New York's punk, new wave, and avant-garde scenes were represented as well, featuring works by Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Alan Vega, and Iggy Pop (Chang 150-51). With the help of FAB, Ahearn began to immerse himself in the new culture of hip-hop and soon cast breakers, DJs, MCs, and graffiti artists for a feature film. Ahearn made his film in direct response to *Ft. Apache: The Bronx* which he said portrayed its residents as "racially stereotyped primitive dangerous characters" (Smooth). His goal was to "shock people" into seeing how "positive and creative people were in the Bronx" (Smooth). In order to retain the integrity of the art, he cast his friend FAB in the lead and included members from within the hip-hop community, their friends, and associates. Ahearn's concern with the film's verisimilitude and revelation of the culture guided him more than adherence to the traditional Hollywood narrative form.

In response to contemporary stereotypes portrayed in the media, Ahearn uses a common stereotype—criminal and violent black men mugging a white woman—to illustrate the humanity of the residents of the Bronx, without reducing its actors to one-dimensional "types." In *Wild Style's* best-known scene, three black men emerge from the

shadows and attempt to mug two protagonists, the white Virginia (Patti Astor) and Puerto Rican Ray/Zorro (Lee Quinones). Ahearn intentionally plays with the stereotype in order to create a moment of revelatory actuality in his film. He humanizes the muggers through his association with Phade, as well as his willingness to accept Zorro and Virginia and apologize. This complicates the characters within the film and offers an alternative to the "Bronxploitation" film depiction of inner-city youth. It also highlights elements such as location shooting, basing the story on real events, and the use of actual people from the neighborhood in the making of the film and Ahearn's casting decisions.

Ahearn says that the muggers he cast were "for real" and met them while filming a Cold Crush Brothers performance. He offered them a job as "stick up kids" the next night for an upcoming scene. A traditional Hollywood film utilizes casting directors, professional actors, costuming, prop managers, and defers to the director as the authority who combines these elements to create the final onscreen image. *Wild Style* and Ahearn utilized members of the neighborhood and acquaintances of cast members. This collaborative method, as well as Ahearn's willingness to cede control of his vision of a scene in favor of actuality created *Wild Style's* most memorable scene. The night of the mugging scene shoot, Ahearn offered the lead mugger what he thought was an "incredibly good-looking prop gun." The actor deemed the director's weapon a "pussy gun" (Smooth). To remedy the situation the actor walked to his car, reached under the driver's seat and produced a rusty sawed-off shotgun, preferring to use his own weapon for the scene. The scene illustrates the collaborative and syncretic (even hip-hop-ish) nature of Ahearn's mode of production.

The muggers also improvised their own lines. Without direction from Ahearn,

they delivered the most quoted lines of the film.[18] After emerging from the shadows, the

lead stick up kid engages Virginia and Zorro in brief small talk. In four quick cuts,

Virginia speaks while the camera cuts to close ups of the three muggers, each of their

faces half-covered by shadow, indicative of their role as antagonist. The camera

eventually cuts back to the angriest looking man of the three. Filmed close-up from a low

angle, the shot gives him an even more menacing appearance. In this potentially

dangerous situation for Lee and Virginia, the rhythm and call-and-response between the

muggers as they ad-lib their lines reveals a creativity that Hollywood could not script;

> Mugger #2: Look people; you heard it on the radio, you seen
>
> it on the TV show!
>
> Mugger #3: A to the K?
>
> Lead Mugger: A to the mother-fuckin Z.

Upon delivering this line the mugger closest to Virginia who does most of the speaking,

pulls his rusty sawed-off shotgun from his coat.

Wild Style, however, resolves its crisis situation not with the traditional

introduction of white male heroism to deliver the helpless female from the minority

villains. Instead, Ahearn resolves the tension by humanizing the stick-up kids via Phade's

(FAB 5 Freddy) entrance into the scene. After the shotgun appears, Phade emerges from

a club in the background. Phade shouts "Hey! Hey! What's up?" and drops his arms and

shoulders in a gesture of disappointment. Phade tells the group that Virginia and Zorro

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[18] Cypress Hill's DJ Muggs sampled the lines for the rap group's popular song "A to the
K" (1993).

are "cool." At this moment, we observe a "crossroads" moment of cultural syncretism. *Wild Style* emphasizes conversation and human contact rather than conflict. This is one example of hip-hop as a community offering people alternatives to violent conflict. The stick-up scene and its resolution is an example of Gilroy's "forward-looking" reality based upon shared humanity (175-76). The man with the shotgun apologizes profusely, and Phade tells him it is okay and "know(s) how it goes." How it goes for Phade and the muggers is that the urban location is one of creativity, but also one of poverty and desperation, designed to prevent escape and promote survival to the detriment of others.

In his essay about the more recent hip-hop documentary *Dave Chappelle's Block Party* (2005), C. Riley Snorton notes the comedian's "compelling storytelling" rests upon his ability to upset the viewer's expectations (112). In the stick-up scene Ahearn shocks his viewers who, by the time of the film's release, were exposed to news media and cinema depicting the South Bronx as the most dangerous place in America. By linking the muggers to the likable and friendly Phade, Ahearn challenges his audience to see beyond the black male stereotypes used in the earliest silent films and perpetuated by mainstream Hollywood films.

Another scene in *Wild Style* foregrounds the documentary impulse as a practice that reflects reality. The scene in which Phade, Zorro, and Virginia travel to the art show contains a multitude of references to actuality, and mirrors the experiences of Lee, FAB, and Patti Astor. Lee and FAB, before their introduction to Ahearn, began making connections with the Manhattan art world and crossing cultural and racial boundaries to promote their new art form. Astor, as the owner of the FUN Gallery, was one of the first in that world to crusade for the new hip-hop movement.

The idea of remaining invested in and true to hip-hop's origins in the South Bronx while moving between cultures becomes a marker of authenticity in both films. The bridge that takes the principle characters from the Bronx into Manhattan acts as a symbolic structure that indicates the importance of mobility into new neighborhoods and boroughs. It serves as a symbol of the mobility between cultural, racial, and economic boundaries, first for FAB and Virginia (unseen but implied in *Wild Style)* and later for Lee and those after him who later achieve cultural and financial capital via their success through hip-hop. It also acts as an anchor for the characters to the place from which their work originates. The inclusion of the long shot of the bridge and their car crossing it effectively acts as a visual reminder of syncretism's ability to connect various cultures without either one seen as inferior. In a discussion about Blaxploitation's similarities with what she dubs "Black City Cinema," Masood notes that both genres include motifs suggesting the importance of mobility. Both genres reflect the African diasporic artistic trope of movement as a means of liberation, "first with the freedom to move around the city, and with hood films, the freedom to leave the city's borders" upon achieving urban mobility (Massood 219). FAB and Ahearn underscore hip-hop's ability to cross these boundaries as well as the boundaries already crossed in its creation. However, there is a rootedness that allows them to stay true to their community even as they cross these boundaries.

While *Style Wars* does not feature artists traveling onscreen, we see the results of this movement as well symbolic movement through the act of painting. The documentary features an art show similar to the one in *Wild Style* and the reactions of the young painters involved in the event. The artists see the subway car as a local symbol for

mobility. The goal for the painters is going "all city," the act of painting trains that travel to all of New York's boroughs. A scene with artist SKEME at home with his mother underscores the generational divide between baby boomers and the hip-hop generation. The teenaged SKEME attempts to explain the risks he takes for the goal of going all city. They are in the kitchen, where many families congregate for important discussions in the home. His mother laughs, "to keep from crying," and asks why he want to go all-city? She answers her own question—for recognition and prestige. Her answer is not necessarily the answer he tries to explain to her, however. He interjects that he "bombs" trains for his own personal satisfaction and that, when he encounters his graffiti name, he feels a part of the environment that often excludes or marginalizes him. It is a mark that affirms he has made some kind of impression on the city; it gives him ownership in a city where he has little influence otherwise.

SKEME describes how he constructs his agency through art. Henry Louis Gates notes that black youth live within a "simultaneous, but negated, parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe [which] exists within the larger white discursive universe" (Gates 49). The film's depictions of SKEME and other graffiti writers as performers that, through the subway painting, repurposes the trains to represent who he is as an individual. This representation also acts as a protest of lack of agency and economic, geographic, and cultural mobility

The scene in *Wild Style* that features the movement over the bridge features a reference to contemporary cultural and musical history and carries with it connotations of the characters' existence outside the quasi-fictional film. The inclusion of the contemporary references and references to actuality outside the film's diegesis reinforces

the documentary impulse within the film. Blondie's "Rapture"—one of the first pop songs to use rap—plays in the car that takes the film's protagonists from the Bronx to Manhattan.[19] The song questions the categorization between fictional narrative and documentary. MTV first featured rapping in a video with "Rapture," and the song served as many viewers' introduction to hip-hop culture. In it, singer Deborah Harry mentions FAB 5 Freddy by name as the person who introduced her to hip-hop. Phade reenacts in *Style Wars* what Harry describes on the car stereo in the film—FAB promoting hip-hop to like-minded artists and musicians who share a similar artistic ethos based around personal and collective expression. The song also refers to painting trains, the primary focus of *Style Wars* and *Wild Style.* The video for the song features FAB, Grandmaster Flash, and graffiti writer turned art world celebrity, Jean-Michel Basquiat. Basquiat, in addition to being a writer known as Samo also promoted hip-hop to new audiences and featured rappers such as Spoonie Gee at his gallery openings (Jay-Z 92). He also lent his artistic talent to the cover of Rammellzee's "Beat Bop" single in 1983 and released the album on his Tartown Inc. imprint (Nosnitsky).

The song continues into the next scene, literally traversing geographic boundaries from a Bronx hip-hop club to the car, to the upper class cocktail party, an indicator to the importance of performance to the film. The song continues to play from this scene to the next. The technique of the music bridge in the soundtrack underscores the physical bridge the car crosses with the hip-hoppers. Ahearn uses the music to underscore hip-hop's geographical origination and its syncretic transmission and excitation of new fans who

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[19] She uses rap but the song itself is not "hip-hop", FAB clarifies in his *JazzTimes* interview.

cooperate with artists from the Bronx to make it a part of the Manhattan art and music scene.

The diegetic music ends after the three reach their destination. The silencing of the music introduces the change in environments and the power structure. The new audience in Manhattan is unaware of the thriving scene across the bridge and cannot yet hear (understand) what FAB has to tell them. Geneva, the party's host, takes Zorro to her room, the music ending when the door is shut behind them. At the party, we ascertain that the Blondie song is metaphorical, illustrating the potential breadth and depth of an art still in its infancy. For both rap and hip-hop and white pop—these cross-cultural forays served as an introduction. Whites only familiar to the world of pop music discovered a new world, while hip-hop practitioners gained access to a larger group of artists, patrons and aficionados who could help them spread the word. Throughout the next scene Phade introduces and promotes the new art to the upper class art patrons. FAB, like Phade, served as a bridge between the Bronx kids and the Manhattan elite, explaining and sharing his enthusiasm for this new, fresh art.

A New Understanding of Race and Culture Through Hip-Hop

Released in 1983, the first documentary to address the phenomenon of hip-hop culture, *Style Wars*, chronicles the struggle between graffiti artists' attempts to rewrite the aesthetics of their environment and a generation of parents and city officials who view their unauthorized actions as a direct affront upon the city and themselves personally. The film follows a group of New York youth navigating their intrusion into the worlds of class, politics, race, and generational difference. While naively creating what is later to

become a worldwide culture, *Style Wars* portrays their efforts as revolutionary art that uses the detritus of the late 20th Century American urban landscape as a canvas. After its release the documentary found others appreciative of the art and won the Grand Prize for Documentaries at the 1984 Sundance Film Festival despite being released on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television network rather than as a theatrical release. Filmed between 1981 and 1983 it initially began as a film focused primarily on b-boys and dancing. The production stalled due to the producer's lack of funds and the increasing popularity and resulting unavailability of the film's primary b-boy protagonists—The Rocksteady Crew (Chang 161). These problems prompted the director to refocus upon the increasingly popular and notorious graffiti scene associated with hip-hop.

    Style Wars portrays rapping and breaking as exclusively black and Latin but presents graffiti as a more integrated element of the culture. For example, in *Style Wars* a young white graffiti writer enthusiastically exclaims, "I love robbin' paint" while describing methods for shoplifting aerosol paint. He describes how, with the help of an oversized coat, he can steal "a hundred cans at a time." With genuine sincerity and frustration at the unfairness, he notes that it is more difficult for "black kids or Spanish kids" because "everybody thinks that a graffiti writer is either black or Puerto Rican." He sees the problematic nature with his white privilege, and notes that a "lot of white people are writin'." His involvement in hip-hop gives him an understanding of prejudice and profiling of non-whites often denied or ignored by the larger white population. This statement illustrates the beginning of the newly formed hip-hop generation's more nuanced understanding of race and culture in America. This awareness of race, culture, and their intersection with others continues throughout the films making up the hip-hop

film cycle.

The editing choices in this documentary act to demarcate the influence of hip-hop upon white youth in their understanding of the importance of race and culture, which the previous generation's adoption of rock as the primary youth soundtrack often failed to acknowledge. The juxtaposition of interviews with white, black, and Latin writers reinforces the multiplicity of cultures involved within graffiti writing. As if to answer the white writer's enthusiasm at his criminal acquisition of art supplies in the previous scene, the scene then cuts to the African American SKEME in his mother's kitchen, to continue an interview begun earlier in the film. His mother says that the youth involved in graffiti are a "whole miserable subculture." Immediately following this statement, the film cuts to a new scene featuring the respected graffiti writer, Zephyr, who is white. He makes no pretense about his privileged upbringing, but he also offers insight into his shared passion for graffiti with others. SKEME's mother is not speaking about black youth, or the underclass, but as one of several representatives of generational misunderstanding in *Style Wars*. The subculture, to both the white artist and black mother, goes beyond race. To SKEME's mother as well as city officials, those participating in graffiti enact an assault on commerce, public property, ownership, and the very meaning of art.

The transit authorities and Mayor's office want nothing more than to squash the "miserable subculture." New York City transit workers, after spending over 48 hours repainting every train, note that graffiti disrupts the capitalist system the subway schedules are based around, referring to commuters and their happiness with a "nice white train," and the cost to the establishment for graffiti removal. The irony of taking the main source of transportation for the world's largest city out of commission for over two

days—just so the cars can be made white—is obviously lost on them. It is clear that this consternation about graffiti art is largely based upon prejudices about race and class. The workers, again unconscious to the actual meaning of their statements, reveal this as they brag about their work combating what they view as a serious crime. After spending a weekend repainting the cars white, they note that it is preferable to a colorful (or "colored") train. Another worker likens their work to American soldiers "like in *Apocalypse Now*" holding their ground against the Vietcong, making the artists both foreign, criminal, and racially different. While not specifically blaming black and brown youth for the graffiti, they make their prejudices clear through well-chosen associations and words. This allows them to avoid overt racism and stereotyping while keeping with the sentiment of their thought.

To take the Vietnam metaphor further, the Transit Authority also has its own version of Agent Orange. Chalfant films a conductor maneuvering a train car through "the buff," the chemical scrub the city uses to remove graffiti art. The conductor comments on the smell of the fumes and the likely negative effect upon his respiratory system. The shot is cramped and sick feeling, the conductor almost pressed against the camera, as he lingers in poisonous gas. The air is gray, as is the exterior of the train, after moving through the buff. This dull, sickly "cure" drastically contrasts to the open, picturesque shots of brightly painted trains passing through the sky on outdoor elevated tracks and through abandoned lots reclaimed by grass and scrub. The image is Chalfant's attempt to display the whiteness of the colonial mindset found in the Vietnam conflict and compare it with New York City's war on graffiti art. Racial attitudes are poisonous, yet out of pride and fear of difference, they are desperately clung to, even to the point of

sickness. The philosophy, so ingrained in the transit workers, allows them to see their

suffering as noble rather than exhausting, dangerous, and stupid. The scene also

expresses a hopefulness that the hip-hop generation will be a colorful, that is

multicultural, group that respects individual creativity as well as differences. This is not

to be the norm, however. Throughout the hip-hop film cycle, many films (*Menace II*

Society and *Do the Right Thing* for example) feature the intersection of two cultures, but

they often end in violence, and are reflections of larger racism in society at large. Chapter

5 focuses on the return of early hip-hop's ideals and a nostalgia for its early days. These

films and television programs offer examples of positive cultural interactions and ways in

which hip-hop utilizes world culture for its artistic endeavors.

Racial Exoticism and the End of the Graffiti Scene

In addition to the positive interactions between cultures, *Wild Style* and *Style*

Wars confront those who do not respect the artists or the culture they represent. The

white working-class resistance to "color" and "foreign" culture and the wealthy art

patrons only interested in a vicarious "slumming" only differ by degrees of

communicative sophistication. While the transit workers blatantly insult the graffiti

writers, the upper class art world accepts the artists only when they appear in sanctioned

galleries, where the work can be bought and sold as consumer items. Chang notes that

this experience was not dismissed wholesale by graffiti artists as detrimental. Numerous

artists left the train yards and participated in the gallery scene as their new venue of

choice. But the period of the celebrity graffiti artist was brief. Years later, Elizabeth Hess

would ask the question that no one bothered to at the time: "'Was it their work or their

class and racial exoticism that inspired patrons to support them and dealers to legitimize their unorthodox talents?'" (180). *Style Wars* and *Wild Style* depict patrons of both types. Patti Astor's character is the true believer. Others only wanted the cache of hipness and quickly moved on to new vicarious experiences.

Syncretism may appear throughout the films, but the art worlds depicted in *Style Wars* and *Wild Style* also explore the phenomenon of the disconnect between two cultures. We experience what Gates' calls "the play of doubles" in which "perpendicular universe(s)" of the street and the upper class rub against one another (49). The wealthy white art patrons' actions significantly contrast with the plain talking, risk-taking inner-city youth such as Lee or Futura. The rich white art collectors featured in *Wild Style* seem either wooden, or lustful toward the racial other. In a scene that features a party that introduces these two worlds, the hostess Geneva seduces Lee through a discussion of a commissioned piece she wants in her bedroom. While the decadent Geneva hosts a salon-like art show in her apartment, she uses the opportunity to act out racist sexual fantasies. She cannot create art, so, in order to attain a sense of control over the artist, she completely consumes it, painter and painting alike. Years later, Zephyr mocks the dialogue, recalling the seduction scene consisting of "Oh can I buy your painting? Oh sit down!" (Chang 185). He affirms that the sensibility of the wealthy patrons as Ahearn presents them is laughable, but that the scene, including the sexual/commercial power structure, was taken from actuality, and Ahearn had no intention to parody his characters.

The reality witnessed in the documentary footage in *Style Wars* depicts even worse behavior. The bourgeois Manhattanites act more extravagant, obnoxious, and privileged than their fictional counterparts. Had Ahearn depicted them as they revealed

themselves in this film, the character would be perceived as a parody and unbelievable. An older, obviously drunk, socialite gushes to the camera excitedly at her proximity to such "rough" characters. She recalls a story about a patron who asked a guest artist what he would do if he were to deface the canvas the way the artist defaced trains. Thrilled, she mimicked his response in a mocking black patois— "I kill you man!"—living her moment of inner-city danger through the uptown gallery, a sanctioned space for the upper class.

The world that ushered Warhol, Lichtenstein, and pop art into legitimacy in the 1960s clamored for graffiti in the early 1980s (Chang152). A few artists, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, in particular, were able to parlay this early success into careers in the art world. Most others went back to private artistic expressions after the fickle art world went from embracing it as "art so strong it hurt people" to calling it "eyesores" (Chang 153, 199). For a time after reaching graffiti stardom, Lee Quinones repaired wheelchairs, and FUTURA worked as a bike messenger. Basquiat died from a heroin overdose in 1988 (200). Hip-hop often evolves quickly, rarely making room for the previous generation. Throughout this dissertation, each round of film cycles has its own flavor, rarely including artists who may have been worldwide stars only years before.

Hip-hop films that followed *Wild Style*, specifically the most well-known—*Beat Street* (1984), *Breakin'* (1984), and *Breakin 2: Electric Boogaloo* (1984)—followed *Wild Style*'s example and featured members of the hip-hop community, albeit in cameo roles rather than lead roles.[20] Unlike the other narrative films, *Wild Style* featured a cast who

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[20] A representative from hip-hop acting in a lead role did not occur again until John Singleton cast Ice Cube as "Doughboy" in *Boyz n the Hood* (1991).

practiced the arts that Ahearn included them practicing in the film. This gave the scripted film a documentary feel and legitimacy absent from many of the other hip-hop films of the era.

Breakin' and *Breakin 2* were especially suspect in their intent to profit off the most popular element of hip-hop at that time—b-boying, known to the public at large as break dancing. Cannon films, operated by Israelis Menahem Golan and Yorum Globus, created a studio know for releasing b-grade action, slasher, and soft-core films. The production company, responsible for the careers of Chuck Norris, Dolph Lundgren, and Jean-Claude Van Damme (Hartley), left no fad of the 1980s unappropriated. The C.B. radio craze spawned Cannon's *Convoy* (1978). The success of *Rambo* and Reagan-era jingoism led Cannon to release *Invasion U.S.A.* (1985) and *Delta Force* (1986). Cannon capitalized upon young men's love of "Chinese stars" and "nunchucks" during the ninja craze *Enter the Ninja* (1981), *American Ninja 1—5* (1985, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1993)[21].

At the time, most companies considered "breakdancing" a fad to be used in advertisements to sell soda and fast food to youth. A commercial featuring a young Alfonso Ribiero in a red Michael Jackson-style leather jacket sold *Alfonso's Breakin' & Poppin' Book.* As an incentive to purchase the book, its publishers include a "Giant 65" X 70" Breakin' board," a portable "safe dancing area" emblazoned with Ribiero's likeness, a "full rap sheet"[22] and "the right kind of music"—a double LP set called *Rap*

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[21] Occasionally the production company released critically acclaimed films in spite of itself: *Barfly* (1987), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Withnail and I* (1987).
[22] No sense of irony seems to be implied with rap sheet also being slang for a person's criminal record. This era's idea of authenticity rarely included criminality as a prerequisite to be a member of the hip-hop culture (excepting graffiti artists' use of public space as medium for their art).

Attack: 22 Breakin' and Poppin' Hits.

Films such as *Breakin'* were suspect in their ties to hip-hop culture, which made way for the Golden Age of hip-hop to shore up hip-hop's cultural importance to marginalized cultures. With its focus on black power, dexterous wordplay in rapping, ecstatic backup dancers, and artistic yet funky production, it ensured the culture continued to "keep it real." However, these films were not worthless. The films served as an introduction to many, first in its distribution in theaters, and later on cable television and home video. Furthermore, they were positive examples of cross-cultural cooperation and antiracist ideals.

While being of the moment often marks authenticity, newer documentaries need to be assessed regarding this supposition. Now that hip-hop defines the politics and popular culture of three generations, media makers often look to the past for subject matter. VH1, a channel that traditionally markets to an older, post-teenage audience, hosts the annual awards show *Hip-Hop Honors*. The show focuses specifically on artists who contributed significantly to the culture and has not only rappers, but other elements of hip-hop and given awards to the Rock Steady Crew, "the Graffiti movement," *Wild Style*, and DJ Grandmaster Flash. The channel's documentary series *Rock Docs* moved the channel's focus on classic rockers like Aerosmith and Thin Lizzy to a hip-hop heavy broadcast schedule. Among the episodes, broadcasts include the documentaries *N.W.A.: The World's Most Dangerous Group*, a retrospective look at the controversial rap group whose members Ice Cube Eazy-E, and Dr. Dre, parlayed their success with N.W.A. into successful solo careers after the group disbanded.

The Cultural Dissemination: From the Bronx to the World

> In school they never taught bout hamburgers or steak/
>
> Elijah Muhammad or the welfare state.
>
> But I know/ And I know because of KRS-ONE.
>
> Because he's droppin science, droppin history/
>
> With a whole leap of style and intelligence see
>
> Yes, I know/ I know because of KRS-ONE
>
> Sublime "KRS-One" (1992)

Before it was a nation-wide culture, a few youth created a subculture isolated within a few blocks of the South Bronx but drawing on a range of influences from around the world. With punk failing to gain popularity and disco experiencing a backlash from traditional white rock and country music fans, there were no guarantees the new culture from the South Bronx would survive[23]. Hip-hop benefitted from the Public Television Network's nationwide distribution of *Style Wars*. The multiple broadcasts of the documentary initiated a new youth culture throughout America and complicated the way in which America viewed inner-city culture.

It took the national exposure from *Style Wars* to finally move hip-hop from New York to the rest of America. The film's impact is incalculable, and many Americans' first exposure to this new and exciting culture came from viewing it on their local PBS stations. Until the mass availability of cable television and the video cassette player in the

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[23] Rap historian Davey D notes that "in 79 (sic) that scene was pretty much on its last leg in the Bronx—It was a dying scene." DJ Jazzy Jay called 1979 the "Great Hip-Hop Drought" as the youth who initially embraced hip-hop came of age they left the local park jams for clubs that served alcohol and hip-hop DJs found disco clubs more lucrative than local gymnasium dances (Chang 128).

1980s, the documentary film's primary venues for distribution and exhibition previously consisted of "schools, libraries, colleges and universities, film societies, art theaters, even prisons" (Ellis and McLane 227, 258-61). This left a large population of America unable to experience documentary cinema. If a documentary was given a wide theatrical release, it was usually a rock n roll concert film such as *Woodstock* (1970), *Gimme Shelter* (1970), *The Last Waltz* (1978), *U2: Rattle and Hum* (1988). All of these films feature mostly white musicians at the height of their affluence and influence.

By the early 1980s, television had become ubiquitous, with the number of sets in America estimated at 83.3 million (*Federal Register*). It served as the vehicle for free information and entertainment for the masses, as cable television had yet to reach most households. Furthermore, the first hip-hop generation grew up watching PBS as children. Progressive children's programs such as *Sesame Street* featured minority children in an urban environment and *Captain Kangaroo* included Bill Cosby as a member of its cast, hosting the popular "Picture Pages" segment. According to Erik Barnouw, *Sesame Street*, which began airing in 1969, reflected a new, faster pace of television based on commercial techniques, and reflected a new television-programming trend, which featured black protagonists not originating from a "world of affluence" (437). The series "was aimed at the underprivileged; in décor and stylistic detail it reflected their world" (Barnouw, *Tube* 437). *Sesame Street* stressed "rhythm and speed," and pre-school children from every socio-economic level were "spellbound" by the series (437). Populated by a giant bird and monsters, the series reflected a familiar setting to its audience, which featured a culturally and racially diverse cast and a set that consisted of a facade of neighborhood shops and stoops of walk-up apartment buildings. Many of the

sets featured graffiti[24]. By the time *Style Wars* premiered on PBS, a generation of youth all over the country had spent their childhoods viewing people from other races and cultures living in the city as role models.

