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Black Empires, White Desires

The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip-Hop

Davarian Baldwin offers a sophisticated reading of spatial practices and social power that are aligned across multiple dimensions and that are often intensely inflected by aspects of race, class, and gender. As Baldwin explains, space may refer to material, lived environments, but it is also politicized in myriad ways and the spatial character of any environment is often forged through the political alliances or antagonisms that unfold within social relations. Baldwin interrogates the often stated authority of the ghetto as the root of "real" hip-hop, challenging prevalent attitudes that assert the "truth" of compressed urban enclaves and nominate the 'hood as today's dominant locus of hip-hop identity.

Foregroundng the representational images and narratives of ghetto spaces that proliferate in the media, Baldwin offers an insightful critique of the manifold articulations of "the real" and the ways that they are interpreted and made meaningful among audiences and consumers, both white and black. The specific references to the infamous east–west animosities that prevailed throughout much of the 1990s are convincingly framed within a discursive conflict pertaining not simply to geographies of difference but to underlying ideological formations relating to distinctions across the geo-political landscape of U.S. blackness in which "ghettocentricity" emerges as "a counter move to the Afrocentricity and white supremacy of the day."

Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip-Hop

Davarian L. Baldwin

> We have reached the point where our popular culture threatens to undermine our character as a nation.
>
> Bob Dole

> People are outraged, man, you get to the point where you're constantly hearing over and over talk about mugging people, killing women, beating women, sexual behavior. When young people see this—14, 15, 16 years of age—they think this is acceptable behavior.
>
> Rev. Calvin O. Butts

> I have seen a rise lately in the disrespect of black women.... Are we the ones influencing the world? If that was the case, what music was Bill Clinton listening to when he whirlpooled Lani Guinier?
>
> Joseph Simmons (of Run DMC)

1997 was a pivotal year for black popular culture in general and hip hop in particular. Caught in the crossfire of the William Bennett/C. Delores Tucker censorship movement, the deaths of Tupac Shakur and the Notorious BIG (in a so-called East/West Coast battle), and an increase in its consumption (especially of "gangsta rap") among suburban white youth, hip hop has been placed under the "microscope and found ... to be the source of all that is wrong with American society" (Diawara, 1993, 2). From the right, hip hop is attacked as a practice that started in urban America but is infecting the morals and family values of suburban teens. At the same time, sectors of the left and the black middle-class distance themselves from hip hop because of its misogyny and homophobia. The critique of hip hop as a black popular culture form that exists as an outside threat or infection, ravaging "American" (and black middle-class) culture and values, must be understood within a history of identification located squarely in the ideological and material spaces of colonialism, racism, and national identity. The ability to fix hip hop as pure difference from the norm or as the source of wrongdoing must be interrogated. It suggests that there is an already-agreed-upon national character

threatened by a deviant popular culture (Dole) and leaves unquestioned the border where national character ends and popular culture begins.[1]

Hip hop itself is not purely a U.S., let alone black, cultural form. However, it is not an understatement to say that the deviancy or threat in popular culture is racialized, particularly through old narratives of the dysfunction of the black family (Kelley, 1997). These stories are now being deployed to identify the source of the problem within hip hop culture. After the death of the Notorious BIG, *Village Voice* writer Touré suggests this vision: "I can see now that the murder and killings are coming from the same hands that make the beats and rhymes; how is living in hip hop any different than living in the dysfunctional black family writ large?" (1997, 30).

For many, it appears that the hip hop nation and the nation at large are no longer safe from the deviancy that the black family produces. Discourse on the black family with its female-headed home becomes shorthand to make sense of the supposedly unique violence and sexuality in certain genres of hip hop. The lazy connections made between mythologies of dysfunctional black families and hip hop ignore the performative aspects of black popular culture. These narratives understand the deviancy in hip hop to be an uncomplicated (re)presentation of black culture (Fanon, 1967). The performance of hip hop as a black cultural form, for better or worse, becomes a reference for "authentic" blackness. As an action and reaction against conservative and liberal backlash,[2] at times hip hop attempts to counter negative notions of blackness with its own "racial authenticity," where the position of absolute difference is self-induced. Racial authenticity is best articulated in these instances through the stance that the artistic production is pure and untouched by any means of dilution.[3]

Within black communities, this process of black authenticity has historically oscillated between the binaries of excess and austerity. As Greg Tate contends, "the controversies surrounding hip hop in the black community have revived an ongoing debate over who best tells black stories: our blues people or our bourgeoisie" (1997, 70). In order to combat the "negative" idealizations of blackness, middle-class moral purists (even draped in kente cloth) attack the sexual frankness of hip hop as "excessive" and tend to support what is understood as "positive rap" because of its Afrocentric rhetoric and/or political awareness,[4] where as some "Ghettocentric" advocates defend the explicit lyrics as reality-based and resent the possibilities of censorship as dilutions of the authentic "realness" of black experiences. This position in hip hop is exemplified by the characterization of the "keepin-it-real nigga."

It must be noted that these positions are not set in stone and often overlap and intersect. For example, a third position might be the one articulated by KRS-One, which contains a nationalist hip hop edge but is rooted in nostalgia, not for Africa's golden era, but for a hip hop golden age. In the midst of hip hop's international growth and change, this "reaching back" for better times attempts to figure out "what went wrong, and why did hip hop become the revolution that failed?" Instead of attempting to "keep it real," this position is set on correcting rap music's ills, so that, as a culture, the hip hop nation can "keep it right." In what way are the articulations of the "keepin'-it-real nigga" or the "African" complicit with a white patriarchal order by designating what behaviors, sexualities, and representations will be accepted into the space of black popular culture? In what way is the masking of these performances as "natural," "accurate," or "real" complicit with the traditional order, and in what way are they disruptive?

Ironically, both extreme critiques and defenses of hip hop as an authentic representation of black life converge upon a certain refashioning of the infamous Moynihan (1965) report. When black families and women are the point of focus, representations of black women stand in for authentic blackness. In turn, the visibility of black female purity or contamination signifies the success or failure of black culture; women's bodies become the terrain on which battles over black authenticity are waged. In this context, C. Delores Tucker is able to attend a