The documentary became a popular format on PBS, in large part due to its popular direct cinema series *An American Family* (1973). Furthermore, during 1980s, "regulatory neglect," interpreted by the three commercial networks as de facto deregulation, led to the decline in documentary programming, except at PBS (Roman 119). This left the commercial networks to pursue what eventually became known as "reality programming" which "often veer(ed) toward the seamy, scabrous, and bizarre" (Barnouw 519). Furthermore, during the Reagan years, the Republican administration reduced funds for the National Endowment of the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Specifically, the administration targeted funding cuts for artists, including filmmakers, whose beliefs ran counter to the Reagan administration (Barnouw 517). The result was that documentary filmmakers' only refuge was PBS, (at least in the US), and the lack of funding for documentaries meant that production values meant less, and more time was available for re-runs of programs. These changes, while obviously politically and financially motivated, benefited the producers of *Style Wars*. When it was broadcast to youth raised by Sesame Street's "rhythm and speed," they were ready for an alternative to disco dancing, rock n roll, and artistic heterogeneity of American popular culture.

By premiering on PBS, Silver and Chalfant reached a much more diverse

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[24] By the end of the 1980s Sesame Street reflected another inner-city phenomenon, gentrification, and was scrubbed of its graffiti (Gingrich-Gaylord).

audience through broadcast television than if the film had travelled the documentary circuit of metropolitan small theaters, museums, and college campuses. The audience it reached was not just the bookish intellectual (the stereotype of the documentary film fan at that time). Instead, *Style Wars* reached anyone who had a television and a willingness to watch. This affected not only black youth, but white gen-xers. As Bakiri Kitwana explains, white youth in the 1980s were increasingly exposed to black culture due to telecommunications, and such exposure, including to films like *Style Wars*, changed the way "Americans engage[d] race." Chalfant notes that even today, wherever he goes, fans of the film thank him for making it" (Delerme).

The first inkling that hip-hop had cross-cultural and international appeal came in the form of English punk band The Clash. After a trip to New York turned them on to rap, they recorded a rap song themselves, "The Magnificent Seven," and released it on their 1980 *Sandinista!!* double album. The album failed to live up to their previous critics' and fans' expectations, but "The Magnificent Seven" became a popular song on Black radio station WLBS in 1981 (Chang 154). The band commissioned FUTURA to paint a banner to promote their series of concerts at the Bonds Casino. During their stay in New York City the Clash, along with FAB, DONDI, and FUTURA recorded "The Escapades of FUTURA 2000" that detailed the history of street art (Campbell). Despite featuring local rappers the Treacherous Three and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five at their 18 day sold out stand at the Bonds Casino, many fans did not appreciate rap the same way The Clash did, abusing the groups by throwing cups and cursing.[25] There

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[25] They also booked Washington D.C., Rastafarian punks the Bad Brains and country singer/songwriter Joe Ely on separate nights.

were fans of punk who did appreciate it, though, and adopted the culture into a larger catalog of revolutionary popular culture. Only a year later, The Clash returned to New York and featured Kurtis Blow as their opener. The reaction was markedly different, and the concert was described as "everything that the debacle at Bond's wasn't" (Holden).

Photographer Glen E. Friedman, who initially gained notoriety publishing photos of the Dogtown skateboard culture in Venice, California, was one of those who connected the skateboard, punk, and hip-hop cultures. Friedman, in addition to skateboarding, began photographing members of the punk and hip-hop community. His two anthologies of photos, *Fuck You Heroes* (1994) and *Fuck You Too* (1996) collect photographs of each culture as a continuous phenomenon rather than sectioning the book by subject matter because to Friedman they all represent the "Fuck You" hero (Adler 105-06). Friedman defines this hero, whether a member of the hip-hop or punk world as "individuals saying 'fuck you' to those trying to limit the thinking and ideals of others" Adler 105). This resistance to limits and pushing experiences within performance can be found in numerous hip-hop films. Its unflinching look at conditions within marginalized communities appears throughout the film cycle.

Friedman refused boundaries of culture, uniting the genres upon a shared sense of rebellion, frustration, as well as an escape found in both music cultures. Subsequently, his photographs became legendary album covers for equally legendary albums by Public Enemy and Ice T as well as Minor Threat, Black Flag and Circle Jerks.[26] Hip-hop historian Davey D corroborates the punk and hip-hop cooperation and respect. In an

[26] Punk and Country artist Hank Williams III recalls in an interview that his first established band's highlights were opening for post-punk band Fugazi (which features members of Minor Threat) and Public Enemy.

article specifically on the early influence and collaborations between punk and hip-hop, he cites Sex Pistols' manager Malcolm McLaren as a significant force for popularizing hip-hop as an artistic movement. McLaren met rap duo/radio DJs The World Famous Supreme Team through FAB 5 Freddy while visiting New York in the early 1980s. Together, McLaren and the Supreme Team recorded and released "Buffalo Gals" and "Hey DJ," two of hip-hop's earliest mainstream hits ("Merger"). The Sex Pistols influence still remains in hip-hop. The box set for underground rapper MF Doom, formerly Zev Love X of early 1990s group KMD (and associate of 3rd Bass) borrows its design from Johnny Rotten's post-Sex Pistols' endeavor Public Image Limited. Public Image Limited released their *Second Edition* (1979) in a record-shaped metal box with their logo embossed on the top. *Operation: Doomsday* (2011) featured a similar metal cover, with MF Doom's masked face embossed on the cover.

As previously mentioned, FAB 5 Freddy also saw the similarities between the punk and hip-hop cultures but suspected that hip-hop could become more than an underground culture. As the host of *YO! MTV Raps*, the first mainstream pop music program exclusively devoted to rap music videos, he exposed hip-hop to an international audience. The two-hour show aired on MTV, a channel that shunned many black musicians, rappers in particular. Before this show, MTV focused on "generic rock discourses so as to exclude black artists and audiences and embodied a straight white male identity" (Mittell 13). *YO!*'s success was rapid, and later was called an "ambassador for hip-hop to mainstream America" (*YO!: The Story of YO! MTV Raps*). Created by white rap fan Ted Demme, who Dapper Dan says was and still is "one of the most important figures in our culture," the pilot premiered on August 6, 1988 with Run DMC

as hosts. Upon becoming a daily series, the natural choice for the producers was FAB 5

Freddy[27]. As the host, he introduced audiences to acts like Will Smith and LL Cool J as

well as more hardcore groups like Public Enemy and NWA.

Without watering it down, FAB exposed America to hip-hop's multi-faceted

personality, from the pop of Kid n Play to the rugged Just Ice. In terms of the show's

production, FAB eschewed the prefabricated MTV studios for the aesthetics of *Style*

Wars and *Wild Style*. He opted for location shooting in the neighborhoods where rappers

grew up, rehearsal spaces, or parties. In the process he became a hip-hop Robert Flaherty

who used the aesthetics of direct cinema to document the growth of a movement. As he

did with *Wild Style*, as host of *YO! MTV Raps*, FAB introduced the black inner-city to

mainstream America, and chronicled both the artists in their home neighborhoods and the

conditions from which their creativity began, all hallmarks of hip-hop cinema. These

elements are also all found throughout the various iterations of the hip-hop film cycle.

For example, when he interviewed the Houston rap group the Geto Boys, FAB

asked the members to tell him some history about the Fifth Ward of Houston. Willie D.

provides the voiceover narration describing the projects of the area as a quick cut

montage of dilapidated houses and overgrown vacant lots. The clip is more akin to a

Maysles Bros. film such as the popular *Gray Gardens*, where the subject interacts with

the filmmakers. To take the focus from the filmmaker and put it on the subject, FAB uses

comments and edits them with images to create voice-over narration post-production.

This stresses the importance of the subject over the filmmaker and gives the illusion of a

subjective filmmaking. Willie D. says Houston is "like any other ghetto. You got

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[27] Demme died in 2002.

violence, drugs, and sex: the reality of the streets." The major focus of Freddy's interviews, whether in Houston or the Bronx, reflects hip-hop's emphasis upon the immediacy of life as lived by the artist, and the influence of environment on the artistic expression

Like Ahearn, FAB never tried to change the reality of his "actors," as Robert Flaherty did; instead, he used his series as a vehicle to document a moment in time, a geographic space, and a people. The series offers a sense of capturing reality on the ground as any documentary, as it attempted to reflect some semblance of authenticity and reality as close as possible. By utilizing documentary techniques such as location shooting, live sound, and non-actors, YO! MTV Raps presents a unique perspective most music fans were unaccustomed to. Instead of rock stars, celebrities, and Hollywood parties, its subjects included housing projects, local fashion, and dialect specific to the area from which the rapper(s) originate.

With a renaissance of hip-hop documentary form seemingly many years away, young black filmmakers after *Wild Style* and *Style Wars* used the template of the documentary impulse and aesthetic to craft films that reflected Reagan and Bush-era neglect of America's inner-cities and minority populations. While filming in a more traditional Hollywood narrative style, these filmmakers shot on location within these affected neighborhoods and used rappers from these neighborhoods as actors. Having grown up with hip-hop, these filmmakers utilized a variety of hip-hop's aesthetics, such as sampling, translating them to narrative film. In my next chapter I discuss the various ways in which these aesthetics become tools of expression for the new "hip-hop generation" of directors.

CHAPTER III

PUBLIC ENEMY AND RADIO BROADCASTS: THE SAMPLE AND HIP-HOP CINEMA

OF THE GOLDEN AGE

My previous chapter discussed a group of filmmakers who succeeded in linking

four loosely associated art forms into a cohesive culture. To capture the feeling of the

environment from which these art forms came, the filmmakers utilized documentary film

techniques such as location shooting and forgoing strict narrative for a looser,

experience-based record of actuality. The films focused a large amount of screen time

upon live performances by members of hip-hop culture. The focus upon individual

performance allowed members of the culture to transmit the *feel* of their art rather than

attempt to explain it. To reinforce the interconnection of the four elements, the films'

editing juxtaposed images of graffiti artists painting with tracks by rappers and DJs. *Style*

Wars and *Wild Style* also helped define hip-hop's look and sound. These films also

highlighted early hip-hop's relationship with other cultures. The variety of media and

cultural factors that influenced members of the hip-hop community revealed the syncretic

meetings between the cultures from which hip-hop originated and those outside it provided a catalyst for its evolution.

Chapter 3 examines ways in which filmmakers adapted the technique of the sample to hip-hop cinema. I begin by defining the sample more technically and discussing its origin within African American aesthetics. Next, I examine in more detail the importance of cross-cultural syncretism in sampling as practiced in hip-hop from its origin to its most fertile period, hip-hop's "golden age." I then offer examples that illustrate the sample's influence upon the cinematic techniques of filmmakers during hip-hop's golden age. My discussion's cinematic examples draw upon two of this period's most iconic films—Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and Albert and Allen Hughes' *Menace II Society* (1993).

I chose to examine these films because they exemplify the climax and descent of a specific ethos found in the Golden Age (approximately 1985-1992).[28] This period of hip-hop earned its title due to the popularity of artists who emphasized social and political awareness, featured rap groups as collectives, rather than a star solo artists, and often either emphasized working for the collective good of the African American community or revealed common black and Latinx experiences often unknown or unreported by the white population and mainstream media.

Both films represent the creative energy of golden age hip-hop. In a repeat of the rush to commercialize hip-hop in the early 1980s, studios released a number of formulaic and poorly made films. *Do the Right Thing* and *Menace II Society* remain two of the most

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[28] The exact dates of this era are debatable, so I defer to Jeff Chang's dates in *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, currently the best and most exhaustive history of hip-hop to date.

artistically important films of this era in part from the connection of the filmmakers to the community their films represent. Spike Lee portrayed the gold chain-wearing Mars Blackmon in his first feature length film *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). He says he patterned the character on early b-boys he knew during hip-hop's inception (Thomas). *Do the Right Thing* was nominated for and won multiple awards, including nominations for Academy Awards and the Cannes Palme d'Or.

Before the Hughes Brothers filmed *Menace II Society,* they directed numerous rap videos. They cast two rappers in *Menace,* whom they had previously worked with, MC Eiht and Too $hort. They initially cast Tupac Shakur until their friendship famously ended on the *Menace* set with Tupac and a group of Crips beating Allen Hughes. [29] At only 20 years old, the Hughes Brothers' first film debuted at the Cannes Film Festival and received almost unanimous critical praise. These two films exemplify artistry created by directors sincerely interested and involved in hip-hop. *Menace* and *Do the Right Thing* also act as bookends for the golden age. *Do the Right Thing* represents the focus upon community, racism and racial justice, and direct action for which the golden age of hip-hop is most remembered. *Menace* tells a grittier story that revolves around similar issues but contains a moral ambiguity and violence representative of the increasing drug trade and gangs within the inner-city as rap transitioned into a more violently capitalist period. Both, however, utilize elements of the sample for the representation of these realities that affect large segments of the African American population.

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[29] While under investigation, he admitted to the assault on *YO! Mtv Raps*. Upon realizing Shakur was offering what amounted to a confession of felony assault to several million viewers, the series host, Ed Lover, attempted to put his hand over Shakur's mouth. He was too late and out of reach.

The Technical Art and Cultural Impact of Sampling

I begin this section by defining the sample in more detail and providing a brief overview of the intersection of culture and technology that contributed to the hip-hop sample. I then describe ways in which it fits into historically established aesthetics of the African Diasporic musical culture. I place specific importance upon the sample's connection to antiphony, the African American musical tradition of call and response between two or more groups. Finally, I suggest that hip-hop sampling, while rooted firmly within the African diasporic musical and cultural tradition, works as a means to deliberately deconstruct and expand upon diasporic traditions through cross-cultural, syncretic integration of other cultural forms.

The sample consists of rerecording and using a passage from one song in another song. The technique of sampling includes the manipulation of a previously recorded text. Some of the sample's characteristics include shifting the original speed and pitch of a song, playing music or songs backwards, using specific repeated parts, or reordering the song differently. Porcello isolates the three main characteristics of the sample as "the mimetic/reproductive, the manipulative, and the extractive" (69). Author Ishmael Reed calls his writing style "mixing and sampling," which he says is a "constant in African American culture, [the aesthetic] of making something whole from scraps" (qtd. in Hess 98). The ways in which DJs and producers utilize the "scraps" or bits of songs determine the mode in which the sample is used. The mimetic/reproductive creates new material based upon "key elements" of another song (Hess 100). The manipulative includes the manual manipulation of the song's original sound. For example, changes in key or tempo

are examples of manipulation. The extractive mode relies upon taking a part of a song out of context and inserting it into another context so as to change its content to coincide with the second song's textual structure and meaning (Hess 99-100).

The sample's importance as an identifier of cultural history and aesthetics in hip-hop cannot be overstated. Culturally, sampling acts simultaneously as homage to historical influences and a means for artists to "represent themselves historically within a lineage of earlier creators and traditions"; it is a reiteration of these traditions for a contemporary audience (Sunder 36). Whether the reproduction is created by musicians playing in another's style or digitally ripping a song from another source, they both serve the same purpose—to *re*-purpose texts in new contexts.

Music sampling came to public consciousness only within the last 20 years due to media coverage of lawsuits over copyright and publishing, yet its history extends to the beginning of the phonograph. Avant-garde artists of the early 20th Century "subverted established media channels of their time" through the manipulation and misuse of prerecorded media, and the technology played the media back to listeners (Niebisch 10). In addition to the collage and abstract painting, artists performed with multiple or modified record players (Niebisch 10-11). Using the sample became popularized in the 1960s as a result of the Beatles' various studio experiments. One popular example of their use of this technique exists in "Yellow Submarine." In it they attempted to replicate the psychedelic experience on album by cutting, rearranging, and reassembling a composition by a brass band (Emerick 122-23). The Beatles' use of previously recorded music illustrates Porcello's common characteristics of the sample—the extraction and

reproduction of a text and its manipulation via the misuse of the playback device or a rearrangement of the source text.

At the time the Beatles were inserting previously recorded material into their songs, Jamaican DJs were doing this and more. At live parties, not in a studio, Prince Buster, King Tubby, and Lee "Scratch" Perry altered the way music was broadcast and consumed. Their example created the template for the hip-hop DJ. The competitive sound system DJs in Jamaica created the need to continually introduce new artists, which led the DJs to create new songs from existing Ska, Rocksteady, and Reggae records. Instead of seeing them as a finished product, producers and musicians assumed their recording was an ingredient in future performances of their song by DJs. In order to create new compositions through mixing records, Jamaican DJs used "dubplates," or records that omitted the vocal track and musical sections and contained only the bass and drums (Veal 52). The omission allowed DJs to "toast" or rap throughout his set as well as experiment with and "reinvent the song" (qtd. in Veal 53). These two cultural practices illustrate the difference between the early African diasporic use of the sample and that of contemporary mainstream western commerce. While Jamaican record companies gave DJs copies of master tapes to do with as they pleased, American and European companies soon began suing over the use of samples in hip-hop music. Jamaican DJs transformed listening to music from an activity reserved for private space into one that relied upon public interaction. DJs within the Reggae culture made playing the turntable "no longer a private, passive or individual process" (Williams 91). By scatting and rapping over songs, often speaking to individual partygoers or exclaiming their superiority over rivals, the DJ

turned party music into "a procedure of collective affirmation and protest in which a new authentic public sphere is brought into being" (qtd. in Williams 91).

This early method of sampling exemplifies the African diasporic musical tradition of antiphony. Often called "call and response," antiphony works with a push and pull between audience and interlocutor and calls to the audience to become part of the performance. Jamaican immigrant DJ Kool Herc introduced the Bronx to the potential of the DJ as entertainer and manipulator of sound. In hip-hop's early days DJ Kool Herc created the "breakbeat." This consists of a DJs isolating "breaks," the most exciting instrumental parts of songs, and looping them via two identical records and a mixer. The breaks were used as accompaniment for breakers (thus the name of the dancers) and MCs. Through the isolation of a favorite section of a song, Herc utilized all three modes of the sample—the mimetic playback of a short loop of a text, the manipulative use of the turntable to select the right speed for dancers and MCs, and the extraction of a section of musical text for another context. All of these modes combined to produce a new composition appropriate to a new communal context. Herc's DJ style also illustrates an important syncretic moment in which immigrant Afro-Caribbean culture introduced the creative and social potential of a new art form to New Yorkers. Not relegated to a lone artist working in isolation, hip-hop artists rely upon the communal relation to fully realize the potential of their art as a voice for cultural, aesthetic, and social change.

It was not until the hip-hop DJ began using turntables that the sample became the primary text for popular music. The sample became the song itself, rather than using special dubplates to create a song live or replicating the psychedelic experience inside the studio. Rose says that the sample in hip-hop represents "reshuffled, looped and

recontextualized" cultural forms as a method of "composition and production" (88). Gracyck explains the sample's "different ontological status" relative to bands that cover another artist's song. The sample does not "represent its source" but rather utilizes "direct quotation" (96). Samples need not be mimetic to be extractive and manipulative. The act is not to copy the complete work of an artist, or to faithfully reproduce a body of work in the way a cover band might play a James Brown song. The sample reproduces parts of a work, whether created by a record or band, and the focus is less on who created the music, but how it is used in the new context. A reproduction of a piece of music acts as a sample both in the eyes of copyright law and listeners. Hip-hop's first major hit "Rapper's Delight" (1979) utilized studio musicians to replicate a DJ using turntables to repeat a phrase from Chic's disco song "Good Times" (1979) (George 93).[30]

While the visual sample in hip-hop culture remains less discussed than the aural, it deserves discussion. The first publicized example of a visual sample is a collaboration between LEE and FAB 5 Freddy. The work, a take on Andy Warhol's "Campbell Soup" series (itself a sort of sampling), spanned the entirety of a train car and featured seven red and white Campbell's soup cans. In place of the word "Tomato" LEE and FAB substituted names of modern art movements on three (Dada, Pop, and Futurist). One can featured the words "T.V. Party," a local public access program hosted by Glen O'Brien that featured contemporary art and music. Two read "Fred Soup" and "Fabulous Five" (Thompson 70). By sampling Warhol, the two artists traced the history of "legitimate" art movements and included hip-hop art in that lineage. The final can label was left blank, a

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[30] Years later, "Good Times" composers Nile Rogers and Bernard Edwards sued Sugarhill Records and received entire songwriting credit and full royalties for "Rapper's Delight" (George 94).

challenge and call to other graffiti artists to sample visual arts as a link to the past and voice for themselves. Other examples of visual sampling that reflect hip-hop's ethos include Dapper Dan's use of couture logos on custom made clothing for hip-hop celebrities (discussed in Chapter 2). Both examples draw from European source material and use traditional African American techniques of antiphony, repetition, and recontextualization. The visual hip-hop sample like the aural one, exhibits a syncretic mix of cultural and textual elements reconfigured within a new context.

The sample appears in *Do the Right Thing* and *Menace II Society* in ways that affect the images and sounds within the films. It also recontextualizes events in order to make them relevant to present. The examples I discuss are representative of the "cut and mix" method used by Kool DJ Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and most other hip-hop DJs. The technique includes "sharp and abrupt discontinuities" or the reproduction of texts (the cut) and the assembly of cuts to provide continuity (the mix) (Dimitriadis 425). In this technique we find the African diasporic traditions of antiphony, repetition, and recontextualization and the three modes of the sample. It opens texts to multiple interpretations and allows "points of intersection between" artist and audience (Dimitriadis 424). As a production of diasporic aesthetics, these new texts become an affirmation of a cultural lineage and record of black history in America, which emphasizes the importance of that history to the present

Filmmakers influenced by hip-hop in the Golden Age do not necessarily make films *about* hip-hop, but they often use techniques similar to the sample to make interventions within the traditional cinematic narrative. Both Lee and the Hughes Brothers are indicative of these practices. While they do not actually reproduce parts of

other films to construct their own, their films use the "reshuffled, looped, and recontextualized" *aesthetics* of hip-hop culture to reference a broader historical experience. Keep in mind that sampling is not a technique hip-hop owns. As mentioned, the Beatles and *avant garde* musicians used tape loops and previously recorded sounds and inserted them into a larger musical texts. Some might say Quentin Tarantino samples material for his films. After all, his films frequently reference older films and genre tropes, not unlike a DJ sampling James Brown's "Funky Drummer." Critics have discussed the filmmaking of Darren Aronofsky as being influenced by sampling found in hip-hop. Certainly, there are "ruptures and breaks" found in his films similar to Grandmaster Flash, and he bases his editing on loops, or repetitions (Kulezic-Wilson). While their films may be influenced by hip-hop techniques, however, this does not make them representative of hip-hop. Filmmakers like the Hughes Bros and Spike Lee are located within a specific community that prioritizes the sample. It is their representation of hip-hop as a culture and community that makes these films. My argument is not that sampling is unique to hip hop films, but that films that feature aspects of hip-hop *culture* are more likely to utilize these techniques and to do so more consistently than traditional filmmakers. Sampling in hip-hop films "historicize[s] hip-hop and articulate[s] a sense of musical and cultural memory" (Stewart 153). The sample can contribute to the overall feeling of "rootedness" by using pieces of reality, whether casting rappers as actors or including news footage about the times and places central to the history of hip hop. This aesthetic can also reconfigure previously used signifiers for new settings (a la Dapper Dan, or a DJ Prince Paul using Steely Dan for backing music in De La Soul's music). It goes beyond being referential, and utilizes "quotation, juxtaposition, layering, and rupture

as potent aesthetic tools" as a consistent technique in its representation of hip-hop culture

(Stewart 143). Filmmakers like Tarantino and Arnofsky are locating themselves in a

community of Hollywood filmmakers and the Hollywood tradition. Hip-hop films and

filmmakers concern themselves with hip-hop as a community and artform first and mold

the samples in their films with the aesthetics of hip-hop in mind.

Characterization, Narrative, and The Mental "Loop" In *DTRT*

Do the Right Thing avoids a traditional plot structure and instead focuses upon the

interactions between characters during a particularly hot day on a single block in

Brooklyn. Lee constructs his film by weaving in and out of various characters' lives as if

sampling, rather than mimetically reproducing, conversations and daily activities. One

particularly memorable scene offers an example of this through the airing of private racist

thoughts of characters spoken directly to the camera. The scene begins with a traditional

shot that cuts between Mookie and Pino (John Turturro). They argue briefly after Mookie

confronts Pino about his racism. After this, we experience a series of quick cuts in which

a character recites a number of stereotypes about other races and ethnicities. The cuts

work like quick cuts, where bits of thoughts are sampled to quickly build tension within

the film. They are only seconds long, like samples in a song, but are effective in creating

a mood and furthering the plot. The dialogue and sets are briefly experienced, but pieced

together to form part of a larger conversation captured through editing. This is similar to

the way a DJ plays a small piece of a song and mixes it with a portion of a different song.

They play off each other, acting together to create a new composition. Through the

antiphony between the sampled songs, we get a more complex, more complete

composition, something larger than the sum of its parts. Lee refuses an easily categorized plot and characters and relies upon work by the viewer to produce meaning. Thus, a kind of antiphony exists between the director and audience. He captures bits of dialogue and mise en scene, and the viewer uses them to make connections between characters and the personality of the neighborhood. The nature in which the audience comes to know the characters Mookie (Lee) and Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) results in a richer emotional investment because of this work, and the personal nature of our understanding of the characters makes the film's climax all the more shocking.

Lee "reshuffles" perceptions of his characters and our understanding of them near the end of *Do the Right Thing*. Throughout the film Mookie represents level-headedness amidst chaos. He calmly discusses with racist coworker Pino (John Turturro) why his dichotomy between "niggers" and "blacks" is insulting. He also sticks up for his boss and Pino's father Sal (Danny Aiello). When black nationalist and constantly angry Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) confronts Sal about his lack of black faces on the walls of the pizzeria, Mookie attempts to mediate the argument. Unlike Mookie's constant brokering of negotiation between community members, Radio Raheem carries a boom box turned to full volume and intrudes upon other conversations without any negotiation of sound level or care for others' space. While he rarely talks, he stoically carries his large frame through the block with an air of menace. We gather, from their reactions to his presence, that others in the neighborhood fear him. In spite of establishing him as a menacing presence, Lee elicits sympathy for Radio Raheem as police ignore pleas from residents that they were choking him to death. That moment reveals him to be vulnerable and unjustly victimized. Lee's recontextualization of Radio Raheem illustrates the actual

versus perceived menace to the neighborhood. Lee also challenges our perception of Mookie with a violent outburst. Mookie does not reason with the mob of angry residents, as Lee showed him doing throughout the film. Instead he initiates a riot by throwing a trashcan through the window of Sal's Pizzeria.

Both acts elicit a reconsideration of our attitudes toward the characters. We mentally "loop" to previous scenes in order to reconsider our initial perceptions. A monologue given earlier by Radio Raheem about love winning out over hate reveals his interior dialogue and seems out of place given the aggressive nature of the music he plays on his boom box and large stature. The camera pans from his conversation with Mookie to directly address the audience, sampling Mookie's point of view to do so. Like other samples, this break in the flow comments on the action and allows the audience to better understand the characters and their context. Lee uses this brief perspective switch the same way Public Enemy might insert a few words from a Malcolm X speech--as an aside to reinforce the message and reposition the audience's overall listening experience before delivering them back into the song. When he looks into the camera and addresses the audience, we perceive him as Mookie does. He directly tells the viewer "the story of good and evil." He punches at the camera with his fist that bears rings that spell "hate" and "love," a sample of Robert Mitchum's preacher character in *Night of the Hunter* (1953) who had the same words tattooed on his knuckles. At points during the story his fist fills the frame, as if his punches are directly in the viewer's face. The aggressiveness of his illustration, that love "KOs" hate, may at first be perceived as dangerous, but given the circumstances of his death, we understand the choice can be a battle, and can now appreciate his sincerity. The mental loop reveals that not only did he never overtly

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menace any other characters except when provoked, but he directly addressed the audience about actualizing love in daily living.

Mookie's action disturbs us because we fail to see any obvious signs to predict the aggression he exhibits at the film's climax. His Jackie Robinson jersey offers a clue into his otherwise uncharacteristic act. Many of Mookie's character traits are "samples" of Robinson. Like the ball player, Mookie finds himself caught between a job he enjoys, though it includes working with racists, and his community's expectations of him. Mookie takes pride in his job, continually telling others he is "getting paid." Yet it is at his workplace that he experiences Pino's racism and Sal's explosive anger, which ends with Sal calling rap "jungle music" and Radio Raheem and Buggin' Out "niggers." Given the pressures of his daily life and his desire to avoid conflict, we see Mookie's outburst as an outward manifestation (sample) of Robinson's internal problems. The immense stress under which Robinson played caused him to become bitter toward the sport and led to dire health problems that precipitated an early death (Rapoport). Mookie, unlike Robinson, found a symbolic outlet for his anger, and, as Lee depicts in the next scene, attempts to reconcile with Sal after the riot. Mookie's can throwing, like Robinson's antipathy toward the Dodgers, resulted in racism spoiling a job that Mookie once enjoyed.

Mookie's "throwback" jersey, a fashion popular in hip-hop, is a replica of the jersey worn by Robinson. The player's number 42 appears on the front. Below the print on Mookie's shirt hangs a leather pendant in the shape of the African continent. The pendant links members of the African Diaspora to a history and specific place of racial pride and origin. Lee avoids strict nationalism, though, by pairing it with the distinctly

American game of baseball. By including Robinson's jersey, Lee makes a pointed comment upon the influence and importance of African American athletes upon the once exclusively white sport, and the continued influence of African Americans and Afro-Caribbean players and in a larger context, to the contributions by African Americans to American history. By omitting Brooklyn on the jersey, Lee traverses geography from Africa to New York to the Dodgers' current city, Los Angeles, where the Hispanic and black communities have adopted the current team's logo as a cultural identifier. The Dodger team color, blue, appears throughout the Los Angeles of *Menace II Society*, and the first person appearing in the film besides the main characters wears an LA Dodgers hat.[31]

Mookie's role as peacekeeper places him in a liminal space between his community and his employer, the same place Robinson existed. The ball player's loyalty to a promise made to Dodgers' General Manager Branch Rickey not to retaliate no matter the physical or verbal abuse conflicted with Robinson's need to protect himself and assert the rights he and other black men fought for in World War II.[32] Mookie's position as the only black employee in the family owned restaurant gives him economic and social cachet in his community, but also puts him in the uncomfortable position between loyal employee and community member with friends and family disgruntled with Sal's lack of

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[31] While the color blue is indicative of the Crips gang, and no character in the film acknowledges a gang affiliation, Caine, O-Dog, and A-Wax avenge a friend's death by killing a young man in a red jacket (red being the color of the Bloods gang).
[32] A year before Rickey hired him, Robinson was court martialed for refusing to move to the back of a bus. The bus driver mistook Robinson's light-skinned black friend for a white woman, further raising his ire. He ultimately called the Military Police who arrested Robinson. He ultimately received an acquittal followed with an honorable discharge (Kelly 76).

sensitivity to his customers. Rose calls hip-hop a phenomenon that shares traits with and subverts "Afrodiasporic histories and identities" (61). In his repetitive visual reference to Robinson via Mookie's clothing, Lee finds a historical figure reduced to a single image and works to subvert a shallow understanding of the Dodgers shortstop. Robinson became a sports icon and hero to millions who suffered daily discriminations.[33] Lee reloops and recontextualizes Robinson's image with Mookie's act of frustration and anger. He intimates that by the early 1960s Robinson became a supporter of Malcolm X, often spoke of "militancy and race pride welded to a strong sense of dignity," and claimed the New York Police used "Gestapo" tactics during the Harlem riot in 1964 (Rampersad 390-91.) He came to be less interested in integration as an employee and sought opportunities for blacks to enter the world of commerce and ownership (Rampersad 392-396). With this understanding of Robinson's journey from tool of integration to supporter of black power, the parallel journey in Mookie's life emerges onscreen. Within the film he moves from gratitude for employment to frustration at a system of control that leaves his community less than full participants in their own lives.

Lee's artistic vision relies heavily upon the extractive mode of the sample. He offers moments from American history, sports, and film. He utilizes this mode as well as the mimetic in the recapitulation of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" played through Radio Raheem's boom box, taking key sections of the song to underscore the frustration residents of the community feel living in a society in which they have little influence. It also acts as an extractive sample in that in its new context, as film soundtrack, it

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[33] Robinson's college friend and second black NFL player Woodrow Strode once stated, "If I have to integrate heaven I don't want to go" (Levy 164).

foreshadows the death of Radio Raheem by the "powers that be" and the residents'

release of anger in a riot after the event. *Menace II Society* utilizes these modes as well,

but also includes the manipulative. It is a rawer, more violent story that takes place in a

disjointed society that encourages youth to care for little more than sex, parties, violence,

and the esteem of their peers.

The Hughes Brothers and Techno-Black Syncretism: Technology, Genre, Ambient Sound, and History

The Hughes Brothers' share a vision of filmmaking characteristic of what Rose

calls "techno-black cultural syncretism." Rose describes rap, and its characteristics such

as sampling, as a "complex fusion of orality and postmodern technology" (85). She

insists that one should not view hip-hop's aesthetics exclusively as a "natural outgrowth"

of African American culture. Doing so, she says, "romanticize(s) and decontextualize(s)"

the technological and other cultural influences upon hip-hop and segregates the art (Rose

95). In her description of hip-hop she describes the use of technology to recontextualize

western musical forms as "techno-black cultural syncretism" (96). Techno-black cultural

syncretism describes both the way black artists re-mix existing technologies and the way

the technology "change(s) the sound of black music" (96).

Though only 20 years old when *Menace* debuted, the Hughes Brothers

exemplified Rose's techno-black cultural syncretism in their use of available technology.

When they began making short films, the availability of inexpensive video equipment

made filmmaking easier than DJing. [34]. The brothers utilized popular media technology in the same way Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa experimented with their parents' turntables and records. Unlike Lee or John Singleton (*Boyz n the Hood* [1991]), who attended NYU and USC film schools, respectively, the brothers, Detroit transplants raised by a single mother, educated themselves about filmmaking using the VCR and VHS tapes. The VCR made virtually every film ever released easily available for viewing. They copied (an example of both mimetic and extractive modes of the sample) favorite scenes from films and repeatedly studied the nuances of each frame (Mitchell 3). Previously, a cinephile either waited for local film festivals, attended theaters that catered to classic cinema, or attended film school. In order to actually make films, cameras and sound recording equipment were either rented or, if a film student, checked out from a university. After shooting, film was developed, and an editing room rented. This all assumes a person had the free time and money to do all this. For the Hughes Brothers growing up in an environment similar to the characters in their film, none of these options was available. They began their film career using a video camera borrowed from their mother's work. They then used two VCRs to edit the raw footage into a finished product similar to the cut and mix method DJs use when using two records to create their compositions (Mitchell 3). Like early DJs Grandmaster Flash and Kool DJ Herc, the autodidactic Hughes Brothers fulfilled Jacques Atalli's prediction that technology would ultimately allow listeners and consumers to become composers of "radically new forms" of art (Auslander 110-11).

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[34] By the late 1980s the touchstone turntable, the Technics SL-1200, cost several hundred dollars. The hip-hop DJ needed two turntables, plus multiple crates of records, and a vehicle large enough to transport them if he happened to be lucky enough to perform live

The Hughes Brothers, using techniques similar to the sample, attempt to change

the way film represents black media and history. They state that they avoid the three-act

structure of the Hollywood film and make, instead, films like "Pink Floyd's *The Wall* or

Disney's *Fantasia*" that feature episodic scenes heavily punctuated with sound and music

(Mitchell 1). Like Lee they use vignettes, or samples, of action saturated with meaningful

music. Furthermore, they eschew being a part of black cinema and do not solicit

comparisons to other black filmmakers (Mitchell 2). Like Rose and Gilroy, they refuse to

adopt the view that black aesthetics remain separate from American culture. Black

aesthetics *are* American culture, and to put them into a group based upon melanin content

ignores any other influences upon them and negates the original vision of each artist

(Mitchell 2). While their first three films (*Menace, Dead Presidents* [1995], and

American Pimp [1999]) feature primarily black casts and focus upon events within black

culture, they incorporate influences from a variety of cultures and periods which make up

their unique vision. In their careers, they share traits with and subvert diasporic cultural

tropes in the same manner as artists within hip-hop. Their style and philosophy expand

upon "Afrodiasporic histories and identities" but also acknowledge the importance of the

syncretic relationships to mainstream technology, traditions, and film histories (Rose 61).

Genre: Sampling Film Noir in *Menace II Society*

Drawing upon their prodigious knowledge of film, the brothers liberally sample

film noir tropes in *Menace II Society*, and thereby link the film with the very LA-centric

genre of noir. The mimetic and extractive sampling of noir reflects their appreciation of

traditional American and European film and its influence upon them even as they adapt

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the traditionally white genres to the black urban environment. The specific use of this narrative style works like the sample and carries with it connotations and antiphonal interactions with their audience's understanding of generic conventions and Hollywood film history. They reanimate the historical tropes of 1940s noir, especially the postmortem narration. The use of this trope recalls noir films such as *Sunset Boulevard* (1955), *Laura* (1944), and *Double Indemnity* (1944). The Hughes Brothers sample this piece of film history for use within a specifically African American context (Gormley 111).

Film noir as a genre often reflects the racism of its era, and with their first film Albert and Allen Hughes extracted the trope, recontextualized it, and made it applicable to the contemporary urban black experience within film noir genre. When noir films featured black characters, they, at best, were minor characters such as ex-boxer Ben Chaplin (Canada Lee) in *Body and Soul* (1947). Including a black actor or actress in the credits rarely occurred. Usually minorities played the roles of servants. In *Double Indemnity*, for example, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) refers to Walter Neff's car attendant Charlie (Sam McDaniel) as a "boy" when asked whether anyone noticed her arrival to Neff's apartment. Her view of Sam was so insignificant that he was not considered a credible threat to their affair and murder plot. McDaniel's role was minimized to the point that it goes uncredited.[35] Maybe the most offensive depiction of a minority character comes from Charleton Heston. In *Touch of Evil,* Heston acted in "brownface" as Mike Vargas, and German co-star Marlene Dietrich played the Mexican brothel madam Tana. Through sampling—extraction and manipulation of the original

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[35] Sam McDaniel is the brother of Oscar winner Hattie McDaniel and Etta McDaniel.

noir tropes—the Hughes Brothers pay homage to the genre, acknowledge the racism found in some these classic films, and create a space in the genre for the black cultural experience.

Postmortem narration works similar to the sample, as it uses an older source text to create another sort of text. The deceased narrator recalls action that has already taken place. The action onscreen, if we take it as the recollection of a character, becomes a revised interpretation of a past event. While not strictly a sample per se, elements of the narrative style resemble the sample; all the more so when produced by the rap video producers turned feature filmmaking team. Voiceover narration and flashbacks, two other common tropes of noir, are used by the Hughes Brothers' to drive the diegesis of their film, but the speaker remains hidden from the viewer until the end of the film. The film's plot, dialogue, and action offer what can be thought of as an "original" text from which the narrator recalls to tell his story.

The narrator in noir films often uses the voiceover as a vehicle for an apology and admission of guilt in the face of unbelievable chance happenings; the Hughes Brothers use the same device to make the historical circumstances *more* believable. The film chronicles Caine Lawson's (Tyrin Turner) summer after witnessing the murder of two convenience store clerks. Like the characters in *Do the Right Thing,* the discovery of Caine's death at the end of the film causes us to loop scenes and reinterpret Caine's actions with the revelation of his death. Caine says in the opening scene "Went into the store just to get a beer, came out an accessory to murder and armed robbery. It's funny like that in the hood sometimes. You never knew what was going to happen, or when. After that, I knew it was going to be a long summer." This opening bit of dialogue recalls

the (near death) confession of Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) in *Double Indemnity* (1944) to Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson). Neff, even close to death, reveals himself to be smug. He records a death bed confession as if it were a memo to his boss whom he takes pride in outsmarting. Neff seems to relish that Keyes came so close to solving the double indemnity death claim yet remained unable to best him. He then recounts the series of fateful events that led him to murder a client and ultimately get shot. Like Neff, Caine's narrative often works as an admission of guilt, but it lacks the same hubris.

The narrative explanation of chance and choice reveals a disbelief in the way fate has shaped the characters' lives. In film noir, as in *Menace*, voiceover narratives feature characters who are powerless and "[unable] to shape the events of their lives to their own design" (Hollinger 243-44). The voiceover becomes revelatory, used to locate a "fundamental truth causing an individually and/or socially abnormal or destructive situation" (Hollinger 244). The protagonist in film noir finds himself in unique situations that consist of a number of abnormal events. For the Hughes Brothers, the sample of the noir trope reveals that, to a young black male living in the inner-city, the abnormal circumstance characterized as exceptional in film noir is a mundane reality. This syncretic act of sampling a cinematic technique used in traditionally white filmmaking expands upon the potential of the original practice to reflect the black lived experience.

Gilroy notes that the black identity "is not simply a social and political category," but rather a "sense of self" based upon a repetition of "outcomes" over time of daily experience (102). It is the individual created by a variety of historical and social factors that the Hughes Brothers explore in *Menace.* The noir narrator is special and experiences a series of "abnormal" events. The Hughes Brothers instead offer a similar set of

circumstances as everyday occurrences. This ability of Caine to elucidate the seemingly random chain of events to his audience "enable[s] the spectator to discover new insights about poor black youth that counter the staple, controlling representations" (Watkins 202-3). By invoking black vernacular culture, the Hughes create new traditions and show how the contemporary experience of being black in America is connected to both African traditions and the legacies of slavery (Watkins 101). They, like hip-hop artists, use syncretism as a performance. They delineate how lived experience affects this "sense of self" that "implies the active participation of the involved subjects" to produce reflexive practices that "engage the interlocutors" in a "highly self-conscious" representation of the self (Chen 98).

Acousmetre and Image: The Sample as Ambient Sound and History

In the next section I examine the influence of ambient sound and the ways in which these incidental or seemingly unimportant noises take on importance in their connections with other elements of the scene. The ambient sound within *Menace II Society* engages the audience in a kind of antiphony and asks them to actively consider the relationship between the audio and visual. In traditional Hollywood cinema, filmmakers utilize sound to further film narrative and identify the location in which it takes place. Michel Chion identifies these as "passive" sounds that stabilize a cinematic image (85). It is "active" sound in film that engages an audience to ask questions about sound's relation to the onscreen images; it is also where we find the Hughes' creative use of the audio sample. Chion observes that synchronous sound is usually "swallowed up" by the "image alone or the film overall" but that, by *manipulating* the sound, the image,

and thus the meaning of the image, is changed (3-4). S. Craig Watkins discusses the importance of what Chion calls the *acousmetre* within *Menace II Society*. Chion defines the *acousmetre* as sound without an explicable source from which it emanates (19-22). The "acousmatic zone" fluctuates throughout film, challenging the onscreen image, whether based upon previously seen sources of sound, or the physical frame of the camera (22). This leads to a constant "possibility of deception" (22). According to Watkins, the Hughes' use sounds deceptively to reveal the complicated nature of the inner-city, in contrast to its over-simplification by law enforcement and the media. I want to think of the acousmetre as a sort of sample. It reproduces and extracts multiple sounds and noises, manipulates their volume and diegetic status to create a textually rich scene that runs counter to mainstream understandings of the inner-city space and its inhabitants.

The acousmetre's introduction in the first scene establishes the importance placed upon sound within the film by the filmmakers. The film opens with the voices of Caine and O-Dog before any images appear onscreen. The absence of visuals directs the viewers' focus upon the audio track. The opening also foregrounds the operation of traditional synchronous sound by using the acousmetre and disembodied voices. Similar to the DJ who takes an audio track and layers and mixes it with other sounds, the Hughes Brothers begin with the voice and build a soundtrack of other sounds to complement images. Ambient acousmatic sound blends with abstract images to "create rhythmic compositions" that communicate without words (Exceeda qtd. in D-Fuse 32). In the first scene a car horn blows during the acousmatic conversation between O-Dog and Caine. The same sound repeats close to the end of the scene, but changes from diegetic synchronous sound to nondiegetic. The sound becomes a marker of emotion, it becomes

an abstract representation of fear within the sound effects of the film. We hear it as the camera quickly pans across a convenience store, mimicking the quick look of the frightened wife to her husband at the cash register. The pan moves so quickly that it distorts and blurs the onscreen image. By manipulating the sound and image, the moment turns into a moment of synesthesia for the viewer that reveals the wife's emotional state. Layering the two elements of film, sight and sound, and distorting them, communicates the Asian woman's anxiety in an abstract, yet easily understandable, manner. Like a good DJ or producer, the Hughes Brothers use samples to refer to the immediate text, but also meanings beyond even the scope of the apparent. Beyond the woman's immediate onscreen fear lies a racial and cultural conflict between the Korean immigrant and black communities extracted by the Hughes Brothers.

The literal blind fear exhibited from the Korean shopkeeper refers to the inter-cultural friction between the black community and others who own businesses that serve them. Historically, residents of low-income black neighborhoods perceived immigrant business owners as exploitative, preying on their inability to travel freely and shop for better quality food with lower prices. Malcolm X claimed Jewish shop owners in black neighborhoods were "robbing (black residents) deaf, dumb, and blind!" He further claimed that Jews sold alcohol and spoiled food to Harlem residents. Malcolm X, whom Todd Boyd calls a "true intellectual," left the Nation of Islam due to its "xenophobic anti-intellectualism" after a trip to Mecca changed his views (387). In the 1980s and 90s black neighborhoods saw an influx of Asian business owners and a subsequent tension between the two communities. Spike Lee addresses this phenomenon in *Do the Right Thing*, depicting the only stores in the neighborhood owned by Korean immigrants and Italian

Americans. While residents openly mock them and resent their presence, the rioters at the film's end spare the Korean shop in a show of diasporic unity. Lee ultimately connects the immigrants to an oppressed class with the Korean man shouting, "I'm black!" to the mob. Two years after Lee's film, the anger over immigrant-owned shops surfaced again in Los Angeles with much more violent results.

The inclusion of the Korean couple in *Menace* and the acousmetre reference contemporary events in Los Angeles bringing the deeper context of American race relations into the foreground. The mise en scene of the store consists of crowded shelves packed full of wine bottles, snack foods, rows of soda and beer, and, behind the register, a full wall of liquor. The amount of destructive commercial items suggests a feeling of claustrophobia from being trapped in an economically exploitative environment. The image of two protagonists becomes lost among the store items that often contribute to health, social, and mental problems that exist at a higher rate in low-income areas. Their voices remain, as the items cover their bodies in a metaphorical digestion of the person, an exterior representation of their damaging effects. The camera pans across the scene and briefly catches the female Asian proprietor of the store. The husband demands the teens buy their beer after taking drinks from their bottles. The demand, though the teens have no desire to steal the beer, heightens the tension of the scene and makes a direct reference to recent events in South Central Los Angeles.

The interaction between O-Dog, Caine and the store clerks illustrates the reality behind the sort of chance events urban black youth experience. In March 1991 Soon Ja Du, the sister of a Korean liquor store owner, shot and killed 15-year-old Latasha Harlins over opening a bottle of orange juice. Despite having money in hand at the register

(verified by security camera footage), the store's owner continued to demand that Harlins pay. Du, initially charged with murder, was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter. Despite a recommendation of 16 years, she received probation and a $500 fine (Stevenson qtd. in Myers).[36] While not as well-known outside L.A., the Harlins murder, along with the Rodney King verdict became catalysts for the rebellion/riot of 1992. In the only traditionally sampled text of the film, the Hughes Brothers insert clips of the Watts Riot of 1965 after the credit sequence. By using the documentary footage, they claim a place in the history of civil unrest in South Los Angeles based upon inequity and assert their place as filmmakers documenting yet another decade of the continuing poor conditions and their inevitable outcomes.

In addition to creating immediate tension, as with the car horn, the filmmakers' use of the acousmetre creates slow dramatic tension. The tension comes to a climax in a manner radically different than Spike Lee's confrontation with Korean immigrants in *Do the Right Thing.* As Caine and O-Dog approach the counter to pay for their items, the faint sound of a baseball broadcast enters the soundscape. The game is initially heard as ambient sound, which leads to the assumption that it is what Chion describes as passive sound, a sonic presence used to add verisimilitude to the scene. Slowly the filmmakers manipulate the sound, and it increases in volume. The game announcers deliberately build the game's tension, drawing out the action of the game. The manipulation of its sonic intensity creates the possibility of action within the acousmatic zone of the film.

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[36] The ruling inspired Ice Cube to write "Black Korea." His solution in "Black Korea" includes gangsterism and assault. His lyrics include the warning **"*So pay respect to the black fist/ Or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp.*

Here the acousmetre works ironically and contrasts the idyllic American pastime that harkens back to the Victorian era with contemporary conflicts in the American inner-city.

The Hughes Brothers use the broadcast of the baseball game to reinforce the onscreen violence; the violence in the language of America's favorite pastime and its history of cultural and racial tension structure the scene. It also serves as ironic commentary on the film industry's too-common correlation of violence and racism as entertainment. Unlike Mookie's gradual build, violence surfaces quickly in *Menace*. Instead of allowing them to leave, the shop owner decides to vocalize his feelings about his customers. He tells O-Dog "I feel sorry for your mother." The announcer, as if punctuating the insult, exclaims "and he is going for the fence all the way." The acousmatic voice of the unseen radio announcer quickly rises in volume. In anger O-Dog shoots the man as the announcer shouts, "he tagged that one! Homerun!" Their voices, louder than the shots from O-Dog's, are no longer a part of the film's diegetic world. The Hughes Brothers use the voices of the announcers, like the horn, as a sample that works with the narrative action to punctuate the scene with heightened intensity. The mix of cinematic violence and recreational sports creates a tension, where the youth see violence as sport, something to foster a competitiveness of a sorts, as seen when O-Dog screens the CCTV footage of the murder for friends. This acts like a sort of highlight reel. This friction between violence and sports reinforces the brothers' purpose for making the film. *Menace II Society* refuses to be escapist sport or exoticize the black gangsta fantasy of suburban rap fans. It acts as a document attesting to historical and contemporary racism and poverty. The violence, in concert with the narration and dialogue of the non-gangster characters, acts to reveal the pressures and anxieties of young black men continually face.

Through a variety of techniques—reproduction, manipulation, extraction, cutting, and mixing—the filmmakers utilize the sample to create a syncretic, wholly African American cultural expression. True to the documentary impulse of the first cycle of hip-hop films, these Golden Age examples seek to creatively reveal a documentary truth based in actuality. Like rap from this era, the films entertain as well as educate, and find a way to participate within a capitalist world while simultaneously critiquing it and those it has traditionally exploited. No longer a teenage fad existing within the South Bronx, hip-hop reveals itself to be a complicated amalgam of history, geography, popular culture, economics, and technology. With the advances of video technology, hip-hop culture serves as a catalyst to influence techniques in films that don't directly document the hip-hop culture or its artists. Filmmakers of the Golden Age translate the aesthetics of the DJ for cinematic representation. Like each individual DJ, each filmmaker tries to evolve the art while preserving its history.

CHAPTER IV

50 CENT AND THE READYMADE IDENTITY OF THE MARKETPLACE

Thus far my dissertation has primarily focused upon the documentary impulse-reality and its connection to the "authenticity" of a text, and the use of the sample as an artistic tool to connote events and people based in reality. In the second chapter I focused on documentary representations of the culture of hip-hop as seen in the films *Style Wars* and *Wild Style*. I noted that in the most accurate fictionalized accounts of the artistic movement (*Wild Style* being its truest early depiction), directors took special care to cast rappers, DJs, b-boys, and graffiti artists who practice hip-hop arts contemporarily to the film. They played characters specific to their specialty—Lee and Lady Pink play graffiti artists, and their "characters" interact with actual rappers (such as Lee's night out with Busy Bee) and b-boys (the Rock Steady Crew) playing themselves. The filmmakers "sampled" actuality thereby preserving the integrity so vital to the culture's ethos.

The Golden Age of hip-hop saw an even more creative and nuanced use of the aesthetic technique of the sample. DJs and music producers often used the works of previous artists from other musical genres to generate multi-voiced musical collages, and filmmakers did the same. Unlike hip-hop's early cinematic depictions, which focused upon the culture of hip-hop specifically, films such as *Menace II Society* used the sample

to refer to film history and technique, as well as events that affected the inner-city black community. Filmmakers condensed multiple events into a few scenes by layering characteristics from reality into a collage. Using the technique of sampling, they produced a new work of art that referenced connections between various cultures, the past and the present, and between the mainstream and marginalized.

In Chapter 4, I examine hip-hop culture's change from an artist- and fan-based culture to one based upon capitalist ideas of profit maximization through market saturation and identity as consumer lifestyle. The concentrated focus upon image and mass marketing reflects the move to the hyper-capitalist ethos found in the Bling Era. Cash Money Records affiliated rappers B.G. and The Hot Boys (which included Lil' Wayne, Turk, and Juvenille) first popularized the term in 1999 on the song "Bling Bling" to denote wealth and its signifiers (jewelry, cars, name brand clothes, etc.) (Kameir et al). Bling's cultural influence is undeniable, becoming such a common word that the *Oxford English Dictionary* added it in 2003 (Thompson 483). Starting in the late 90s and peaking in the early 2000s, the era celebrated hip-hop's status as pop music through songs that celebrated expensive cars, champagne, and grills (gold and diamond-encrusted tooth caps). The song and its resulting ethos heralded the change from "hood and gangsta rap to what happens when those artists get paid" (Webb). This is not to say rappers refused to discuss wealth prior to this. Rap in particular has continually reveled in "getting paid." Even Rakim, celebrated as one of rap's most dexterous rhymers and spiritual MCs, often wore enormous gold rings with his custom MCM track suits (Chang 259). Artists in the Bling Era took this ethos to its extreme, composing whole songs about wearing dental appliances costing more than a new car. It was a celebration of the newfound money rap

was offering more new artists. Artists offered street stories found in gangsta rap mixed with the celebration of newfound wealth and ostentatiousness.

Rap music by this point was pop music, but it took several years and changes in the popular culture industries to make this happen. Def Jam label artists Run-D.M.C. performed at Live Aid, and their performance was broadcast to millions worldwide; by 1989 *YO! MTV Raps* debuted to fill a demand for rap videos (Thompson). In the last years of the Golden Age, major labels began signing rappers they could promote to white suburban audiences during MTV prime time; as a result, Hammer and Vanilla Ice sold 9 million and 11 million albums respectively, in the early 90s (Cantor).

Other industrial and social factors moved rap from being seen as a successful novelty to the most popular music in America, and led the way to Bling rap becoming the phenomenon it was. In the early 90s Nielsen and Billboard retooled the way it measured an artists' popularity with surprising results. Nielsen jettisoned its previous method for measuring the popularity of singles and albums in 1991, replacing it with SoundScan, which used actual sales from monitored cash registers instead of relying on record store reporting; a week after using SoundScan, N.W.A.'s *Efil4Zaggin* replaced REM as America's bestselling album (Thompson). Billboard began using a reporting service that monitored and reported the number of plays a song received (Thompson). The results revealed rap as the "mainstream sound and defining genre on the Billboard charts" (Thompson).

Bakari Kitwana who writes extensively about hip-hop culture, notes other factors that led to rap's dominance by the mid 1990s, partly due to the larger numbers of white youth

adopting it. In the 1980s, rap was the music of black teenagers and a few white fans, many of whom embraced it as an antiestablishment music that expressed progressive social views set to a funky beat (25-27). He claims that rap filled a vacuum left by the dissolution of other music scenes that drew mostly white audiences as popular culture shifted in the mid 1990s. Like punk before it, grunge quickly burned out. Kitwana points out that with grunge's death, hip-hop began to count "significant numbers of white kids among its audience" (28). At approximately the same time, several magazines began promoting hip-hop as a lifestyle and identity, giving white youth removed from black and urban settings "a means of discovering nearly anything they wanted to know about Black youth culture" (28-29). Popular culture and media became more important in the lives of Americans. Mainstream media and the greater influence of black popular culture in it (including the success of Oprah, Michael Jordan, Will Smith, and Spike Lee) offered white America "greater access to black culture in general" and "afforded Blacks greater visibility" (38-43).

Another important feature in the shift from the Golden Age to the Bling Era is the prevalence of the rap label mogul. In the Golden Age, hip-hop label heads mostly stayed in the background, happy to work behind the scenes. Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin and their Def Jam/Def American label created the rap mogul archetype with their roster of legendary artists (including legends Run DMC, Public Enemy, LL Cool J, and Beastie Boys) and hard-charging drive for success. Rubin's mission with Simmons was to change the mainstream in Def Jam's favor based on "the integrity of the records" (Chang 244). Pop music and politics mixed easily at Def Jam, where they sold millions of records with a vision of rap "reintegrating American culture" (Chang 245). The next generation of

moguls, primarily Sean "Puffy" Combs of Bad Boy Records and Marion "Suge" Knight of Death Row Records, bridged the space between the Golden Age and Bling Era. They created multi-million dollar music empires using spectacle and the popular media to further their empires. Mainstream press such as the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* closely followed the feud between the East and West coast rap empires. The media-fueled rivalry between the two companies went from trading barbs to physical altercations that ended with the labels' biggest stars, Tupac Shakur and Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace, dead due to gun violence likely caused by the feud in September 1996 and March 1997 (*Hip-Hop Evolution*).

Rap moguls in the Bling Era with an eye for talent began growing stables of artists like labels before them, but did more to expand their business interests. A large part of the Bling ethos is based in the creation of wealth. To that end many of them used their roles in music as departure points in to other media and industries. There seems to not be a market segment untouched by rappers--clothing, music, electronics, liquor, and video games. Where previous Golden Age rappers appeared in commercials for liquor, the moguls in the Bling Era owned the liquor companies (Jahmal). Sean Combs retooled Bad Boy after the death of the Notorious B.I.G. and began focusing more on glamour. He began his own successful rap career, wore shiny suits in day-glo colors, promoted champagne, establishing Ciroc vodka, name-checked expensive cars, and cast synchronized dancers in his videos. Dr. Dre left Death Row and created Aftermath records. Within three years of leaving Death Row Aftermath's albums and production talents out-earned The Beatles (Knopper). He partnered with Interscope, and signed Eminem and 50 Cent among others, giving its parent company Universal the nickname

"the house that Dre built" (Knopper). Master P's No Limit records sold millions of records with little video or radio play. Master P (Percy Miller) negotiated a contract that allowed him to keep 75% of his profits and expanded into other areas such as film and clothing (Barber). His business acumen led No Limit rapper Silkk the Shocker to exclaim on his song "The Shocker" that they were "Independent and black owned and still got money like Al Capone." Hip-hop paid more than ever and more media companies rushed to distribute rap music. The mogul's mogul Jay-Z began in this era and is, as of 2019, worth $1 billion (the first hip-hop billionaire). In addition to his rap career he co-owns liquor brands with Bacardi and a music streaming service (Greenburg).

The Bling Era, the era of big money, big cars, and moguls, saw a shift in focus as rappers began taking street economics to the American marketplace with an intensity unseen before in pop music. Talib Kweli rapped "We're survivalists turned to consumers" (Chang 447). These survivor instincts saw rappers diversify and branch out into markets beyond music or the arts. Jay-Z notes that "hip-hop from the beginning has been aspirational" (Greenburg). These aspirations became even more focused and apparent in this era, where songs like "All about the Benjamins" and "Big Pimpin'" expressed a desire for success in a more honest and transparent way not found in other music genre.

Moguls in the Bling Era mimicked models of growth laid out by larger corporations to market their "brand" or the image as a rapper (usually themselves and fellow labelmates). One way they grew their brand is through the formation of conglomerates. By establishing multiple businesses based on their rap brand, they were able to take advantage of synergy created between these different brands. In this model, each

company benefits due to its relationship with the rapper, his/her history, and image, and it distinguishes it among other companies. Without the image, the company would be simply another brand among many.

One example of the way a rap mogul utilized these models is the way Lil Wayne established his brand outside rap. One of the first to use the word "bling," Lil Wayne distributed his brand over a number of companies he established: Bogey Cigars, Sqvad Up (mobile game app), TRUKFIT (clothing), Young Money Entertainment (music label), and Young Money Sports (sports agency). Most companies he owns directly benefit from cross promotion with Lil Wayne's popularity as a rapper (some, like his clothing and mobile game feature his likeness) and creates synergy between the two based on his popularity.

Like major media companies, he is also able to use his brand developed as a rapper to participate in joint ventures with other companies, in which he endorses a product and works on designing consumer items without the risk of establishing a new company. He has joined with Dr. Dre's Beats headphones to create a Lil Wayne signature line. Skateboard clothing company Supra worked with him to release his own line of skate shoes. Some of his joint ventures have been global as well, allowing him to easily distribute his brand abroad. Hip-hop is wildly popular in France, with millions of potential consumers of products endorsed by their favorite artist. Lil Wayne was able to capitalize on this through his collaboration with French watch company Wize and Ope, who created a signature watch line bearing his name (lilwaynehq). As impressive as Lil Wayne's accomplishments are, several rappers from this era utilized strategies used by

larger companies in the cultural industries to ensure that they would continue to be paid by rap after their popularity waned.

In this chapter I examine 50 Cent's career as a rapper and a mogul through his films and videos. I assert that his career as a rapper is a part of a synergistic business model based upon selling the 50 Cent "brand," which transcends his individual identity or artistic expression. As a counterpoint to 50's career, I cite the often-prescient film *CB4*, a parody that predicted rap's increased popularity as it became associated with criminality and wealth. *CB4* mockingly critiques these changes while 50 Cent exemplifies the new emphasis on commerce over artistry or politics in the Bling era.

I use John D. Ramage's idea of the *readymade identity* to describe the work marketization performs on hip hop artistry in the Bling Era. The readymade identity is an "off-the-shelf" identity that uses signifiers of "authenticity" uncoupled from the real communities and real histories that informed hip hop in earlier eras. The point is not that 50 Cent is "inauthentic" as compared to, say, Chuck D, but that his performance of authenticity centers more on *signifiers* of rebellion, like sex and violence, than on actual political or social engagement. His performance is a simulacrum of those elements of artistry, storytelling, community, and social location used to define hip hop as "authentic " in previous generations. It is an insincere performance, one that always *feels* like a performance because it always seems calibrated to "make a buck." The concept of the "readymade" captures the transformation in notions of "authenticity" associated with the Bling Era, and I will use it as a shorthand for this set of changes.

Cb4: Parody and the "Thug" Identity

CB4, directed by Tamra Davis and based on Chris Rock and Nelson George's

screenplay, parodies and satirizes the extreme characteristics and personae of rappers. The parody critiques the idea of authenticity equaling the "ghettocentric," where one's artistic merit is measured based upon the performance of misogyny and violence. The film centers on Albert Brown (Rock), whose given identity originates from a working-class home, with two strict but loving parents. His neo-hippie girlfriend would rather listen to the bi-racial, John Lennon cum Curtis Mayfield styled rocker Lenny Kravitz, than to rap (Albert rolls his eyes in disgust when she suggests listening to him). With aspirations for fame like his heroes, Albert transforms his identity as nice guy from a stable home with a doting girlfriend to that of a gangster hailing from the ghetto of "Locash," California. The parody focuses upon the readymade and constructed characteristics found in gangsta rap and the extent to which some pursue these readymade identities as markers of "authenticity." The authentic identity is often humorless, leaving no room for parody or laughing at oneself.[37] Albert's alter ego and rap group are an obvious parody of N.W.A. CB4's song and video for "Straight Outta Locash" mimics N.W.A.'s "Straight Outta Compton." While the CB4 video focuses upon the violent imagery for the sake of parody, the N.W.A. video's primary purpose is to protest Los Angeles Police brutality in impoverished and minority neighborhoods. Many rappers, like N.W.A. are not simply gangsters, but complicate the image of the urban black male. Like Albert in *CB4,* middle-class Sean Combs became rapper and producer Puff Daddy; a

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[37] In what he now calls "one of the dumbest things I did in my career," Coolio took great offense to Weird Al Yankovich's parody of his 1996 song "Gangster's Paradise," which Yankovich rewrote as "Amish Paradise." Coolio later admitted his "being too magnificent and too terrific" about himself kept him from perceiving the compliment of having a song parodied by the same man who recorded songs based on, and likely helped the careers of, Michael Jackson and Madonna. At the time the rapper was angered to the point of physically threatening Yankovich on the song "Throwdown 2000" (Johnson).

schoolteacher's son, Christopher Wallace, became gangsta rapper Biggie Smalls; and established political rapper/actor Tupac Shakur became a proponent of "thug life."[38] Each of these individuals' identities are complicated, and do not fit into an easy niche. They are as thoughtful and talented as they are "street" and rough; Albert's is as complicated, but he refuses to allow that through, and instead relies solely upon signifiers of hyper-masculinity, danger, and rebellion he performs.

The evolution from the Golden Age of hip-hop to the Bling Era can be summed up in the difference between the titles of popular albums from each era. The title for Eric B. and Rakim's classic *Paid in Full* (1987) denotes remuneration for work performed by the duo for their artistry. As I described earlier in my dissertation, the album cover features them with their "payment" from their efforts, and includes cash, gold jewelry, and Dapper Dan suits. In contrast, 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2003) features the rapper staring from behind a pane of glass with a bullet hole in its center. We can either assume the bullet hole comes from 50 Cent, indicating his potential for violence, or that a bullet shot with 50 as its target was ineffective, as he is a sort of superhuman. Along with the album's title, the image portrays the accumulation of wealth as a goal accomplished through force. 50 specifically emphasizes the physical aspect of his identity, which carries the connotation that violence is his primary means of gaining wealth. Although masculine bravado appears in rap early on (found in boasting about physical prowess and rap skills), there is a focus on the hyper-masculinity of 50's bodybuilder physique that had not been seen previously. The ripped, muscular body is a signifier of masculinity, a

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[38] Initially cast in *Menace II Society,* Tupac attacked the Hughes Brothers on set. Afterwards he appeared on *YO! MTV Raps* and admitted his assault. The footage was used in court later to convict him.

bling-like object itself, bigger and more impressive than others. Instead of Dapper Dan suits, a shirtless 50 wears an accessory adapted from the Harlem tailor's aesthetic to reflect the rapper's ethos. He wears a Gucci shoulder holster that matches his gray Gucci belt. What 50 trades on are the most obvious, and least effective, signs of empowerment—physical strength and the capacity for violence. In previous eras, artists performed masculine bravado through raps boasting about how much better their skills were than their rivals. Graffiti artists worked to paint the biggest and boldest mural or go all-city. B-boys would mock their competition on the dance floor before exhibiting their signature moves. Hip-hop was originally used as a way to channel this (primarily) masculine energy that manifested itself in more harmful ways on the streets. Many rappers, though they may have committed some of the violent acts they rap about, readily admit the raps are cautionary tales, reportage, or the musical equivalent of action movies. Rap is the venue used as a way to move away from violence of the streets. Instead of using hip-hop to escape violence, 50 Cent uses it as a venue to start beefs and capitalize on this violent tendency as a brand worth investing in.

This is not to say that Curtis Jackson/50 Cent's identity is anything similar to Albert's in *CB4*. Albert pretends to be a criminal with the air of violence. 50 in many ways constructed a hard exterior to cope with the harsh realities of his life. By his own admission 50 possesses an aggressive if not violent personality.[39] His identity also includes growing up poor in a single-parent home. Jackson's mother dealt drugs before

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[39] 50 Cent is known for his "beefs" with other rappers throughout his career. The altercations with his contemporaries, some of which include Ja Rule, The Game, Jadakiss, and Gunplay—some of which moved from the rap diss to physical altercations including members of each camp using guns.

being murdered. Prior to his rap career, 50 lived as a criminal who often feuded with gangsters, many of whom belonged to organized crime families. After becoming a rapper, he used his criminal background as his media image. That is, he took those pieces of his given identity that were well-suited to the desires of the new, more expansive rap marketplace and performed them exclusively, without variance or temperance. He translated those real circumstances from history into myth.

The scars from surviving nine gunshots at close range are the most apparent of signifiers at first glance. Shirtless on his album cover, 50 displays the scars as signifiers of bravado. He is a survivor of street violence that should have killed him. One of the nine wounds from the injuries comes from a bullet that passed through his cheek. The wound contributes to the timbre of his voice, and his physical appearance. The scars from bullet holes became an operative part of the origin myth of the 50 Cent media persona. His ability to avoid death makes him uniquely able to market his experience as an alpha male. This is not to negate the tragic losses experienced within the hip-hop community through violence. Rap often attracts young men from violent neighborhoods, and its violence often follows them in their career. The murders of Tupac Shakur, Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace, Jason "Jam Master Jay" Mizell, Andre "Mac Dre" Hicks, and Lamont "Big L" Coleman act as reminders that murder is a tragic reality in rap. 50 uses this simulation of murder and resurrection, to appeal to ever-growing numbers of rap fans.

As N.W.A., Snoop Dogg, and Tupac demonstrated a few years before 50 Cent's debut, gangsta rap sells. Dr. Dre and his partner, Interscope record veteran Jimmy Iovine, found a combination of gangster and Gucci in 50 Cent, who aligned perfectly with the

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changing rap landscape. Given the larger number of white youth buying rap music, the music industry needed to repeat formulas that worked while staying relevant. Kitwana notes that the business of hip-hop is "firmly in the hands of white American men, mostly baby boomers" (45). With the concentration of white men giving the final say over what is "mainstream," the "final product would appeal to other white kids" (47). Many of these fans reveled in it as a way to experience "armchair ghetto tourism" without having to leave the safety of their suburbs (Ragusea). 50 Cent was a window into this world for many white rap fans. This is contrary to Golden Age artists like Public Enemy who promoted black pride and a thoughtfulness about race and class in America. Chuck D, Public Enemy's rapper, notes that what comes out of the music industry "is packaged and sold as hip-hop, but it is a distortion of hip-hop culture" (Kitwana 47).

50 Cent and the Construction of the Readymade Identity

Ramage argues that humans can "misbehave" but cannot "mis-act" (62). In his definition of the two, behaving is motion without thought and "conforming to readymade identities" (62). Action denotes taking "some responsibility for the construction of one's identity… and possess[ing] the capacity to say no to some of the given and ascribed elements" that make up human identity (63). Much of the Golden Age consisted of saying no to ascribed elements. Groups such as X Clan and Public Enemy said no to the ascribed elements society places upon black men. They worked to promote a positive image and complicate white America's stereotypes of the black community. Even many gangsta rappers of the Golden Age like Ice T and Compton's Most Wanted spun morality tales of gang life, offering a complicated view of its thrills as well as its deadly outcomes.

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Gangsta rappers were also at the forefront of revealing rampant police brutality in black neighborhoods. 50 Cent utilizes the street stories and jettisons their complications or political potential. By doing this consumers are given a readily-digestible identity, especially those white consumers wanting safe "ghetto tourism." It plays on readily available stereotypes and signifiers of hyper-masculinity and the dangerous urban black male.

Before the release of his debut album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* 50 "work[ed] hard to mythologize the shooting outside his grandmother's house as well as the murder of his assailant" only weeks later (Brown 185). In interviews promoting his album, he offered hints about the incident without explicitly naming others involved in the shooting. Instead, he pointed both listeners and federal law enforcement to his album's lyrics for clues about the shooting, which included names of organized crime figures. Ethan Brown says that 50 even named his shooter on the song "Many Men" (185-87). Daryl "Hommo" Baum, the alleged gunman, plays a large part in the rapper's origin myth, as he "repeatedly implied in interviews" that Baum's death resulted from the attack. The murder of Hommo by 50 proved to be the most widely known account of the man's death. A federal investigator's report says that Hommo died from a single gunshot after a beef with a local crew of gangsters (187). 50 continues to stand by the story despite these facts.

The similarity between Albert Brown and Jackson's choices of rap names underscores the extent to which identity and performance of signifiers of criminality and violence are successful in the marketplace. Both Albert and 50 Cent utilize names of gangsters in their community as signifiers of danger. In *CB4,* Gusto (Charlie Murphy)

owns the local rap club in Brown's hometown of Locash, CA. Perceived as the harmless

young men they are, he refuses to allow Brown and his friends to perform in his club. To

Brown, Gusto appears to have everything one could want—jewelry, cars, guns, a

"hoochie" girlfriend, and a bodyguard. Once Gusto and his gang are incarcerated in "cell

block 4" Albert adopts his name and gangster image, using stories of the real Gusto's

criminal activity as a means to secure "street" credibility and build his own rap career.

When rappers choose names based upon crime figures, they are usually hyperbolic

representations based upon celebrity criminals such as Rick Ross (William Roberts),

Noreaga (Victor Santiago, Jr.), Capone (Kiam Akasi Holley), Scarface (Brad Jordan), and

Lil Cease (James Floyd).[40] According to Ethan Brown, Curtis Jackson took his moniker

from a Brooklyn-based "stick-up kid" named Kelvin Martin, (142). This name serves to

locate 50 in a place familiar to himself and many of his listeners, and acts as another

example of the way hip-hop uses references from reality for performance. By using a

local crime figure, it serves to tie-in to a readymade identity. Unlike Albert, 50

acknowledges his namesake but takes his street name wholly as his own, using it to

establish a credibility. Again, Jackson utilizes a resurrection, the name of a noted dead

local gangster, to create an aura (Ramage calls it the "gist") of a person unconcerned with

death in his pursuit of money.

Like other origin myths, the one constructed by 50 gets told time and again. Upon

the release of his debut album, 50 had already been "mythologizing" both his shooting

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[40] Rick Ross is the exception, who took his name from the incarcerated "Freeway" Ricky
Ross, who is claimed to be the inventor of crack cocaine. Ross the rapper is currently
facing trouble from the organized crime syndicate Gangster Disciples after mentioning
names of their associates on songs. The gang has posted many videos threatening the life
of Rick Ross.

and subsequent retribution upon his attackers in interviews (185). Mythologizing is part of creating a star persona within the media industries. But 50 Cent builds a less complex, easily digestible identity focused on signifiers of masculinity and a performance of dominance. Many rappers' origins begin in the streets like 50 Cent. Afrika Bambaataa led the Black Spades gang of South Bronx; many rappers have been involved in Crips and Blood sets. This background added a gravitas and believability to their images; they knew and overcame the hold of the street. Certainly their identity included this air of danger. They worked to complicate their images, however. For example, former member of the Crips, Snoop Dogg also presents himself as a family man who volunteers for local Los Angeles peewee football leagues. 50's choice to mythologize is not unique and is indicative of the Bling Era as a whole. However, he fails to nuance his identity in a way previous rappers did. He lives the image.

50 Cent's debut album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* sold millions of copies. The video for the album's first single, "In da Club," offers an extended view of the super-human image already carefully cultivated in promotional interviews and photos. The video chronicles Curtis Jackson's transformation into a consumer product. By using imagery found in science fiction and mad scientist films, "In da Club" strives to sell a bling lifestyle through the creation of a rap superhero whose marketability is fine-tuned to attract the largest number of consumers. The video's premise is an example of Chuck D's issue with contemporary hip-hop, in which white dominance of the rap industry attempts to "put soul in a bottle" and is "packaged and sold as hip-hop" (Kitwana 47-48). Instead of the political lyricism of Chuck D or reformed gangster tales of Ice T, "In Da Club"

celebrates what Chuck D sees as a focus on consumption above all else, even if it trades on stereotypes of masculine black violence to draw consumers.

The title for Drew Millard's article marking the ten-year anniversary of the rapper's debut album is indicative of the rapper's ethos: "50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* is Ten Years Old Today, Go Out and Punch Somebody." Millard celebrates 50's ability to market himself through the creation of a hypermasculine persona. The video focuses on this process of identity construction and attempts to convince its viewers they need this corporate made, hyper-capitalist creation, not actual resistance to the images found in the marketplace of the music industry.

Eminem (Shady) and rapper/producer Dr. Dre (Aftermath) literally cultivate (develop) 50 Cent in a laboratory. The "lab" is often used as slang for the recording studio where artists work to perfect their craft and record songs that further the creation of identity. A quick cut back to the artist development center reveals the rapper wearing heart monitors as he exercises. Soon after he raps into a mic in what looks like a server room where computer equipment is maintained. The server room in the contemporary business world literally runs the business via computer networks, and 50 rapping into a microphone connects him to a network of bits and data, and a larger corporate entity. He is literally uploading himself to the corporate network. 50, working with the hugely successful Dr. Dre and Eminem, acts to cultivate an image that will replicate their success in the marketplace.

An important image in the video is that of anesthetization. The video represents the state as not only acceptable, but desirable. The first image of 50 presented to the viewer is that of him unconscious upon a table willingly undergoing surgery to have

robotic parts inserted into his body. The chorus of the song refers to alcohol and ecstasy

while club-goers dance, connoting the intoxication of the substances. Artists previously

used this state to negatively describe a life lived without purpose or meaning. Modernist

poet T.S. Eliot described an aging man's reflective evening of regret about a life

"measured out with coffee spoons" as a "patient etherized upon a table." Elvis Costello,

in "Radio, Radio" takes the metaphor further and applies it to mass media's attempts to

pacify audiences to a point that they will accept marketing as truth. His song describes a

music industry bent upon "cutting out" dangerous artists in favor of safe music created to

"anesthetize the way that you feel."[41] 50 Cent's message found in the "In da Club" video

is basically the same as Costello's—marketers of music and culture want to lull the

audience into passive acceptance of a readymade identity. The difference between

Costello's song and films such as the *Matrix* and *Blade Runner* that inspired the "In da

Club" video is that 50 the artist's active engagement with the marketplace is something

celebratory. This is problematic, since his embrace of marketable commodity image of

violent black masculinity can have actual negative consequences for both the market and

people buying his products. As this image sells, corporations come to expect more of the

same, creating a feedback loop of negative stereotypes. Mark Anthony Neal says that this

creates an environment where "only certain examples of blackness" are accepted in the

marketplace, and often the examples trade on stereotypes (*Beyond Beats and Rhymes*). As

only stereotyped identities are accepted, negative stereotypes are reinforced for rap's

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[41] After a few bars of "Less than Zero" on *Saturday Night Live* in 1977, Costello stopped
the song, apologized to the audience, and launched into "Radio Radio." He stared icily
into the camera as producer Lorne Michaels fumed at the unannounced change of songs
as well as the song's sentiments regarding mass media. Costello did not make another
live television appearance in the United States until the 1980s (Thomson 109)

largest consumer base-white youth. With the FCC's media deregulation in 2003, fewer companies own more outlets, limiting diverse views. These few companies continue to reproduce what makes them money, no matter the social cost (*Beyond Beats and Rhymes*). "In da Club" presents the acceptance of a readymade identity as inevitable and actually preferable to "real" life. In the bling era, the party and material signifiers of wealth and physical dominance are celebrated as an alternative to the grim reality of the streets. This is counterproductive, as it encourages consumers to buy into an identity that often perpetuates negative outcomes found on the streets, as well as promoting a one-dimensional, negative perception of black culture, which is bought into by many white consumers.

Traditionally, science fiction films depict those who attempt to recreate life in a laboratory as naïve at best and criminally insane at worst. Science's attempt to replicate the natural world usually produces a destructive or threatening creation. The attempt at human evolutionary advancement devolves to a point that compels its inventor to destroy his creation. Filmmakers have continually repeated the trope in films such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1912), *Frankenstein* (1930), *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984), *Re-Animator* (1985), *The Fly* (1986), and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). The metamorphosis of 50 Cent by Dr. Dre and Eminem appears to be a more fulfilling life than his previous one. What it presents us is the glorification of simulation, hyper-masculinity, wealth, and status.

In order to receive the "new flesh" of the readymade identity (to use David Cronenberg's term for the media network's effects on viewers in his film *Videodrome* (1983)), audiences are asked to buy into the 50 Cent identity. Films such as the *Matrix,*

Videodrome, and *They Live!* (1988) feature a secretive network of players conspiring to convince people to adopt a pliable identity. Usually the conspirators "anesthetize" the populace through undetected messages delivered via mass media. When the protagonist of the films discovers the conspiracy, they become endangered by an omniscient presence radiating out from the media. Those behind the conspiracy fear a revolt if their mind-control is revealed to the masses by the protagonist. The transparency found in the "In da Club" video does a better job than subliminal messages could hope to. Henry Krips notes that the Althusserean "hail" to the audience, which is the work done by this video, is less concerned with "precision of terms" but works primarily "upon the gaps in what it says" (74). The "gap" in the video can be thought of as the cut between the two primary locations featured in the video.

In the laboratory, as stated earlier, 50 trains under the supervision of his mentors to construct an identity. The video's other location is "the club," which is filled with members of 50's G Unit posse, Eminem's D12 crew, and young females. The first illustrates the active process of constructing identity. The second setting demonstrates the adoption and performance of a readymade identity by others. Rap fans are both consumers and community members. Community is formed through a shared appreciation of expression and members of this community will choose various ways to express membership in their identities. Hip-hop, like many other subcultures, relies on consumerism as a way to express membership. For example, Run-DMC became known for their track suits and Adidas sneakers which many rap fans adopted as their own. As mentioned earlier, there are aspects of 50's identity that could be harmful as it seems to

trade on performing negative stereotypes, especially so given the mass distribution of it without equal distribution of other identities from which to adopt.

The club effectively acts as a commercial for the readymade identity constructed at the Shady/Aftermath development center. It displays the benefits of adopting the identity. 50 holds court as the center of attention, as similarly dressed men flank him. The viewer sees what the fully formed identity looks like, an identity that can be bought and requires no process; it is product only. After 50's identity is constructed, the club shows the results of the change. The laboratory "develops artists," the word "develop" connoting an enhancement and alteration in an individual's original state.

The culmination of the "development" rests upon successfully convincing consumers to adopt this readymade identity. The video's transparency about its motive of marketing 50 Cent continues until its final frame. The camera pans the length of the club, revealing Dr. Dre and Eminem viewing their creation from behind a two-way mirror. The club is not what it seems, but another room of the laboratory, a simulacrum of a club or the readymade identity of what a club should be. The camera cuts to a shot looking over the shoulders of Dre and Eminem and into the club. This shot reinforces the transparency of the readymade identity development witnessed throughout the video. This revelation is not about a panoptic observation, but about researchers learning how to convince the viewer to voluntarily submit to changing identity. Consumers are continually asked to renegotiate their identities through advertising. What this video suggests is that the viewer should adopt an identity that trades on stereotypes. The more consumers adopt this identity, the more corporations reinforce it by bringing more of the same to the marketplace.

CB4 parodies violence and sexuality in videos like "In da Club" but depicts its thugs as shallow buffoons. While Rock bases the group CB4 on N.W.A., he also acknowledges the group's importance and talent in a list of his top 25 hip-hop albums. He notes that N.W.A. 's *Straight Outta Compton* is still his favorite rap album, calling it "like a British Invasion for black people." Telling of Rock's preference for the Golden Age's variety, the number 5 album is The Pharcyde's *Bizarre Ride II the Pharcyde*, an album Rock calls "ahead of its time." He notes that albums like this are rarely made anymore since "everybody got taken over by gangsterism." Rock holds the belief (as did others involved in the earlier hip-hop community) that rap could reflect all aspects of life, whether it was the brutality of N.W.A. or the often funny and self-deprecating style of Pharcyde. What Rock parodies in *CB4*, beyond the obvious "studio gangster," is the adoption of a readymade media identity in hopes of gaining respect and a sense of authenticity based within narrow criteria. Instead, Rock warns of the unintended consequences of adopting such an identity. In my next section I discuss 50 Cent's simulated warning against adopting a gangster identity and the evident contradiction given his career-long efforts to convince young audiences to adopt the G-Unit/50 Cent readymade.

Do as I Say: 50's Insincere Argument Against Adopting His Readymade Identities

Beginning in January 2003 with "In da Club," 50's career focused upon convincing consumers to adopt his identity as brand. The breadth of consumer products he involved himself with rivals that of the Beatles and Kiss.[42] Over ten years he

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[42] Kiss bass player and leader says his band sells over "3000 licensed products, everything from condoms to caskets" (Perman).

consistently sold fewer albums after *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, but during that same time he

also transcended his initial role as rapper, as many rap moguls do. It soon became

obvious that music was secondary to selling his readymade identity through other outlets.

As I have previously noted, traditional business methods such as networking and utilizing

mass media to spread the artistry and culture of hip-hop have been a part of hip-hop since

the old school and Golden Age eras. One could argue that 50 is just the natural evolution

of consumerism in hip-hop.

Beginning with Sugarhill records' Sylvia Robinson, "hip-hop moguls," and

entrepreneurs such as Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin became symbols of growth-

centered careers. The hip-hop mogul became a visual signifier for the "good life," as well

as a social leader. Russell Simmons, in particular, exemplifies "growth-mediated forms of

social uplift" through his business ventures to "normalize black political discourses"

(Smith 71). Due to his cultural capital gained *through* his financial capital, he now writes

op-ed articles for news outlets such as *The Huffington Post.* His clothing company Phat

Farm legitimized once maligned hip-hop fashion. His most recent endeavor, the Rush

Card, is a refillable pre-paid debit card specifically marketed to those without access to

banks. Simmons exemplifies "the figure capable of extracting the productive element

from the yawning ghetto maw, for the benefit of broader society" (Smith 84).

50 Cent's entrepreneurial success is exemplary of the bling era's shift to a broader

marketplace, one not targeted to the street or dedicated hip-hop community but inclusive

of mainstream audiences in the US and around the world. This broader market has made

it possible for hip hop moguls to pursue a wider array of merchandising opportunities,

which 50 has certainly done. Capitalizing on his success at the time, 50 diversified his

brand to a multitude of products seemingly unrelated to hip hop culture. He first created the G-Unit clothing line, the RBK line of sneakers for Reebok, both aesthetically similar to Hilfiger, Simmons' Phat Farm, and a host of other brands worn by the hip-hop crowd. However, his most lucrative venture involves capitalizing on his interests in Glaceau, manufacturer of the sports drink Vitaminwater. During his involvement with Glaceau, the company experienced rapid success with its grape flavored "Formula 50." Coca-Cola bought the sports drink for $4.1 billion, of which it is estimated 50 Cent received $60 million to $100 million (Chamas). The drink, however, has been described as "a more aspirational version of the ultimate ghetto beverage," the cheap Kool-Aid-style fruit drinks called "quarter water" (Chamas). The difference is its marketing of 50 Cent and his identity.

50's mythic persona is key to his marketing strategy and touches all of the various products he has endorsed. Rap moguls of the Bling Era took cues from the cultural industry's corporate strategies. 50 Cent was no less shrewd in his marketing of his image, creating conglomerates that all would benefit 50 Cent. He licensed his likeness for two videogames, for example, and both make sure to include "50 Cent" in their title and allow the gamer to play as the rapper. In his first video game "50 Cent: Bulletproof" (2005) players move through New York's criminal underworld in search of the person responsible for shooting the protagonist 9 times. The gamer, from a safe distance, enters a digital world lived in by 50 Cent. [43] In 2009 he released "50 Cent: Blood in the Sand," which featured a storyline in which 50 Cent and G Unit travel to the middle east to

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[43] The game's plot was "written" by *Sopranos* and Emmy winning writer Terry Winter (Goldstein).

reclaim his stolen gold. His most recent electronics venture is a high-end headphones company that feature the "STREET by 50 CENT" and "SYNC by 50 CENT." After his mentor Dr. Dre's "Beats by Dre" line became hugely successful, 50 followed suit with branded products like Dre's. Instead of partnering with an established audio company, 50, ever the mogul, established his own corporate brand and charged $100-$200 more for his products. Each product, in some way, promises to offer the purchaser access to the rapper's identity, whether it is his brute physicality (in the games) or the conspicuous consumerism of the Bling Era ($500 headphones).

His films, however, represent the height of his marketing. The 2005 the biopic *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* premiered in theaters worldwide and boasted Academy Award winning director Jim Sheridan and *Sopranos* writer Terry Winter. The film told the now well-known story of the rivalry between the rapper and Harlem organized crime figure Kenneth "Supreme" McGriff and included the ubiquitous nine gunshots. Its marketing images included the rapper holding a semi-automatic pistol in his left hand and a microphone in his right. Given the media saturation of a major studio film release, the ads created a controversy outside the world of hip-hop. The studio quickly changed the image to 50 cradling an infant. With his second film, *Before I Self Destruct* (2009), he reinforces messages of violence and misogyny, the darker side of the bling era, but also attempts to clarify himself to his marketing segment as part of the film's storyline.

As discussed throughout this chapter, 50 Cent's identity never hides aspirations for dominance as the ultimate rap mogul. When Dr. Dre partnered with the Beats company to sell $250 headphones, 50 established his own headphone company and released headphones costing $500; when other rappers endorsed soft drinks and liquor,

50 bought the drink company and named a flavor after himself. *Before I Self Destruct* is 50's cinematic version of this pattern. Not only having directed, written, and starred in the film, he used it to create market synergy by releasing an album with not only the same title as the film, but also using the same image on both the DVD case and CD.

The film tells the story of Clarence who is left to raise his younger brother, Shocka (Elijah Williams), after his mother's murder. Faced with financial burden Clarence quits his stocker position at a market. Soon after, Clarence kills his mother's murderer and later confesses to the murder to the assassin's employer, Sean (Clifton Powell). Sean hires Clarence as his replacement hit man after speaking with him less than five minutes. The film then presents 50 Cent as an uncatchable assassin, dating the prettiest woman in the neighborhood, and supporting Shocka who, at 13, is offered full scholarships at every Ivy League university. After reinforcing the 50 Cent identity of violence, misogyny, and materialism for 90 minutes, the last scene purports to serve as a warning. His girlfriend Princess (Sasha Delvalle) colludes with another boyfriend and robs and murders Clarence. His death is presented as a consequence not of his lifestyle, but of trusting a female. Shocka abandons his Ivy league dreams and vows revenge.[44] In addition to the closing scene, one other acts as a cautionary tale, but actually communicates the opposite sentiment.

After the controversy concerning the *Get Rich and Die Tryin'* film poster, 50 Cent, ever the savvy marketer, devoted a scene to clarifying, through Clarence's dialogue, who should and should not adopt his identity. The scene begins with Princess

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[44] Wikipedia, proving again why the open-source encyclopedia should never be considered a scholarly source, describes Princess as a "user and a fake ass bitch".

and Shocka in the bedroom. She sits on the bed while he stands facing her. At this point, his manner of dress has changed to resemble that of Clarence's: do rag, tilted New York Yankees hat, baggy jersey and jeans, and a long chain around his neck. The scene alludes to the one previous to it. In it, Princess asks Shocka a series of trivia questions. The questions cause Clarence to exclaim "Come on now! Who gonna know that shit? That's some top-secret shit. Professors and shit be knowin' shit like that."[45] Afterwards, embarrassed that Shocka knew every question she asked, Princess tells Clarence "I could've stumped him. I could've asked him what this feels like." The camera then tilts down, focusing on her crotch and her fingers pointing to it. She reiterates her point and says that Shocka has never had any "booty" to which she and Clarence laugh. Though unspoken, this scene asserts two things: that women do not respect intelligent men, and that displaying intelligence is a barrier to sexual fulfillment.

Placing them in the bedroom alludes to sexual encounters, the bedroom being a generic signifier for sex. Shocka, since he stands facing Princess, towers over her, placing him in the position of power, which in *Before,* equates to either violence or sex. The juxtaposition becomes even more profound when she speaks to Shocka. As she places the chain and hat on him, Princess says, "You look just like your brother—like a little gangsta!" Merely changing clothing makes Shocka attractive to women and gives him the menace of violence, which is reiterated by Princess' squeal "You're so cute!" In her eyes, the metamorphosis turns Shocka from sexless nerd and the butt of jokes to the recipient of Princess' attention in the bedroom.

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[45] The questions include "Who wrote The 'Allegory of the Cave'*?"* and "What was Abraham Lincoln doing before he was shot?"

As Princess beams at Shocka, Clarence arrives home after murdering a female drug dealer. Seeing Shocka and Princess in the bedroom, he explodes with rage. He angrily says, "What the fuck is this shit?" Shocka immediately points at Princess and says, "She did it" and quickly exits the room. Clarence continues his tirade: "You fuckin' dressin' him up and shit like that, he's a good fuckin' kid man. You don't do no shit like that!" He continues: "C'mon man I leave you to look after him. You can't be doin' shit like that. It's fucked up man. I'm telling you man." He then turns toward the door his little brother exited through and yells "Shocka you know better than that shit!"

At the level of words alone, Clarence/50 announces he is aghast that someone would dress a child like himself. Clarence suddenly becomes akin to the parody of a conservative politician found in *CB4.* Virgil Robinson (Phil Hartman), after hearing his son recite CB4's lyrics (and adopting the CB4 readymade identity), becomes morally outraged and decides to use the group as a moral scapegoat to further his career. After a warning not to perform a particular song, Robinson attends a CB4 concert in his hometown with police waiting to arrest them for indecency. After beginning the offending song, "Sweat of my Balls", Hartman storms the stage with the police, arrests the group, resulting in free campaign publicity. Both 50 Cent and Hartman's politician use rap music to further their careers. Both exploit its violence and sexuality, consistently repeating the offending material while acting shocked and disturbed by its impact upon youth.

The scene in *Before I Self Destruct* is reminiscent of Robinson's argument about the dangers of hip-hop clothing in *CB4.* Offering his reasons to the press for his crusade against rap, Robinson delivers one of the films best lines: "Anyone who would defile

America's pastime by wearing a baseball cap backwards…well that's an evil that speaks for itself!" While Robinson's "un-American" comment humorously points to the asinine argument made about things as trivial as clothing, while many more pressing issues are ignored by those in power, Clarence's "What the fuck is this shit" tirade rings equally hollow. It feels like a disingenuous performance given that Shocka knows his brother is an assassin and discusses it as if Clarence worked a regular job. In addition, after 50 received criticism for advertising *Get Rich* using violent imagery, the speech seems like a forced declaration of his marketing strategy and chastisement to parents who allow their children to dress like him. But a forced, overwrought statement from him only serves to communicate an opposing message since the film seems to reiterate the association of the clothing with sexual prowess and self-esteem.

Before continually emphasizes Shocka's intelligence and innocence, but also implies that such qualities are undesirable. The only time Shocka seems interesting in the film is when he uses his intelligence to bribe another boy to protect him from bullies. Not surprisingly, this boy is not incredibly smart, and dresses in a more traditional hip-hop fashion quite similar to 50 Cent. Like Clarence, the boy wears a do-rag, New York Yankees hat, and extra-baggy jeans. Shocka, portrayed as weak, possesses the "gift" of intelligence that is of some use beyond answering trivia questions He trades schoolwork for the also valuable gift of physical violence. As stated previously, Clarence and Princess reduce him to a sexual joke and laugh at the fact that being smart will not lead him to sexual encounter, the other significant form of power located within *Before I Self Destruct* and the 50 Cent universe.

Both signifiers of power repeatedly sold by 50 Cent—violent masculinity and sexual prowess—become less attainable in the face of academic aspirations. The hail to the audience within the gaps between what is stated and what is meant becomes apparent. The unstated message is that intelligence prevents males from becoming fully formed men, that it keeps them within a powerless child-like state, only able to experience masculinity vicariously. In Shocka's case, it is Clarence and the younger Clarence "stand-in" at school who protect and provide for him. Shocka may be respected by them for his intelligence, but not enough for them to want it for themselves.

Secondly, Clarence's reaction reveals his "brand" is exclusively meant for men like himself. He intentionally separates his identity from the skinny intelligent boy. In Clarence's misogynist worldview, Shocka should remain a "kid," a category even weaker in his eyes than woman. By offering this rationale, 50 Cent directly indicates his market audience, while simultaneously marketing himself back to youth like Shocka. The "good kids" who feel powerless are offered power embodied in the signifiers sold by 50 in the marketplace.

Like many other items in the consumer marketplace, there is at times a contradiction between what the official stance of a company is and what it communicates in advertising. The contradiction for 50 lies in that the mogul advertises the very same clothing under his G-Unit brand to youth, including elementary children.[46] The film itself acts as a commercial for the 50 Cent brand even as the content critiques such fashions. The commercialism and branding become so blatant that at one point in the film Clarence pulls next to another driver with his window down, loudly playing a 50 Cent song. He

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[46] By the time *Before* was released, the G-Unit clothing line ended after four years.

turns to Clarence (and the audience) and comments on how much he enjoys the song. 50, in a tactic used by other corporate interests, sells an adult "gangsta" image to minors, then divorces himself from the charges of selling it.

The role of "concerned" producer of potentially dangerous goods is a common trope in the capitalist marketplace, with hopes of covering egregious damage done to those buying its product. The McDonald's website features "experts" and nutritionists who advise consumers about safe levels of fast food and offer suggested "healthy" meals from the McDonald's menu. Tobacco companies utilize this strategy as well. A series of lawsuits forced Philip Morris to warn its customers of tobacco's dangers beyond the requisite Surgeon General's warning. To absolve itself of the "guilt" of selling tobacco, the website for Philip Morris features prominent articles on health problems associated with cigarette smoking. Its absolution of marketing a dangerous product also includes an article on its website about smoking cessation programs, written for them by "Cheryl K. Olson Sc. D., a respected public health writer." 50 does something similar, but acts as the "expert" of his own brand, duplicitously assuring the viewer that his product may be toxic to young people to avoid liability.

50 Cent's embrace of toxic masculinity undercuts his authenticity and weakens the hip-hop community. It reinforces negative, harmful stereotypes, that commodify "an image of young black men that stoke white paranoia" (Ragusea). 50's profiteering is dangerous in that is has corporate backing, and the media companies he works with have much more ability to broadcast these messages and face fewer challenges to the harmful image the choose to promote. Previous generations of rappers included many more voices and offered more varied choices in the marketplace. Moguls who helped define the Bling

Era like Sean Combs and Jay-Z actively promote an image of success founded on lyrical ability, hard work, and intelligence. To be sure, every mogul works to have his product stand out in the marketplace. It is how it is done that undercuts 50 Cent's message.

Conclusion: **Legal Gangsterism and Free Enterprise**

Within less than a decade, the Bling Era gave way to a more diverse media landscape that included file sharing, streaming, and YouTube. 50 Cent's music career declined to the point that his albums no longer charted as high as they once had; his albums struggled to sell even a fraction of *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. His album *Curtis* (2007) sold one-twelfth of his previous two albums combined. His identity remains a marketable product, though.

Curtis Jackson's 50 Cent identity remains a potent symbol of successful American capitalism, and the man is transitioning from his street thug identity to what John Ramage calls the "workplace identity." Ramage describes the workplace identity as one that reinforces financial success and excellence in business. Ramage says books promoting "success rhetoric" use terms like "leadership" to establish an ethos based upon "worldly success" and fail "to question the ends of those actions" leading to their success. The term leadership, according to Ramage, becomes "deviant" and an inadequate "model for human identity" (47-8). Like 50 the gangster, 50 as workplace readymade encourages others to "get rich or die tryin'," only now the focus is more on getting rich and less on mortality.

Ever the businessman, 50's bling is grandiose in areas beyond rap. Stock manipulation and business tactics are the new kind of gangsterism he engages in, rather

than physical beefs. A series of tweets by the rapper on the weekend of January 8, 2011 advised his Twitter followers to invest in H&H Imports.[47] His advice created demand for shares of the company and sent the stock's price from $0.01 per share to $0.45 by the following Monday. G-Unit, Inc. sold its 30,000,000 shares for $8.7 million on January 10, 2011. By the close of the stock market Tuesday the stock dropped to $0.03 per share.

His entrepreneurial success based on business savvy and street toughness teaches others how to adopt this identity in books such as *The 50th Law* (2009) co-written with Robert Greene. Green authored *The 48 Laws of Power*, whose dust jacket calls the book an "amoral, cunning, ruthless, and instructive" manual about gaining and retaining power. It boasts a distillation of the philosophies of Machiavelli, Sun Tzu, P.T. Barnum and "3000 years of the history of power" into 48 "laws." His website's address, powerseductionandwar.com, rivals any album title released by 50 Cent. Described by the publisher as a "bible for success in life and work based on one principle: fear nothing," 50's book is now available as a graphic novel, a reflection of the author's hood super-hero persona and evidences his savvy marketing to youth. His most recent literary endeavor is a fitness book outlining an exercise regimen that offers the potential for its readers to "get fit like 50 Cent" and "develop mental toughness" possessed by the rapper.

Chris Rock noted that contemporary "rap sucks for the most part." He credits the lack of quality music to the infiltration of hyper-capitalism into rap. Echoing Gilroy's observation about using previous artists as touchstones for contemporary artists, Rock

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[47] Tweets include "HNHI is the stock symbol for TVG sleek by50 is one of the 15 products this year. If you get in technically I work for you. BIG MONEY" and "You can double your money right now. Just get what you can afford" ("50 Cent's Twitter Penny Stock").

compares the mogul mentality embraced by many rappers with artists who identified with their art as an emotional expression rather than a potential revenue stream. He says, "You know how shitty Stevie Wonder's songs would have been if he had to run a fuckin' clothing company and a cologne line?" (Ewing). Rock's parody of the rap industry, in light of contemporary rap's focus upon products ancillary to the art, continues to gain new fans tired of the current state of their beloved culture.

While *CB4* initially received negative reviews, the hip-hop generation who viewed the film as youth continue to reclaim it as an early warning of the culture's hyper-capitalist shift. In a reassessment of the original reviews by (primarily) white Baby Boomers, contemporary critics found that *CB4* was prescient about rap music's trajectory. Brad Laidman writes in *Film Threat* that *CB4* is a humorous exhibition of a culture obsessed with danger and violence as authenticity, even though most raps were fictionalized or second-hand observations of the gangster life. Therein lies the film's humor and its warning against embracing the readymade identity: "CB4′s best joke is that perhaps [middle class youth posing as gangsters] didn't matter. Once you went out on the streets as a gangster the streets were more than happy to reciprocate"(Laidman).

He also notes that, in the wake of the East Coast/West Coast rivalry of the 1990s that climaxed in the murder of Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G., neither rapper began their lives as gangsters; neither came from families involved in the gangster lifestyle, but each embraced the image and often rapped about criminal activity. In retrospect, with the senseless deaths of these artists in mind, *CB4*'s parody is much more provocative. The resultant violence experienced by the MCs who adopted a local gangster's persona was seen as outrageous, and played for laughs while reinforcing the

theme of "true" authenticity in hip-hop in which rappers who do not stay true to themselves are not true artists, and criticizing "studio gangsters." The film, read retroactively, warns of genuine and potential dangers of adopting the identity of gangster, and reinforces the culture's nostalgia for a time when rap celebrated differences and authenticity was not measured in number of arrests.

Gary Dauphin, well before the ascendancy of 50 Cent declared that post Golden Age hip-hop films reflect the culture's "sensibility" but were joyless. He partially blames mainstream companies such as New Line and Miramax's attempts to cash in on the culture and use hip-hop as a placeholder for authenticity. He also notes the films themselves lost their vibrancy due in part to a lack of representation of the culture as an art form, of which rap only comprises one-quarter (207). Affirming that hip-hop "is and has always been a diverse field of making and receiving images," Dauphin nevertheless overstates the homogeneity of that culture (207). He fetishizes the best in hip-hop cinema as *historical* document. To him, joy in this genre equates to replicating the innocence of early hip-hop or political statements of the Golden Age. My final chapter deals with a renewal of hip-hop's representation through visual media. In one sense, the next film cycle returns to Dauphin's nostalgic South Bronx and Golden Age scene, producing mixed results in its attempt to recall an idealized past in *Straight Outta Compton* and *The Get Down*. The best contemporary hip-hop media is syncretic in nature as it looks to the past for influence, is global in scope, and animated. Television programs such as *The Boondocks* and *Afro Samurai* return to hip-hop's earliest ethos of syncretically adopting and reinterpreting other cultures. They borrow as much from Chinese Zen Buddhism,

Japanese Manga and Samurai films as from Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa and embrace hip-hop's ability to unite the global and local, past and present.

CHAPTER V

ANCIENT ASIA AND THE RETURN OF MLK: NIHILISM, NOSTALGIA, AND THE

(RE)VISION FILM CYCLE

In my final chapter, I return to the popular ideology that identifies hyper-

aggressiveness and hyper-capitalism as a necessary trait for success. The seeming ease

with which hyper-capitalism and conspicuous consumption pay dividends to those

involved in rap is in fact a trap as I noted previously in my dissertation. Within a period

of approximately 30 years, hip-hop evolved from an artistic expression used by youth

looking to break from South Bronx gang culture and find their voice, to the Golden Age

in which emcees honed their craft and acted as the CNN of the inner cities of America,

to the hyper-masculine, violent, and ultra-capitalist bling culture. In reaction to this

change in hip-hop, two counter-hegemonic reactions emerged—syncretic animation

designed to expose contradictions within the reigning ideologies and a strong sense of

nostalgia for the earlier days of hip-hop before commercialism overtook the culture.

The film *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) and the Netflix series *The Get Down*

(2016-2017) both rely heavily upon a nostalgic look back at hip-hop from its earliest days

in the Bronx (*The Get Down*) and the Golden Age (*Straight Outta Compton*). As is

common with nostalgia, these vehicles look to the past as a place and time when the culture was purer, more exciting, and more "authentic" than it currently is. Both place their nostalgia for a more exciting, artistically motivated era in direct contrast to current hip-hop, especially rap, as a monetized consumer product.

The animated television series, *Afro Samurai* (2007) and *The Boondocks* (2004-2010, 2014)*,* critique the current consumer readymade identities popularized by 50 Cent and others, who rely on the "trap" of violence, drugs, and money for their cultural authority. Both series expose, through the processes of discovery and revelation, this popular identity within rap as a capitalist pathology. They assert that the adoption of "Thug" identity breeds ignorance, a refusal to accept personal responsibility, and a reliance on others for a sense of self. The pursuit of "more," which never fulfills the characters of each series, acts as a form of psychic violence that results in their characters' dissatisfaction with life.

I begin my final chapter by examining the contradictions within hip-hop scholarship regarding prevailing attitudes of rappers. I then turn to Cornel West's observation that clinging to an ideology of "more" results in the powerlessness and ultimate futility of nihilism. Next, I discuss the way in which this is addressed through nostalgia, and how nostalgia, while a comfort, is an incomplete way to deal with the present. I argue that nostalgia for "old school" hip-hop offers no real solution for the present, other than a retreat into the past. Finally, I examine the ways in which *Afro Samurai* and *The Boondocks* critique and offer alternatives to this philosophy, which West calls a "disease of the soul" (19).

Conspicuous Consumption as Lifestyle

As I discussed in my previous chapter, a common trend among contemporary rappers

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consists of sponsorship by established fashion houses or establishing their own clothing lines. 50 Cent, Jay Z, Sean Combs, Russell Simmons and many others demonstrate the importance placed upon the formation of a brand identity. Their association to a particular lifestyle is, at times, even more important than their music. The realization led rappers to capitalize upon readymade identities constructed for the marketplace. The baggy pants and baseball caps previously worn primarily by black and Latino American youth are now considered wardrobe essentials by millions of individuals worldwide. As the signifiers of hip-hop culture became more important rappers such as 50 Cent focused less on preserving the artistic and cultural integrity of hip-hop. Instead their primary focus became making money through market saturation of commercial items meant to promote a hyperreal identity and lifestyle. Within the hip-hop community, some dissenters criticized the commercial yardstick by which rappers had come to measure themselves.

Michael Eric Dyson says the "bling ideology" of conspicuous consumption exploits youths and legitimates gangsterism (49-50). He offers the example of Jacob "the Jeweler" Arabo's relationship between laundering money for black organized crime and creating the celebrated diamond jewelry, "rings and things," which 50 Cent boasts about in "In da Club."[48] In one particularly insightful essay, Dyson traces the place of the Air Jordan sneaker in black youth culture, and the way in which Wall Street brokers and crack dealers, who "reproduce capitalism's excesses on their own terrain," similarly rely upon images of success rather than substantive actions ("Michael Jordan" 467). Dyson fails to compare the ethics of

[48] In his criticism Dyson approaches anti-Semitism, noting the "presence of a nonblack person who co-created a moment of seminal, if problematic, productivity within the African American culture" (50). While anti-Semitism continues to be leveled at some artists and critics, Russell Simmons and Jay-Z released a commercial on broadcast television "relating anti-Semitism to racism" (Boffard).

rap moguls with those of corporate America, however. He suggests that an artist can "retain

roots, integrity (and) authenticity," but fails to offer what this model might look like. Instead

he lauds Jay-Z's "alliances" with corporate culture, which Dyson says defends the black

underclass. Patricia Rose says that rap contains multiple contradictions given that the

expression of historically black males often manifests itself in the form of sexist or violent

lyrics (1-3). She notes that rap prioritizes "black voices from the margins of urban America"

that often reveal the complexity of violence, death, and "male sexual power over women"

(2). While she proposes that the "ghetto badman posture-performance is a protective shell"

against a turbulent, often violent environment, she also notes the potentially harmful

outcomes of "the return of the ghetto as a central black popular narrative" (11).

Rose offers a conciliatory stance on the misogyny and violence used to create

authenticity within parts of the rap community by calling it complex and at times the result of

forces outside the culture. We see this progression throughout the late 1990s until 50 Cent's

thug-centric brand of bling and "coke" rap became the popular sound and image of hip-hop.

[49] The romanticized criminality became a signifier of authenticity within rap culture and

black culture, but also within lower socio-economic youth populations as a whole. Jeffrey

O.G. Ogbar asserts that criminality is now so synonymous with authenticity that artists are

subject to insult from their peers for *not* using drugs or serving time in prison (69).

Ogbar claims that the decline of "pro-black" rap such as Public Enemy and Eric B.

and Rakim led to the devolution of hip-hop as an art that confronts the white establishment

and celebrates black culture (68). He describes what took its place as an "essentialist rap"

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[49] Southern trap music uses these themes. Additionally, it adds grittier references of illicit drugs (both use and sales), strip clubs, and shout outs to neighborhoods unknown outside their hometown.

that promotes the idea "that there are particular traits or characteristics innate to black people" (68). These traits include "romanticized notions of pathology and dysfunction," including the belief that black males are "naturally criminal and violent" (68). While academics straddle the line between criticism and justification, the animated series— *cartoons*—influenced by hip-hop, embrace the culture's positive traits and harshly criticize what the culture has become.

Hip-Hop Media's Fight Against Commercial Nihilism

> Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one's soul.
> This turning is done through one's affirmation of one's worth—an affirmation
> fueled by the concern of others. (West 19).

Rose and Dyson's comments act as explanations, but not as solutions to a problem. Cornel West suggests that the problems faced by the inner-city must exceed explanations and offers solutions to existing crises within the inner-city minority community. In *Race Matters* West observes the maladies of the inner-city and minority communities holistically. He refuses to cling strictly to a political dogma, instead acknowledging the value of both "liberal structuralists'" emphasis upon social structures that have historically denied particular groups political and economic power (12-13, 19) and the "conservative behaviorists" focus on morality and personal responsibility (13, 19-20). The problem with clinging to one philosophy, according to West, is that neither is effective alone. West says liberals fail to discuss "self-worth" and exhibit a hesitancy to discuss culture as the place where "meaning and values" are created for fear of appearing conservative (13). Conservatives, West says,

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fail to admit the link between social inequities and behavior or "examine cases in which blacks do act on the Protestant ethic" yet remain unable to improve their overall conditions. He proposes a "politics of conversion" that uses the best of both sides with an emphasis on a middle way between the two. He calls this a "love ethic" (19).

West points to the nihilism adopted by contemporary generations and claims it has led to a "pervasive spiritual impoverishment" related to the "absence of love of self and others" (5). The absence of love, combined with economic and political isolation, results in what he calls "random nows." These same moments exemplified in videos like "In da Club," revolve around "pleasure, power, and property" in a postmodern market culture "dominated by gangster mentalities and self-destructive wantonness" (5). West, like Dyson, points to the market's particular destructiveness within economically disadvantaged and minority communities. West does not explicitly state as much, but he alludes to the hip-hop generation Dyson discusses—those raised upon a music that glorifies gangsterism and sexism.

He notes that conditions of psychological depression, worthlessness, and despair pervade black communities unlike others in America (14). The factors contributing to these mental and emotional conditions include the saturation of market forces in black life, a crisis in black leadership, and "the cutthroat market void of morality beyond the culture of consumption" (16). The market forces call for the expansion of pleasure through market goods (as Gates notes with sneakers), but they also encourage people to perceive others as objects who exist to deliver individual pleasure (17). The predominance of a market devoid of humanity in poverty-ridden areas allows a mass movement of nihilism to flourish. Nihilism cannot be overcome by anything but affirmation of one's worth and love of others (19). Because he believes this nihilistic attitude threatens America's existence, West calls for

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a "politics of conversion," a "love ethic" (19). This solution includes addressing both the existing economic structures and personal responsibility.

The theme of nihilism and its destructiveness runs throughout *Boondocks* and *Afro Samurai*. I propose that the *Boondocks* and *Afro Samurai* exhibit a particularly hip-hop ethos that recalls its first generation and its golden age. Furthermore, both series examine the destructiveness of the nihilism West describes and offer similar solutions for West's "disease of the soul."

The Inner-City and Ancient Asia

While the *Afro Samurai* story originates in Japan, it places an importance upon syncretism with a hip-hop voice and promotes a movement away from the self-aggrandizement and gratuitous violence that now obsesses a worldwide community that has adopted hip-hop. *Afro Samurai* began as a manga series in Japan by Takeshi Okazaki. A postmodern amalgam of cultures and nationalities, the series' main character is a black samurai with a large Afro (a style originally adopted in the 1960s as a sign of black pride). Initially self-published, Okazaki's stories were eventually distributed in the US by Tor Books in early 2009 and released months later in Japan. After watching a trailer for a proposed TV series, Samuel L. Jackson collaborated with Okazaki, Japanese animation company Gonzo, and Wu Tang Clan producer/musician/ composer RZA to release the series on Spike TV.

Afro Samurai reflects the transcultural and transnational nature of 21st Century hip-hop. The series also exemplifies Gates' allusion to writers seizing "upon topoi and tropes" of black culture and inserting them into a foreign text. *Afro Samurai* is indicative that hip-hop

and African American rhetoric have moved from a national phenomenon to that an international, interracial, and inter-cultural success. Its mode of production, setting and characters all reflect the heteroglossic nature of hip-hop. The cross-cultural exchange lends the series a critical authority that a Japanese-produced series might lack. The cooperation between artists like RZA and Japanese manga artists for a series on a major cable television network expands hip-hop's geographic and cultural influence. Along with its visual sampling, we experience the interaction between visuals, music, and the movement of the animation. Through *Afro Samurai's* holistic use of these elements, we see a direct correlative to early hip-hop and the interrelation between the four "elements" of graffiti, DJing, mc-ing, and b-boying.

The mixture of the ancient and futuristic, along with the American and Eastern cultures, embodies hip-hop's aesthetic technique of sampling and syncretism. *Afro Samurai*'s mise-en-scene includes elements that, when combined, are anachronistic and would be incongruent in a traditional American narrative. Examples of some of these include thatched huts, buildings situated on stilts built of bamboo, rope bridges, and the use of the katana (samurai sword) as the primary weapon of choice. The inclusion of clothing such as the kimono and sandals with wooden soles also leads its audience to locate the action in feudal Japan. In direct contradiction to the costuming and mise-en-scene, Afro's nemeses, warrior monks called "The Empty Seven Clan," wear traditional robes and are often depicted bobbing their heads along to the hip-hop soundtrack on their headphones. The Clan resides in a traditional Japanese temple and use candles for illumination, yet they also utilize night vision binoculars, cell phones, and cybernetic limbs. What links the feudal past and post-apocalyptic future is the way the hip-hop characteristics are translated into the series'

aesthetic. As I noted in chapter 3, the video for "In Da Club" utilized futuristic elements such as cybernetics. *Afro Samurai* differs in its creative juxtaposition with history and culture. It creates a unique environment where syncretic expressions are based on an Eastern interpretation of hip-hop and an African American reworking of ancient Eastern culture. In 50 Cent's case, the use of imagery is no more than a symbol of the rapper's physical strength and sexual prowess, and by extension, his corporate image for sale to consumers. While 50's music has little to do with the visual expression of the video beyond selling an identity, RZA's soundtrack for *Afro Samurai* plays an integral part in the series.

As discussed previously, the sample of prerecorded music plays a major role in hip-hop, essentially creating a new work of art through the combination of previously recorded sounds or creating original music indicative of another artist's style. The soundtrack of *Afro Samurai*, composed by RZA of the Wu Tang Clan, features the heavy beats and deep bass established by hip-hop's earliest DJs. He uses jazz samples and record scratches traditionally found in hip-hop's music but missing in much modern rap. In addition, RZA mixes Sergio Leone-inspired orchestral movements, funk reminiscent of 1970s Blaxploitation films, and avant-garde ambient noise into a new fusion. Using African American hip-hop traditions as its base, the soundtrack layers upon it older black musical traditions, European orchestras and musique concrete.

The soundtrack plays a large part in the overall narrative mood of the series. RZA's experimental compositions, many of which include gritty raps about inner-city violence and crime, tie together the cultures of Asian and African American hip-hop. Characteristic of the sample, the compositions often contain a multitude of voices not initially apparent to the casual listener. The inclusion of RZA is important, given the use of tropes borrowed from

Hong Kong action cinema for Wu-Tang Clan albums. His interest went beyond the films of the 1970s and 80s, and he eventually became a student of Sifu Shi Yan Ming, abbot of USA Shaolin Temple (Ching). The temple teaches Chan Buddhism through martial arts. The mise en scene of *Afro Samurai* features both statues of the Buddha and a philosophy of self-mastery through the martial arts and depicts a black protagonist adopting this culture and philosophy.

As far back as *Style Wars* graffiti artists exhibited the use of the sample by borrowing from established artists such as Warhol and commercial entities such as Disney characters. Similarly, the animation of *Afro Samurai* remains solidly within the contemporary manga style of Japanese comics but borrows techniques and subjects from artists of Japan's Edo period. The movement of objects by wind and a subtle use of color both play a large part in the aesthetic of the series. Characters may become still, but trees, clothing, and clouds continue to move, sometimes with great force. Often a scene will consist of a few dark colors punctuated by light glinting off metal and bright red blood. The use of color and sense of movement of the natural world resembles works by Ukiyo-e artists such as Katsushika Hokusai.

With the art of the Japanese wood block print, Hokusai sought to capture the movement of the natural world. His prints also used colors conservatively, at times using primarily shades of one color as seen in his most famous work *The Great Waves of Kanagawa* (1832*)*. The print also captures the effect of wind upon waves as it stirs them to tsunami force. Both *South Wind, Clear Sky* and *Winter Evening in Japan* feature landscapes similar to those found in *Afro Samurai. Winter Evening* exhibits the quiet of snow falling at night, and the bright white of snow as the moon's reflection lights it. *South Wind* juxtaposes a

fiery red Mt. Fuji with the bright white of clouds floating around and snow covering its peak. The juxtaposition of the red signifies the violent beauty of a destructive volcano that towers over Japan. *Afro Samurai* avoids using red in most scenes except for blood. Not only is this a reference to Hokusai's technique, but a way to assert the particularly destructive force of accepting violence as a way of life.

Similar to the juxtapositions within Hokusai's painting depicting the contrasts of beauty and violence, fire and snow, hip-hop utilized contrast as a way to express the contrasts found in the inner-city. The reality included its blight and violence, but also a kind of beauty unseen by mainstream society.[50] Artists within traditional hip-hop based reputation upon skill possessed within their specific element of choice (rapping, b-boying, etc.). 50 Cent and others now find satisfaction in physical and economic dominance predicated upon image. The necessity of violence and callousness in pursuit of material gain and reputation within the world of *Afro Samurai* is reminiscent of the continuous beefs and violent conflicts many perceive as necessary to prove one's authenticity in contemporary rap.

Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation credo of "Peace, Love, and Havin' Fun" produced "Planet Rock," a song about the unity of races and cultures through music. Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" exposed America's favorite cowboy John Wayne as a character glorifying genocide, painted Elvis as an appropriator of black culture, and expressed a Pan-African, cross-generational ideology through sampling James Brown's "Funky Drummer" and Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sherriff."[51] By contrast, DJ Khaled's song featuring T.I. and Lil' Wayne

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[50] As discussed, citizens and city officials often viewed paintings on trains as destructive, and DJ mixes and samples were often the target of copyright lawsuits and criticism as not being music but rather a mere replication of "real" music.

[51] Chuck D later retracted his criticism of Elvis in the song. He claims "respect" for Elvis, and offers that Elvis respected and counted as friends many black artists

called "Bitches and Bottles" describes an enjoyable night out including "loading up your cartridge" before leaving the house for the club where he orders "bitches and bottles." This quasi-sociopathic consciousness is said to originate from "rejection, from outrage at the world, from the pain the world causes" (Michalski 14-15). *Afro* works to overcome this pathology by confronting its implicit (and amoral) values. It exhibits the use of nihilistic violence in pursuit of social position. The protagonist believes that his violent actions give value to his psychic pain, but it is only when he challenges his personal morality that he finds relief from suffering.

The series features the wandering samurai called Afro and his animated alter ego/conscience, Ninja Ninja (both voiced by Jackson). As in many samurai and kung fu films, the two are on a quest. Afro's quest centers on finding the "Number One" headband, a totem that signifies the top samurai, and exacting vengeance upon its current holder, Justice (Ron Perlman), the man who killed Afro's father. Since only the holder of the number two headband has the right to battle number one, the initial part of Afro's youth revolves around capturing the totem that allows him a chance at vengeance. The series follows Afro fulfilling that goal through violence. The marketplace may be for a headband, but it remains a symbol of power and status. The feudal environment mirrors West's "cutthroat market void of morality beyond the culture of consumption" (19). The comparison is not merely metaphorical. Dyson discusses the importance of Nike Air Jordan sneakers in the inner-city community and the lust for a particular article of clothing does end in bloodshed at times.

The young orphaned Afro, upon completing his training with Sword Master and graduating to the rank of samurai, discovers his teacher possesses the number two headband. Since Afro must possess this item to fight for the place of number one samurai and avenge

his father's death, he challenges his master for the item. Sword Master warns Afro that possession of the headband, and the subsequent quest for number one only brings a life of pain and violence. He asserts that in order for Afro to live a truly fulfilled life, he must give up his quest for vengeance. Ignoring his master, Afro slays him. The murder leads two of his fellow students, Otsure and her brother Jinno to seek vengeance for their master's death. We can see *Afro Samurai* as a statement concerning the senselessness of a violent life lived in the nihilistic pursuit of ultimate power. The peace Afro seeks from obtaining this status only creates more chaos, something West notes in his assessment of nihilism.

Upon the murder of Sword Master two major events occur. Afro isolates himself from the rest of humanity through violence, continual marijuana use, and stoic silence. In another cross-cultural, cross-temporal example of hip-hop in the series, Afro's demeanor resembles the mostly silent "Man with No Name" in Sergio Leone's "Dollars Trilogy."[52] To reflect the smoke of choice among hip-hoppers, a large joint replaces Clint Eastwood's trademark cigarillo.[53] Afro, like Leone's character, calmly lights up during tense moments. Both refuse close associations with others and speak only when necessary. Afro's quest for number one prevents him from establishing bonds like the ones previously held with Sword Master, Otsure, and Jinno. His isolation from the rest of humanity leaves Afro with one person he refuses to let others see: his conscience.

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[52] Which is also a cross-cultural western that combined the violence of Italian B films, the quiet reflection of character and landscape of Italian Neorealism, the American western, and a contrast of Eastwood's character Rowdy Yates on the Western television series *Rawhide* (1959—1965).

[53] Taking the connection one step further, the cigarillo and joint allude to rap's favorite method to smoke marijuana: the blunt. The blunt consists of marijuana wrapped tightly in the large tobacco wrapper normally used to hold the loose tobacco of a cigar.

The murder of Sword Master creates Ninja Ninja, a physical manifestation of Afro's conscience only he can see. Ninja Ninja continually warns Afro of dangerous situations, while Afro continually ignores his exhortations. Ultimately, Afro's conscience dies at the hands of Afro's childhood friend Jinno. When Afro draws his sword, before any strikes are made from either swordsman, Ninja Ninja dies. It is the intention of Afro to kill anyone for the number one headband that kills his sidekick, his conscience. What *Afro Samurai* offers, in contrast to Dyson's command to engage the marketplace, is a lesson in the futility of consumerism. The final acquisition of a consumer item is never the final goal in market capitalism. Only the pursuit exists, and its existence only points to what the consumer lacks. Consumerism works through a feeling of lack, not that of satisfaction. Afro's pursuit of headbands and vengeance mirrors the market structure. Vengeance never satisfies and, like the market, sets a series of events into motion that only seem as if they will cure his "sickness of the soul." After accomplishing what he believes he wants, what he is driven to do, Afro still feels the emptiness that put his quest into motion. Instead of success, Afro's experiences from the nihilistic competition to the top offer nothing but death of his conscience and a greater sense of loss.

In his final speech before Afro slays him, Justice warns him that being number one is not what he expects. He explains to Afro that the power he seeks will not fulfill him and will, in fact, accomplish the opposite of what Afro expects. Upon killing Justice, Afro realizes too late the price paid for his struggle for vengeance and status. He looks around at the corpses that came before him. At this moment he understands too late that the realization of his goal isolates him completely from the rest of humanity. The series leaves us without explicitly offering a solution to the destructive nature of nihilism. It offers a meditation upon its results,

leaving us to contemplate its consequences upon Afro and those who crossed him during his quest.

Return to The Old School: The New Wave of Nostalgia

A new hip-hop cycle has emerged within the last few years that nostalgically looks back to the past. The cinematic representation of "old school" hip-hop community found in the nostalgic hip-hop films and programs features elements of word of mouth, discovery, deference to tradition, analog technology, and hard-earned place in a community. This depiction directly contrasts with the rapidity of the contemporary hip-hop's evolution, the rise of "Soundcloud" rappers who create their works in the digital vacuum of the computer, the lack of respect for hip-hop's traditions, and the hyper-commercialism. Music and the moving image have been linked since the first "talkie" was released in 1927.[54] Howell notes that music and film are connected as "20th Century heritage objects" (70). As older hip-hop fans yearn for the "glory days" and younger fans become interested in hip-hop's roots, this new film cycle steps in to present these heritage objects to an audience that desires something with more weight and depth than what is currently offered to them. This often takes the form of nostalgia. Nostalgia and memory are slippery and are often altered in the retelling of the past to smooth out the rough spaces, burnishing memories to remove more complex or difficult truths. Hip-hop is now a culture old enough to see generational differences emerging, much like rock n' roll saw with the generational divide between the Woodstock

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[54] Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*. This film also illustrates the simultaneous love of black music and oblivious white racism that runs through American culture, as Jolson sings "My Mammy" in blackface during the last scene.

generation and youth weaned on new wave and punk. As these differences become more pronounced, many hip-hop fans yearn for the "good old days" of the 80s and 90s.

Hip-hop culture is one that consistently lives on the cutting edge but has also always carried a nostalgic streak. Many graffiti murals serve as memorials to deceased loved ones; many of the records sampled by DJs are classics that evoke earlier styles and trends; many of rap's best songs idealize or mourn the past[55]. Even often used phrases such as "old school" and "back in the day" contain a ring of the nostalgic. As rap's first generation of fans approach grandparent age and rap's canon becomes more well-defined, nostalgia has become a more prominent theme in visual media representing it. Two of the more overtly nostalgic representations are *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) and the Netflix series *The Get Down* (2016). Both feature origin stories (gangsta rap and hip-hop as artistic movements) that idealize a time that was less than ideal.

Straight Outta Compton tells the story of the "world's most dangerous group" from its origin in 1986 to Eazy-E's death from AIDS in 1995.[56] Critics received the film with almost unanimous praise. The film was nominated for numerous awards, including an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay, and won awards for Best Movie from BET, MTV, and the NAACP Image Awards. Many were upset that the film was not nominated for best picture, leading founding member Ice Cube to dismiss the Academy as being out of touch at best, racist at worst, with the cryptic comment "It's the Oscars. They do

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[55] Pete Rock & CL Smooth's "T.R.O.Y."*,* Wu Tang Clan's "C.R.E.A.M", and Scarface's "On My Block" are particularly good examples of nostalgic looks at life.
[56] A documentary narrated by Chris Rock called *N.W.A.: The World's Most Dangerous Group* was released in 2008, and first aired on VH1, a network best known for airing classic rock videos and documentaries, demonstrating the nostalgic pull of the group's output in the 1980s and its importance among popular music at large.

what they do" (Platon). Not everyone felt the film deserved the critical praise, and actually

called out the film for whitewashing the group's violence against women (Abad-Santos). I

submit that much of the film glossed over the group's story in favor of a narrative that speaks

to moviegoers' need for nostalgia. The film idealizes a past that may not measure up to what

people wish to remember.

Nostalgia often appears at times when a present seems undesirable or unfamiliar and

offers comfort in the face of confusion (Stafford). The 1970s and 80s saw a wave of nostalgia

films made by Baby Boomers who longed for the "simpler" times of the 1950s. Films like

American Graffiti (1973), *Grease* (1978), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Dirty Dancing* (1987)

and multitudes of others became box office hits and resonated with (white) audiences. These

films came on the heels of significant political movements such as the Civil Rights

movement, women's movement, and the Stonewall riots and gay liberation movement. Music

and art were also of great concern to politicians, religious leaders and parents, given the

ascent of "satanic" heavy metal, the overtly sexual music of Madonna and Prince, and

explicit rap of 2 Live Crew and N.W.A. (Grow, Schwarz). All of these factors complicated a

world that seemed simple for a large part of heteronormative white conservative America.

These films often painted the era with a broad brush and heavy-handed signifiers of the

simple 1950s: all-white casts, rock n roll music, fashion, cars, and references to likable public

figures. These films offered their white audiences a familiar glimpse of themselves and

allowed them to imagine a time before their world became complicated and politics and art

threatened their communities. While some films reflected topics that concerned the 1980s,

like abortion (*Dirty Dancing*), or promoted controversial Beat poets (*Peggy Sue Got*

Married), these were very minor plot points, and feel like self-congratulatory nods to progressivism in otherwise conservative retellings of the 1950s.

As Hollywood indulged in nostalgia for a time when minorities used separate restrooms, women were expected to obey their husbands without question, and the LGBTQ community remained closeted, rap music was reaching what is seen as its creative peak. Classic albums by Public Enemy, Run DMC, Eric B and Rakim, De La Soul, and the Beastie Boys and many more were released during this time period. Gangsta rap, created in the mid-1980s by Ice T and Schoolly D, upped rap's traditional braggadocio by including graphic stories of violence and criminal acts.[57] The cinematic nature of gangsta rap appealed to a wide range of listeners, and soon reached the mainstream. By 1993 Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* was certified triple platinum and spawned singles in constant rotation on MTV (RIAA-The Chronic). Thirty years after its inception, gangsta rap has taken on a different meaning. Today mugs and t-shirts bear the phrase "Drink some coffee/Put on some gangster (sic) rap/& Handle shit. Lyrics and a posture meant to frighten the public are now used as comedic fodder with characters like *Office Space*'s (1999) Geto Boys loving IT nerd Michael Bolton (David Herman) and Fogell/McLovin (Christopher Mintz-Plasse) from *Superbad* (2007). It is no wonder a generation well into middle age would become nostalgia for gangsta rap, but nostalgia for hip-hop often does as much to misinterpret its history as films made about the 1950s did earlier.

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[57] Schoolly D released "P.S.K. What Does It Mean?" in 1985. The song commemorated Philadelphia gang Park Side Killers. Ice T's "6 'N the Mornin'" was released a few months later in 1986. Ice credited Schoolly D with inspiration, noting that he took Schoolly's gangsta blueprint and made gangsterism more universal (Jam). A natural storyteller, Ice T created a gangster film on vinyl with the song; it contained a (relatively) complex plot, characters, a story arc, action and a denouement resolving the night of mayhem he relates to listeners.

The nostalgic biopic has become a hip-hop trend in the 2000s and includes films based on the lives of Notorious B.I.G. (*Notorious* [2009]), 50 Cent (*Get Rich or Die Tryin'* [2005]), and Eminem (*8 Mile* [2002]), but *Straight Outta Compton* has, to date, been the most critically acclaimed and highest grossing. The film grossed over $200 million the year of its release, making it the most successful hip-hop film to date (Galuppo). *Straight Outta Compton* is steeped in nostalgia, often at the expense of the truth. Although gangsta rap was predicated upon tenets of being offensive, misogynistic, violent, and macho, *Compton* works to create a world where "they're the good guys and have always been" (O'Callaghan). Nostalgia is the place where mistakes can be reversed and alternatives to history are written (Chrostowska 55). Howell notes that nostalgia falls into two types: restorative and reflective (71-72). Reflective nostalgia is "self-aware, and sometimes critical in its relation to the past" in that it works to tell a nuanced story, that often has both good and bad memories on display (72). Reflective nostalgia is critical and "questioning" and can be "ironic and humorous" (Chrostowska 75). Restorative nostalgia, in contrast, sees itself as "truth" rather than nostalgia, and is "simple" rather than a complex look at the past (Boym qtd in Chrostowska 72-73). The restorative type of nostalgia attempts to mythologize an actual time and place, not unlike the idealized 1950s America created by filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s and confuses the "actual" place with the "imaginary one" (Chrostowska 74, 77). Finally, according to Boym, restorative nostalgia is most likely to be the type that is "packaged for the market by the culture industry" (qtd in Chrostowska 75). Both *Straight Outta Compton* and *The Get Down* rely heavily upon restorative nostalgia; however, *The Get Down* uses it playfully along with more reflective elements. *Compton* utilizes straight restorative nostalgia, in part, to erase some of the more damning behavior committed by N.W.A.

Director F. Gary Gray, and the members of N.W.A. (two of whom co-produced the film along with Eazy-E's widow) paint the members' behaviors using restorative nostalgia. Since this category of nostalgia sees itself as the "truth" and is the sort "packaged for the market" for consumers, the world found in this film is shaded in the protagonists' favor and uses biopic reality to rewrite much of the controversy surrounding N.W.A. as either boyish rock star behavior or hyperbolic speech (Howell 72, 75). Howell notes that this kind of nostalgia can be dangerous (Howell 77). Gray uses it to hide negative behaviors, bolster the group's reputation within popular culture, and avoid responsibility for past behavior. He admits as much in a response to a question about the treatment of women by Dr. Dre that they "made the movie we wanted to make" not one that reflected upon reality as it was, both good and bad. Two instances in particular illustrate the way nostalgia works to favor "secondhand memory" over a critical engagement with the past (Chrostowska 53). The first incident is the scene in which a dis track is recorded by Ice Cube and listened to, dismissively, by the group; the second example I use here of reflective nostalgia manifests itself in the filmmaker's obvious effort to overlook N.W.A.'s violently misogynistic lyrics and behavior.

The scene in which a dis track is recorded and listened to by the group exemplifies the way in which the filmmaker dodges responsibility for some of the groups' more harmful acts. After splitting with N.W.A. over royalties he felt were owed him, Ice Cube wrote the dis song "No Vaseline" for his second solo release *Death Certificate*. The song is an important part of N.W.A. history, and its recording is depicted in the film, as is the group's reactions listening to it for the first time. After being called a traitor, Ice Cube resorts to a scorched earth method of returning a relatively mild insult. The song denigrates each member

and their manager as gay, weak, and threatens them with violence. After a short clip of Ice

Cube recording the song, the film cuts to the rest of the group listening to the track. Ice

Cube's considerable homophobia and anti-Semitism are played to almost comedic effect as

Jerry Heller (Paul Giametti) becomes apoplectic at hearing Cube trading in Jewish

stereotypes. Since Heller is portrayed as a dishonest manager to begin with, the audience is

led to laugh at Heller rather than critically listen to the lyrics. Other members of N.W.A. are

seen smirking at the lyrics, indicating they are in on the joke, even if it is at their expense. DJ

Yella (Neil Brown, Jr.) smiles at the track and calls it humorous. Eazy-E (Jason Mitchell)

tells Heller to calm down and plays it off as simply a battle rap, thereby excusing the racist

and violently homophobic lyrics. The anti-Semitism is a small part of an even more offensive

recitation of homophobic lyrics that advocate and encourage violence against gay men. Being

gay is equated with weakness in lyrics like "I'm a man and ain't nobody humping me."

Other, more graphic, lyrics threaten violence against his former members, whom Cube has

declared to be gay and thus less than human. This is only one instance of nostalgia glossing

over truly offensive behavior. For all his repugnant lyrics, Cube's crime was lyrical and

ideological. Dr. Dre's behavior against women in general, and Dee Barnes specifically, was

most definitely physical, and it is excised from the story completely in the service of

nostalgia.

Gangsta rap has rarely been kind to women, who have mostly been relegated to the

role of sex object and punching bag.[58] N.W.A. set the bar for generations of rappers after

them, with lyrics that denigrate traditional courting and dating as weak and silly ("I Ain't Tha

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[58] Ironically, the album *Bangin' on Wax* (1993), recorded by actual gangster members of Crips and Bloods featured a verse by a female member on their single "Steady Dippin'."

1"), see sex as another form of currency for crack ("Dopeman"), and group rape and murder as natural payback for a prostitute not surrendering all her money to her pimp ("One Less Bitch"). The nostalgia manufactured by the remaining members of N.W.A. and the film that represents them forgets the groups' hyper-misogynistic lyrics and fails to mention Dr. Dre's history of abuse against women. Gray said, after being questioned about the brutal beating given to television personality host Dee Barnes by Dr. Dre in 1991, that his film "served the narrative and the narrative was about N.W.A." ("F. Gary Gray Speaks…"). This is highly disingenuous given the important role that the beef between Ice Cube and N.W.A. plays in the film. In fact, Dee Barnes' show *Pump it Up* is where the rivalry started, after Ice Cube insulted the group at the end of an interview with his protégé Yo-Yo (Banks). The retribution against her for simply being a reporter on whose show the insult appeared was in fact the first physical altercation in the rivalry, despite Barnes not being a member of either camp; Dr. Dre's response at the time was "it's no big thing—I just threw her through a door" (Banks). Despite all this, as well as the court cases stemming from the incident and the continued retelling of Barnes' story over the years, the incident was purposefully ignored in the film. This is not to say that Dr. Dre cannot make a genuine apology, admit he committed a horrible act of violence, and reform; history seems to bear out that he has. The problem is that by hiding the story via a nostalgic retelling, the very act is deemed unworthy of being told and thereby doing a grave disservice both to their story and, more so, the stories of abused women.

Almost a year to the day after *Straight Outta Compton* premiered, Netflix released its most expensive series to date, Baz Luhrman's *The Get Down* (2016). The show features a group of teens in the South Bronx in the late 1970s as they navigate the search for fame in

the discos and in the streets that welcome the new, then nameless, art of DJing, b-boying, graffiti writing, and MCing. Reflective and restorative nostalgia are both utilized in its story. Where *Compton* used restorative nostalgia to scrub the dirt from a group's legacy, *The Get Down* more thoughtfully examines early hip-hop and engages ideas around it. The story is told in flashback via lyrics rapped at an arena concert by Mr. Books (Daveed Diggs/Nas).[59] Nostalgia is the thrust behind the series. We first experience Mr. Books, a successful rapper in the mid-90s, well after the end of the early days and Golden Age, when arena concerts and "bling" were what most rappers aspired to. As he raps, he tells the story of his life in the Bronx in the late 1970s, how he as a young Ezekiel Figuero (Justice Smith) and his friends met their DJ Shaolin Fantastic (Shameik Moore) and entered the world of hip-hop, how his girlfriend Mylene (Herizen Guardiola) left the church for life as a disco star, and how they fell in and out of love throughout their journeys.

The Get Down idealizes early hip-hop, the DJs at the center of its creation, the South Bronx, and the time period of the 1970s. The series literally glows within the dystopia that is 1970s-era Bronx. Bright reds contrast with dingy browns of burned out tenements and New York sidewalks. There is an almost musical-like quality to the set design, with every detail expressing an energy of time and place and character expressiveness and earnestness that echo Luhrmann's other depictions of the past. This restorative nostalgia creates a mythic quality to the South Bronx where creativity bursts out of every block. While an especially fertile time in the arts in New York, especially within the South Bronx, the image of the 1970s is tempered some by reflective nostalgia. The use of hard drugs by high schoolers, gangs, organized crime, and murder moderate the mythmaking. Often the two styles of

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[59] The raps were recorded by Nas, and dubbed in.

nostalgia are found simultaneously. One example of this is the odd use of animation in the series' second season. From time to time, without reason, the episode becomes animated.

At times the animated sequences feel like a plot device employed to fill in holes in the plot, as if it were necessary to show action that may not have been filmed or originally scripted. One plot line in particular demonstrates both the fancifulness of restorative nostalgia and the critical observations of reflective nostalgia. The scene begins with the "gods" of hip-hop, Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, and DJ Kool Herc, looking down on Shaolin Fantastic and Ra Ra (Shylan Brooks) discussing the future of the Get Down Brothers. Ra Ra will set up the group's performance at the local disco, Les Infernos, and Shaolin will "save" Ezekiel from his college visit. The scene uses a pastiche of the animation style and sound effects anyone familiar with cartoons from the 1970s would instantly recognize. The scene turns into a musical sequence with the Get Down Brothers rapping at school over the intercom system and later in a flying saucer. Simultaneously, an animated gangster Cadillac (Yahya Abdul Mateen II) assembles his own group of gangsters in an attempt to prevent the Brothers from infiltrating his disco, which doubles as an organized crime hangout. The sequence is light-hearted, and the Brothers defeat Cadillac and perform at Les Infernos. Later in the series this restorative sequence is contrasted with deadly consequences. Boo Boo (Tremaine Brown, Jr.), the youngest member of the Brothers, begins selling drugs with Shaolin. In revenge for the Brothers' insurrection and disrespect, Cadillac poisons the drugs they are selling. This results in people at their hip-hop show becoming unconscious, Boo Boo being arrested, and the group dissolving. While the restorative animated part told a light-hearted tale of hip-hop overcoming organized crime, the reflective reality is that the Get Down Brothers were only children, organized crime was a very real,

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very dangerous force in the south Bronx, and many youth were negatively impacted by that environment.

The show and its nostalgia unfold through a mix of storytelling modes, some familiar to the hip-hop cycle. Sampled news footage establishes a time and place for the story. Often news footage, specifically of the Bronx and the blackout of 1977, were used to insert the viewer into the era. Other footage was reproduced to bear the grainy look of footage *from* the era, such as "fake" interviews of Ed Koch (Frank Wood) and his public tirades against graffiti, or Mylene's public service announcement against graffiti. Also included is the depiction of actual members of the hip-hop community. Since the men depicted are now grandfathers, Luhrmann cast actors bearing a distinct likeness to the younger selves of Grandmaster Flash (Mamodou Athie), Afrika Bambaataa (Okieriete Onaodowan) and DJ Kool Herc (Eric D. Hill, Jr.). All of this is illustrative of pastiche, an "aesthetic imitation" of characteristics that refer to a specific culture and time, but not in a critical way (Dyer 1,128). *The Get Down* illustrates how nostalgia and pastiche are linked with the use of these pieces of real televisual footage, recreated commercials, and the inclusion of real people in a fictional film. Dyer notes that pastiche offers a feeling of the past, "the knowledge we can have our place in history" (133). Jameson notes that nostalgia films, starting with *American Graffiti,* attempt to "recapture lost reality" of the past and approaches the "past" by utilizing "glossy qualities of the image" which we find throughout *The Get Down,* whether it is the fetishization of Shaolin Fantastic's red Puma sneakers by Ezekiel or the characters who are stand-ins for stereotypes of the era-the coke snorting record producer, the shady politician, the disco dancer. Nostalgia of both kinds is just that—a creation of the past in which we find our place, through a variety of images that signify that past.

Maybe the most compelling scene of nostalgic pastiche in the series demonstrates the early divide between Baby Boomers and the hip-hop generation and the freedom this underground culture offered. Ezekiel is tapped by local Bronx politician and Mylene's uncle Francisco Cruz (Jimmy Smits) to deliver a speech to a South Bronx crowd at a rally for Ed Koch. Koch delivers his standard speech about cleaning up the city, starting with "graffiti thugs." After finishing, he asks Ezekiel to deliver his talk and encourages him to make his own stand against it. Young people in the audience shake their heads while older ones clap in approval. Inspired by a train in the distance graffitied with the phrase "Raise your words not your voice," Ezekiel begins improvising an anti-graffiti speech that cleverly weaves names of famous graffiti artists, such as Taki 183, Tracy 168, Voice of the Ghetto, Crash, Daze, and Doze, as a nod to the youthful audience. With each mention, the video cuts to a still photo of a 1970s era photograph of each artists' work. The young people in the crowd smile in approval of the wordplay and secret message being delivered. At the end of the speech, Ezekiel makes it plain to his constituents and says that "young people aren't the problem we're the solution." His speech reinforces the secretive nature of hip-hop's early years, that it was a club of those in the know, appealing to the nostalgia of viewers for the sense of community that defined hip-hop before the culture sold out.

Netflix canceled the series after only two seasons, ending on a dark note that was likely meant as a season cliffhanger. Mylene begins using cocaine heavily and falls in with a decadent downtown crowd; a local gangster funds the recording of Ezekiel and company's rap, while cutting out DJ Shaolin Fantastic in favor of a live band; one member of the crew is arrested for dealing PCP. While this may not be the ending Luhrmann envisioned, it is the one he got. In some ways it acts as a reflective look at the ways hip-hop culture, and

American culture at large, changed with the coming decade. Rappers became more important and became recording stars. DJs became less and less important in hip-hop, before being made almost obsolete with sampling laws and computer programs. Discos died and the dancing culture went underground and spawned a new cult of the DJ within the rave scene. Drugs became more prevalent and a larger problem for America's inner-cities with the introduction of crack cocaine.

The Boondocks, Nihilism, and "Common" Sense

In contrast, _The Boondocks_ offers a look at West's nihilism, but also offers solutions to the destructive "random nows" of hopelessness within the contemporary mediascape. When he was still majoring in Afro-American Studies at the University of Maryland in 1996, Aaron McGruder began writing _The Boondocks._ The strip debuted in the University of Maryland's newspaper _The Diamondback_. It featured a group of children including Black Nationalist Huey Freeman, his wanna-be gangsta brother Riley, and their mixed-race friend Jazmine. The plotlines loosely revolved around the children's experiences moving from inner-City Chicago to white suburbia. When the strip debuted, McGruder notes the freedom he had to construct a controversial strip came from an initial demographic of "18-to-24-year olds who are pretty much offended by nothing" (Bruchy). He eventually took the strip from the _Diamondback_ and continued writing _The Boondocks_ for Internet audiences while shopping the strip to distributors. After meeting a Vice President at Universal at the National Association of Black Journalists in 1997, McGruder received a 5-year contract from Universal Press, which included a large initial release (Bruchy).

While national distribution was victory for McGruder and edgy comics, its

demographic of readers significantly broadened from college students. In what may be the most controversial writing ever found in the "funny pages," McGruder featured a Thanksgiving prayer in the November 22, 2001 that read:

> In this time of war against Osama bin Laden and the oppressive Taliban regime… We are thankful that OUR leader isn't the spoiled son of a powerful politician from a wealthy oil family who is supported by religious fundamentalists, operates through clandestine organizations, has no respect for the democratic electoral process, bombs innocents, and uses war to deny people their civil liberties.

In order to make the strip more palatable to its post-9/11 readers, many newspapers moved it to the Editorial section (Sills 207-09). Others dropped it altogether due to reader outrage over its content.[60] Newspapers such as *The Washington Post* due to its potentially "offensive" content often censored it. For these reasons, McGruder left the comics page to begin *The Boondocks* television show in 2005 for Adult Swim's animated stable of series and ended the strip officially in 2006. The series consistently ranks as one of the channel's highest-rated programs, despite no new episodes appearing since 2010.[61]

A major difference between the comic strip and the series is its specifically hip-hop sensibility and aesthetic. The addition of color, motion, and sound gave the series a more kinetic hip-hop style. The theme song, performed by Asheru, is reminiscent of a golden age rap, intimating McGruder's intention to entertain as well as educate, similar to rap groups such as Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, and Eric B. and Rakim. It uses heavy

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[60] Newspapers used the same tactic previously with the left leaning *Doonsbury* strip written and drawn by G.B. Trudeau.

[61] Season 4 returned in January 2014.

beats, musical samples and lyrical references that contain a multiplicity of meaning, all reminiscent of the "boom bap" style popular among golden age DJs. In a nod to one of the era's most talented duos, the theme samples Eric B and Rakim's "I Ain't no Joke." Like rap's most celebrated MC Rakim, Asheru cleverly uses wordplay to communicate complex ideas succinctly.

The rap contains lyrics with a multitude of meanings that are dependent upon the listener's understanding. Lyrics like "I am the stone that the builder refused" and "(I am) the inner glow that lets you know to call your brother son" refers, at the most basic level, to rebelliousness against societal structures and a sense of community and love of others. It also refers to a true rebellion that, as West insists, involves a love of self and others outside of established ideological structures and the consumerist status quo. The lines also refer to important religious movements within the black community: Christianity, Rastafarianism, and The Nation of Gods and Earths. Asheru takes the line "The stone that the builder refused" from a biblical passage in Psalms seen as prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ. For decades an institution in the black community, the church embraces racial identity and provides a critique of "Eurocentric values" (Lincoln 320). To further the metaphor, the one who considers himself the "builder," that is white hegemony, has for centuries rejected the admission that African American physical labor is responsible for the actual building of America. In the construction parlance, the builder is a title for the person who coordinates the labor but does not take an active part in the actual build*ing* of a structure. Black labor in this sense is the "cornerstone" of America's wealth and success, a point civil rights leaders from the black church continue to make.

The line also refers to the Afro-centric religions of Rastafari and The Nations of Gods

and Earths. Bob Marley sings the same line Asheru raps in his 1970 song "Corner Stone." In it, the cornerstone is from a Biblical verse Rastas used to describe Haile Selassie, whom Rastas venerate as an incarnation of God on earth. The "son" in the second example is a reference to its homonym "sun," which is a term used by The Nations of Gods and Earths also known as the 5% Nation.[62] The 5% Nation is an offshoot of Elijah Mohammad's Nation of Islam, and like the NOI, stresses black unity, culture, and education. Many rappers, primarily from New York, adhere to the 5%er philosophy in some fashion, and its slang like calling a person "son" is often adopted in the hip-hop community.[63] The complexity of the mixture of spiritual, cultural, and racial influences within just these two lines is indicative of McGruder's nuanced take on race and culture as it is lived in America.

Like *Afro Samurai*, *The Boondocks* borrows from Asian culture as well. The closest the song has to a chorus is "chop, chop, chop! /Judo kick!" These lyrics connote the philosophical connection I mentioned in previous chapters between the inner-city African American community and Hong Kong action films. The montage that introduces the show contains an image of Huey Freeman dressed in a traditional kung fu uniform. Huey, Riley, and Robert all perform some semblance of martial arts moves during the opening credit sequence. The series' animation (as well as the original comic strip) resembles Japanese anime rather than traditional Western illustration. Even before writing the strip for his college newspaper, McGruder held a love of American and Asian comics. A self-described "geek" McGruder worked in a comic store where he began his love of illustration and Japanese

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[62] Females cannot be suns. They are "earths" in 5%er theology, and as the earth revolves around the sun, the woman must be subservient to the man (Swedenburg).

[63] A few rappers who ascribe to this theology/philosophy include RZA, GZA, Ghostface Killah, Rakim, Poor Righteous Teachers, NAS, and AZ.

manga (comics) and anime (animation). He characterizes *The Boondocks* series as "very, very black anime" set in a world "that cultivates people's imaginations (and) allows people to be themselves" whether they are perceived "outside the narrow definition of what is hip or cool" (Larnick). This inclusiveness within a "very, very black" art form resembles the acceptance of others with a sincere love of the primarily African American influenced culture of hip-hop.

The series continues the strip's examination of race and cultural differences in America. Despite criticism from Rose and others that audiences (especially white audiences) want entertainment based upon negative stereotypes of minority populations and sexism, it consistently ranks as one of Adult Swim's highest rated shows. Rose suggests that since rap's success and appeal involves cross-racial voyeurism of ghetto stories, the songs devolve into a venue for white entertainment without any economic, social, or historical background explanation for the existence of the ghetto (10-14). Rose does not distinguish between white pop fans or rap fans, and white hip-hop fans. Where Rose and others place blame on the corporate structure and white voyeurism, Ogbar asserts this wholesale blame is "simplistic" and only part of a larger problem. He notes that white youth purchase the majority of gangsta rap, yet they purchase the majority of "conscious" pro-black albums as well (68-71). Ogbar, like West and McGruder offers that rap must take a more complex, holistic view of culture, historical racism's effect upon black culture, and self-determination.

McGruder rarely features overtly white Americans as vocal oppressive racists but uses the self-hating Uncle Ruckus to express the most offensive epithets. He does critique white liberalism, its ineffectiveness, and markers of social class, however. Whites usually appear as the kind of liberal Cornel West describes as reluctant to examine personal

responsibility or morality. Often this type of white appears in crowds of other whites. Usually they accept whichever opinion seems the most "intelligent," as with their acceptance of graffiti Riley paints across the fronts of homes in the episode "Riley Wuz Here." A professor in the crowd continually praises it and reminds them he is "an expert." The second type appears indifferent to their own white privilege and America's racial disparity. We see an example of the reluctant liberal in the series' second episode, "The Trial of R. Kelly." Based upon the actual trial of R&B singer R. Kelly for committing and videoing sex acts with a young teen, Kelly's lawyer resembles attorney William Kunstler, famous for defending Black Panthers, members of the Weather Underground, and the Chicago 7. He offers a defense not based upon evidence that, as in the real Kelly trial, is damning.[64] In his opening statement he calls "the so-called mountain of evidence for what it really is: racism." Claps and words of affirmation from the gallery follow his statement. Huey, the example of reason in the *Boondocks*, silently shakes his head in disgust. Huey's disgust reflects the series' continued examination of race and racism and the magnitude of emotion and perception around them. Often McGruder, as in the R. Kelly trial, focuses on instances where race is exploited or misused, such as in the Kelly trial.

Riley and Huey trek to downtown Chicago to watch the Kelly media frenzy and are confronted with the nihilism and lack of empathy West says pervades the hip-hop generation. The voiceover from a reporter introduces three "outraged" demonstrators condemning Kelly for his actions. While not explicitly identified, a news reporter describes them as "scholars, activists, pillars of the African American community." The camera pans across their faces,

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[64] At one point in the episode, the video evidence presented by the prosecution shows Kelly answering the phone "This is Robert Kelly" and then giving his social security number to the caller.

revealing likenesses of Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Michael Eric Dyson.

Opposite the three scholars, hundreds hold signs that read "Stop wit the hatin," "We Luv Yu R Kelley," and "Not Gilltee!" The protest doubles as a party as a woman cooks on an outdoor grill and other protesters play volleyball. We see West's "sickness of the soul" in the woman interviewed in the pedophilia case turned block party. In her words and actions McGruder succinctly displays the lack of empathy for others or respect for self in some contemporary black communities along with the obsession with celebrity and consumerism that drives this state of nihilism. A reporter asks an overweight woman eating fried chicken her name. She responds with "Heeeyyyy!!" The reporter then asks her why she came to support the singer. She responds, saying "'Cause he good!" The chicken is an obvious nod to a hurtful stereotype, but McGruder uses the stereotype to reinforce the fact that the woman *willingly* fulfills a stereotype. Furthermore, the woman is a manifestation of the lack of seriousness with which the case is viewed. Asked about Gates, Dyson, and West's position regarding Kelly, she responds "Man! Fuck them little, uppity-ass niggas. All they talk about is readin' and eatin' right!" With a few short words she voices West's nihilism in her love of R. Kelly music over an exploited girl, her lack of respect for her education, health, and image. McGruder, through his acerbic view of American media and race, becomes a moral compass within the hip-hop community.

Throughout the series, McGruder refuses to soften his criticism and plays the role of gadfly. This steadfastness often puts him at odds with traditional black leaders, academics, and the black media. In response to one of the more controversial episodes, Rev. Al Sharpton sharply criticized the episode "Return of the King," which features Martin Luther King, Jr. using the word "nigga" to criticize a hip-hop community obsessed with violence, sex, and

consumerism. The series own channel, The Cartoon Network, refused to air two episodes that criticized BET (likely due to the fact that both networks are owned by Viacom). In the episodes "The Hunger Strike" and "The Uncle Ruckus Reality Show" McGruder accuses BET of reinforcing negative black stereotypes. The episode features thinly veiled likenesses of executives of the channel plotting "the destruction of black people" (Braxton).

The call from Sharpton and executives of BET that McGruder's comedy goes too far illustrates the divide between generations and classes. McGruder's ethos is firmly entrenched within the hip-hop generation, which is often at odds with older civil rights leaders. Because of his unflinching criticism and the popularity of his show among a broad range of viewers, McGruder acts as a virtual civil rights leader with a distinct hip-hop ethos. West specifically mentions Sharpton as the type of leader who often "inadvertently contribute(s) to the very impasse they are trying to overcome" within the white power structure (44-5). What West proposes instead are artists and intellectuals who value "critical dialogue," which includes questioning leaders of the past and present, white and black political establishments and offering a vision of "moral regeneration and political insurgency" for those who "suffer from socially induced misery" (44-6). McGruder's series indicts white racism, specifically institutional racism, *and* black irresponsibility. And he refuses to lose sight of the difference between symbolic change and structural changes in equality. The episode that begins its third season, "It's a Black President, Huey Freeman," for example, critiques the election of the first African American president and contrasts Huey's disillusionment with that of the rest of the Freeman family and friends. The episode, presented as a documentary for a "production of Deutsche Public Television," features a German documentarian (Werner Herzog) who interviews the characters and narrates the episode. The episode opens with the narrator

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cataloging the various ways in which the Republican party attempted to link Barack Obama with left-wing radicals.

An often-used trope of the *Boondocks* is the exaggeration of public figures' press speeches and talk show appearances—an example of the manipulative mode of the sample. This technique uses previous material or likenesses but pushes them to their logical extremes. McGruder uses this reinterpretation for his cartoon's progressive message. Like hip-hop, the change in context and alteration of the original gives the material new meaning and often reveals layers of meaning previously untapped. McGruder peppers his public figures' speeches with expletives for humorous result. It is humorous, not merely for its parodic value, but because McGruder uses extremes of character, offering hyperreal versions of them to not only parody, to upset his viewers' expectations (as I mentioned earlier was his intention from *The Boondocks'* inception). The goal is to force audiences to see the intentions that often lie behind public words.

"It's a Black President, Huey Freeman," samples many public figures throughout and explores their media representations. McGruder opens the episode by using this technique to parody the Republicans' attempt to link Obama to "extremists" Rev. Jeremiah Wright and Huey Freeman, who in this episode (a documentary pastiche) is labeled a "domestic terrorist." Herzog, in his documentary, presents ways in which the republican party sought to label black activism "extremism" and to link Obama to a "radical" agenda. He briefly features a dossier with a picture bearing the likeness of Bill Ayers, the former Weather Underground member, the first activist Republicans used to tie Obama to anti-American sentiment. Linking Obama to the 1960s, a time seen as "radical" and to an organization professing radical methods for reaching its goals creates a myth of Obama as threatening.

Furthermore, it plays into the American racist myth of the black man as agent of violence.

In an exaggerated version of Rev. Wright's "Goddamn America" sermon excerpt used in anti-Obama commercials, McGruder parodies both its use by the Republican Party and Wright's emotional polemics. McGruder rewords Wright's sermon with more expletives. The clip reinforces the respect for Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders of King's era that appears throughout the series. In "Return of the King" he conducts himself in a way that shows respect for himself and his values as well as for others. Despite Al Sharpton's criticism, the episode features Dr. King living in a society he cannot understand and grows increasingly frustrated at what appears to him the wholesale adoption of media demagoguery and a black population overcome with an "In Da Club" mentality. After surveying a crowd drinking, dancing, and fighting he asks "Is this it? Is this what I got all them ass whippings for?" His final words to them after listing a litany of disappointments from a lack of vision to BET and his fears for the future are, "No, I won't get there with you. I'm going to Canada."

That Wright used any expletives heatedly from the pulpit, specifically "God damn," is the antithesis of Dr. King. In *The Boondocks* Wright's angry tirade becomes humorous through the extreme license taken with the clip aired multiple times during the campaign season. In *The Boondocks* episode, Wright loudly pronounces from the pulpit: "I say motherfuck America! Motherfuck American money! Motherfuck America day! America can eat a dick! America can lick the balls!" Although he is no fan of right-wing politicians, McGruder indicts Wright as having partially created the problem through his own similar grandstanding.

McGruder also parodies clergy like the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who use their office for political purposes and shows how intelligent black leaders are sidelined in the contemporary mediascape. The exaggeration of Wright's speech illustrates the lack of

righteous anger and "relative absence" of genuine humility West finds within post-Civil Rights black leaders. McGruder characterizes Wright as foul-mouthed and unable to articulate his point beyond generalities, making him akin to what West categorizes as a "perform[er]" or "play-act[or]" (38). McGruder features West as one of three academics as I mentioned earlier in the episode "The Trial of R Kelly," but they are absent in this episode.[65] In that way, the series highlights the lack of influence and media coverage of intelligent African American leaders while over-exposing "performers" like Wright or Sharpton. "10-year-old domestic terrorist" Huey Freeman's transgression is less explosive, yet it attests to the Republican Party's tenacity. After Huey is found to be Obama's "friend" on Myspace, Republican candidate John McCain takes advantage of the "hostile relationship between social conservatism and…black and Latino youth" (37). McCain claims in a press conference that the boy believes "Jesus is black, and Ronald Reagan is the devil" and deserves to be on "America's shit list, not our friend list." His misunderstanding of technology and use of Reagan as the touchstone of American decency is telling.

Obama's response to distance himself from Freeman asserts the power held by the conservative wing of both parties. In order to become president, Obama must cater to and play the political game with the Establishment. In a press conference to counter the newest accusation, he says he "pretty much" accepts every friend request. Despite saying he does not know who the boy is he says, "I denounce, I repudiate, and condemn him. Basically, Fuck him!" As Obama gives his last lines, the view cuts to Huey watching the press conference. When Obama says, "fuck him!" Huey turns his head toward the camera in disbelief. His

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[65] West calls McGruder "My dear brother" and says he has known him for "20-something years" having met the illustrator while a student in college.

mouth drops and eyebrows raise. In this moment Huey retreats into silence.

Non-responsiveness becomes his default throughout the rest of the episode. Obama's response indicates that politics and power ultimately trumps honesty and dedication to those fighting for social change it shows that his opponents mean more than those who would support him. Huey's response to the documentarian's question about being excited about "everything changing forever" with the election of a black president elicits one syllable: "eh." This dismissal of the historic occasion reveals Huey's indifference about the election and his distrust of American politics and politicians no matter their race. When pressed to explain what he believes about the election, he replies it is "the death of America." Notably visible over Huey's right shoulder is a portrait of Malcolm X, the Civil Rights leader "ambivalent" to the white American political system (West 102).

West promotes channeling Malcolm's "black rage" for constructive change and insists that "the future of this country may well depend on it" (104-5). When Huey's revolutionary politics become co-opted by politicians and campaign managers to elect a president, his radical stance turns to apathy. Huey, while not saying it outright, comes to the realization that a black president will still be responsible to the white power structures despite liberal whites and African Americans who expect the election to completely change a system firmly in place. Having said so much for so long and having his message forgotten so quickly, Huey, like Afro, retreats into silence and insulates himself from those around him.

Throughout the episode Huey comments little about the Obama presidency beyond mumbling "eh," as if to communicate a knowledge others would not understand, or even be receptive to. His friends and family say much more. Each views the election of Obama as an event from which they expect to receive personal benefit. His grandfather Robert expects

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accolades for being a Civil Rights participant. Riley's excitement revolves around the police having no authority to arrest him. The rapper Thugnificent uses the election to enhance his career and change his image. Each is very vocal about their respective personal wishes and has parts in several scenes in which they voice them. Huey's lack of personal identification with the election is hyperbolically interpreted as him hating Obama, and by extension being anti-black and pro-conservative. This lack of enthusiasm and its interpretation causes riots throughout the episode. The first one happens because he refuses to buy "Obama water" from a street vendor at a car wash. After refusing to share the rest of the group's excitement, members of the group accuse Huey of wanting McCain to win and not liking Obama's family. After his grandfather Robert chides him for starting problems, Huey exclaims he "didn't say anything." The mentality even reaches the series' racist Uncle Ruckus, who wades into the crowd to protect Huey and proclaims "You say 'Yes, we can! We say, 'No you cain't nigga!"[66] It is then that they chase the Freemans threatening violence. Later in the show, mobs burn Huey in effigy. *The New York Post* features his photo with the headline "EH? WTF!" His feature on the cover of the *Post* recalls years of racist covers and editorial cartoons, including one comparing President Obama to a monkey shot by policemen (Chan and Peters). The *Post* also references other African American artists' responses to the paper. The political rap group Public Enemy, known for songs such as the theme for *Do the Right Thing* (1989) "Fight the Power," had a particular distaste for the racially insensitive *Post.* In "A Letter to the *New York Post*" Chuck D states, "Founded in 1801 by Alexander

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[66] Uncle Ruckus is an elderly dark-skinned black man convinced he is white. His excuse for his darkness is the pseudo disease "re-vitiligo." Vitiligo is a condition where melanin reduces in dark skin. In a parody of Michael Jackson, Ruckus claims his white skin has become increasingly darkened over time due to the reverse condition.

Hamilton/That's 190 years of continuous fucked up news." Spike Lee, in addition to featuring the group in his 1989 film, opens a scene with a pan across a variety of newspapers, one of which is the *New York Post*, which describes the heat wave in its headline as "A Scorcher!" The headline foreshadowed the police riot, shooting, and fire in the film's climax, indicative of the paper's history of racist grandstanding and exacerbating already tenuous race relations.

Huey's last words in the episode are "What's the point of talking if nobody ever learns?" and "I'm retired." Huey simply watches the spectacle around him, despite the monumental changes. What he knows is that, as revealed at the end of the episode, life returns to normal. Huey retires from "terrorism" into the power of silence. For Huey, silence is the only reaction he finds appropriate to the misguided hope people have in Obama. As witnessed by reactions from family members and the crowd at the car wash, his silence uncovers ignorance and misunderstanding in people who refuse to look beyond their expectations of others. Cheryl Glenn writes at length about the power found within silence. Huey's silence is not the "language of the powerless" (Glenn 27). It is, for Huey, a source of strength and protest of the American government's continued lack of interest in fulfilling its promise to represent its citizens. Like Dr. King in the first season, Huey plans to move to Canada. Before he can relocate, his ride to his new home, Uncle Ruckus, is arrested by the Secret Service for threats against the president.

Huey uses silence as a tool to resist the influence of a status quo he perceives as damaging to himself as well as the general population. The hierarchy of popular culture that produces and profits from rappers like Rick Ross and 50 Cent and celebrates "nihilism" in the form of the "reduction of individuals to objects of pleasure" is unlikely to change. As I

discussed throughout my dissertation the "art" of hip-hop eventually enters the consumer market in every era of its growth. In its formative years, before its corporatization, people like FAB 5 Freddy and Russell Simmons marketed hip-hop in a way that reflected a broad spectrum of styles while preventing its exploitation. With the culture's popularization and corporatization of "bling" along with hyper-violent and hypersexual hip-hop, the art form reduced itself to a one-dimensional pastiche of hip-hop. Throughout *The Boondocks*, Huey says less than any other character. He chooses his words carefully, and usually uses them to impart knowledge or express his frustration. While other characters view his silence as passivity or superiority, Huey uses it as a rhetorical stance to resist prejudice and mass culture thereby empowering himself. Through Huey's observations, McGruder "disrupts" the authority of "junk" culture and allows it to convict itself (157).

McGruder wants to "expand the dialogue and evolve past the same conversation that we've had over the past 30 years about race in our country" (Robinson). To do this he assumes the role of gadfly. He largely ignores white media, a topic of the "same conversation" had about race and its depiction of minorities. Most people, black and white, have discussed or heard discussions of the topic, often multiple times. McGruder portrays white characters in a way also indicative of the white media's interaction with black America. He assumes that white media will ignore, exploit, or misrepresent the African American population like the characters in *The Boondocks*. Instead, McGruder focuses more often upon popular black culture, specifically the adoption of negative stereotypes for financial gain. He features several rappers on *The Boondocks* who betray themselves. The first rapper, Gangstalicious, introduces the viewer to the world of rap as image and its delivery by Black Entertainment Television (BET). Gangstalicious appears in his video for

"Thuggin' Love" surrounded by women in g-string bikinis. Later McGruder reveals the rapper to be a closeted homosexual gangster, a verboten sexual orientation in the macho gangsta rap world. The other rapper primarily featured is Thugnificent. He serves as a pastiche of egocentric rappers. He owns a mansion decorated with statues of himself, disturbs the neighborhood with raucous "In da Club" style parties, and keeps an entourage of sycophants at his side. McGruder later reveals Thugnificient holds a bachelor's degree in communications. He quickly becomes passé like so many in rap, loses his home and possessions, and is forced into taking a job as a delivery driver. McGruder, ever the gadfly, revels in unmasking the bling and revealing the hard truth behind the rap industry: too often style outweighs substance and any financial gain is quickly squandered.

Not content with animation, McGruder began soliciting funds on the fundraising website Kickstarter for an Uncle Ruckus live action film. A short video made specifically for the site features Gary Anthony Williams, who provides Ruckus' voice on the animated series, majestically walking onto a stage backlit with red lights. Cheers and applause erupt. The soundtrack, which includes a loud gong and martial snare drum, builds slowly into an anthem reminiscent of television productions of the Olympics or political news coverage. He slowly begins unfurling a flag. As he unwinds the flag, he reveals he is holding a Confederate flag; cheers and applause erupt.

McGruder's artistic outreach is reminiscent of hip-hop's communal efforts in early films such as *Wild Style* and *Style Wars*. Like Huey, McGruder, at least for this project, "retired" from corporate support in order to preserve his vision. The internet gives anyone the potential to reach an audience much larger than cable television, and allows McGruder to utilize alternative methods to fund, promote, and create his projects. The Uncle Ruckus

Kickstarter site states the fundraiser is "like a big ass bake sale!" In McGruder's iconoclastic

style, the donation levels reflect the values of Ruckus. The donation levels bear the names of

"great white Americans" such as Clint Eastwood and Bull Connor and offer a variety of gifts

based on the donation[67]. In addition to Kickstarter, McGruder began a YouTube channel

featuring Williams, who also voices the animated character. Williams bears an uncanny

likeness to the cartoon version of Ruckus, and the YouTube channel shows him interviewing

attendees of the NAACP awards, commenting on Grammy winners, appearing on Snoop

Dogg's YouTube program, and broadcasting his Hangout video chats.[68] By embracing social

media, McGruder adopts a more communal ethos as a means to express his art and drive it

forward.

Hip-hop and hip-hop media continue to change. The Old School portrayed in *The Get

Down* and *Straight Outta Compton* continues to live on. Due to increased Internet

communication fans now keep up with old school graffiti artist Zephyr's newest train

painting via his website, the Rock Steady Crew and their younger DJ, DJ P's, mixes on

YouTube, and Chuck D's comments on Twitter.[69] It ensures that aficionados of non-

commercial hip-hop, whether images from the 1970s or the latest trends in the art, have a

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[67] The donation levels are: Honey Boo-Boo ($1); Jimmy Rebel ($5); Hank Williams, Jr. ($10); Ted Nugent ($15); Clint Eastwood ($25); J. Edgar Hoover ($55); John Wayne ($100); Robert E. Lee ($250); Rush Limbaugh ($500); Elvis Presley ($1000); Chuck Norris ($1500); Tarzan ($2000); George W. Bush ($2500); Bull Connor ($5000); Ronald Reagan ($10,000).
[68] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPgCCmfaV8Xs-Sql1XSkLUA/feed
[69] During the 1999 DMC DJ championship, DJ P took the stage to jeers of "Where the hell's Tulsa!?" after his hometown Tulsa, OK, was introduced. He received the only standing ovation of the night. The contest made him internationally famous and a member of the Rock Steady Crew. He went on the win BET's "Master of the Mix" second season. https://youtu.be/gg5xKFrcWZk

place to congregate and participate in a culture that has moved well beyond the South Bronx of the 1970s.

Nostalgia through documentary and biopic continue to be popular. In addition to the various gangsta rap biopics mentioned in Chapter 4, Netflix has found success with its *Hip-Hop Evolution* (2016), which traces the era featured in the *Get Down* onward. Rival streaming platform Hulu released a biographical series *Wu Tang: An American Saga* (2019). Featuring story and music by the RZA, the show depicts the group members early days in the rough neighborhoods of Staten Island and their evolution to Asian-inspired rap supergroup. These are both likely signs that fans of old school rap and hip-hop will continue to drive media like this for years to come. Other filmmakers are expanding the history of the nostalgia films by releasing documentaries about the influence of women in hip-hop, including *My Mic Sounds Nice* (2010), *Say My Name* (2010), and *Roxanne Roxanne* (2017). Films such as *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (2006) and *Pick up the Mic* (2006) critically examine issues around masculinity, misogyny, and homophobia. Given the success of these series and films, the hope is that hip-hop media only becomes more inclusive and socially aware.

CHAPTER VI

TERWORD—CREATIVITY AND DIVERSITY COMES WITH AGE

"Courage is the Enabling Virtue for Any Human Being—Courage to

Think, Courage to Love, Courage to Hope"—Cornel West

In *Examined Life* (2008) West discusses what he calls the "Socratic Imperative"

of possessing the bravery to examine one's life to perceive truth "as a way of life," rather

than a "set of things in the world." This is his recipe for a fulfilled life, and it is similar to

the one espoused by hip-hop's earliest pioneers, who sought an authenticity based upon

creativity and community. It is a return to Afrika Bambaataa 4 principles of hip-hop:

Peace, Love, Unity, and Having Fun. McGruder and others continue this line of thought,

expanding their visions of ways in which this truth is lived. As mentioned throughout,

hip-hop is an art that is universal yet local, and artists creating with this spirit carry the

spirit of Bambaataa and the ethos of authentic hip-hop.

Dyson believes that Hip-hop will "renew its intellectual identity in the post-Bling

era when it begins to forge alliances with the cultural expression of degraded and

oppressed people around the world" (49-50). Dyson's hope is that hip-hop can continue

to be a critical means to develop and disseminate political consciousness, the struggle for

self-determination, as well as the struggle for human decency and agency" (Dyson 85).

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He cites the example of the Solidarity movement in Poland using NWA's "Fuck tha Police" to "express their outrage at oppressive social and political forces" (Dyson 49). Black music and identity become "instructive for other people to complain about and protest the limits of freedom" (Dyson 49). Dyson sees a wholesale cultural sampling of American rap as a way for other cultures to borrow black art and the African American struggle for civil rights. Yet, he is surprisingly narrow in his understanding hip-hop. Despite his claims to be a "hip-hop philosopher and preacher" Dyson, like many focused solely upon American rap, mislabeling it as the singular definition of hip-hop.

While some of Dyson's writing is observant, specifically regarding historical racism in America, he is no hip-hop historian. The education in anti-racism and social justice that Dyson hopes for began in America approximately 35 years ago with African American, Latin and later, white hip-hoppers. The education included Public television's nation-wide broadcast of *Style Wars*. Not only did it inspire thousands of new hip-hop fans, the documentary exposed youth across the country to subtly overt and covert institutional racism, many for the first time. Young viewers heard the subtle racist remarks of mass transit workers talk about the beauty of a "nice white train" and their comparison to holding back the artists with fighting the Vietcong. An eye-opening scene displays that white youth involved in the graffiti scene were already becoming aware of white privilege, something that took more than two decades to be a mainstream topic. In the film, one white writer discusses the problem minority youth have obtaining paint due to suspicious shop owners. He then describes the ease with which a white youth is able to "rob paint." This simple illustration communicates to youth involved in a common artistic pursuit that racism exists, and white privilege is a real phenomenon in a way no politician ever could explain.

In addition to hip-hop becoming a multi-racial, multi-gender culture in America, its international reach happened much more quickly than Dyson credits. British punks The Clash, members who were raised in the British equivalent of American housing projects, found an exciting and unique art to integrate into their distinctly English punk sound. Instead of inauthentic mimicry of another culture, they expressed their appreciation of this black and Latino, Bronx-born art form by integrating it into their own artistic expressions as they had previously with Jamaican and Rocksteady.[70] They recorded their first hip-hop influenced single "The Magnificent Seven" in 1980. The song, the first major hip-hop single by a white group predates Blondie's "Rapture" by several months, and was of European, not American, origin. Although the single charted poorly in their home country and failed to enter the charts in America, the song was popular with listeners of New York City's black radio station WBLS (Strummer qtd. in D'Ambrosio 222; Chang 154).

As hip-hop continues to borrow influences beyond America, it continues to expand its creativity and open up avenues of creativity for other cultures. We see a continuation of syncretism and sampling of popular images for new purposes by American graffiti artist Shepard Fairey and British artist Banksy. While it seems Dyson's "booze and broads" of American rap will continue to be the popular face of rap for the time being, the international culture of hip-hoppers is strong and growing. Both *The Boondocks* and *Afro Samurai* fulfill this history of international exchange in hip-hop. Networks broadcast both series throughout the world, exposing a new generation to the movement, music, and visual art of hip-hop as well as how its creators adapted other cultural influences to it. Like Japanese youth's

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[70] Their documentarian, advisor, and "fifth member" Don Letts, is Rastafarian and son of West Indian immigrants.

immediate love of hip-hop after viewing the premiere of *Wild Style* and the Rock Steady Crew, the culture's hybridity and vibrancy allows its adoption by others outside its African American and Latin origins in the South Bronx. While the single-mindedness of rap and its attendant videos may offer a negative view of hip-hop, others are hard at work to pay homage to all four of its elements.

Hip-hop, in its infancy, mirrored other American popular culture fads. The music was slow to reach a larger commercial audience, and breakdancing and its fashion soon went out of style. The one hit wonder dominates early manifestations of popular music, whether it is the "hillbilly" artists of country and western, rock's girl groups and doo wop quartets of the 1950s, or disco divas of the 1970s. Rappers also suffered the same fate early on, making genre defining records only to disappear later. These include revered artists as Schoolly D ("PSK—What Does it Mean?"), Kurtis Blow ("White Lines"), Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five ("The Message"). Even rappers with multiple platinum albums such as Run DMC, LL Cool J, and Big Daddy Kane have found it difficult to sustain their careers at their peak. This is changing due in part to older hip-hop fans dissatisfaction to contemporary music and their newfound ability, through file-sharing and streaming technologies, to rediscover the music of their youth. Perhaps, however, this is really a return to FAB 5 Freddy's initial goal of melding "high" art and "street" art. As hip-hop enters its fourth decade, hip-hop finds itself big enough to include music for the pop charts and artists willing to take risks artistically. Despite the influence of the corporate marketplace upon rap, and willing participants like 50 Cent who join its mentality of greed, hip-hop currently boasts artists who ably combine commerce and art. In addition to Fairey and Banksy, old school

graffiti artists continue to hold gallery shows and sell their works for thousands of dollars without the capitalist baggage that can compromise authentic expression.

Jay-Z may be the heir to FAB's visionary practice of syncretism as he continues to meld commerce and art. As a rapper he continues to sell millions of recordings and fill concert stadiums. Not content with this limited success, he works, to use FAB's phrase, "make moves" in the world of art. Previously the art gallery only featured space for painters and dancers, while DJs and rappers served as entertainment on opening night. Jay-Z changed that perception by collaborating with controversial performance artist Marina Abramović, known for marathon, physically and emotionally taxing performances such as *Rhythm 2* in which she took drugs to physically immobilize herself, and *Rhythm 0* in which she sat passively while visitors were presented with a variety of objects that could harm her. The last experiment included having her clothing cut, rose thorns pushed into her skin, and one patron threatening her with a loaded gun while another struggled to take it away (Abramović and de Negri 29-30).

On his YouTube documentary channel "Jay-Z's Life + Times Presents" he featured his reinterpretation of Abromivć's "The Artist is Present" in which she silently stares into the eyes of museum visitors across a table for 6 hours. In his version, Jay-Z rapped his song "Picasso Baby" for 6 hours. In discussing the performance, he says that the gallery and music venue are false dichotomies that cause separation among people. He wants to "bring the worlds back together" ("Picasso Baby"). During the 6 hours Jay-Z raps to fans, early hip-hop pioneers and supporters. Attendees include FAB 5 Freddy and Glen O'Brien, young poets and artists, filmmakers Judd Apatow and Jim Jarmusch, Rick Rubin's recording partner

George Drakoulias, children, an elderly female art dealer, and Abromavić herself.[71] Through Jay-Z we see hip-hop as a celebratory performance, much like that of the b-boys, DJs, and rappers of the early years. In this performance we have a Bling Era performer stretching out his Golden Age-worthy skills into the gallery space, similar to the graffiti artists in hip-hop's early years. With YouTube and other streaming services, hip-hop moves into a new medium for filmmakers to represent their community. If Jay-Z's encapsulation of hip-hop's history is any indication, we can expect more, exciting syncretic paradigm shifts in the future.

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[71] In a fascinating turn of events, Abromović becomes the good-natured but assertive aggressor, quickly striding to the rapper, forcing him to rapidly walk backwards while rapping as she follows.

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    charlie-ahearn-on-hip-hops-unlikely-genesis.

VITA

David Shane Gilley

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: SHOW AND PROVE: THE CINEMATIC AESTHETICS OF HIP-HOP

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in English at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma December 2019.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Library Information Science at University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 2018.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in English at University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, OK 2001.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in English at University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 1997.

Teaching Appointments:
Head Librarian, Holland Hall Upper School	Present
Librarian, Central Jr. Sr. High School	Fall 2017-Fall 2019
Librarian, Walt Whitman Elementary	Fall 2016-Spring 2017
Teaching Assistant, Oklahoma State University	Fall 2004–2011
Adjunct Instructor, Tulsa Community College	2003–2004
Adjunct Instructor, University of Tulsa	Fall 2002
Adjunct Instructor, University of Cent. OK	2001–2002
Adjunct instructor, Rose State College	Spring 2002
Adjunct Instructor, Redlands Community College	Fall 2001

Publications:

"What's in the Basket?' *Jouissance* and the Circuit of the Lacanian Drive." *The Other: The Online Journal of the San Francisco Society for Lacanian Studies*. 2010-2011Edition

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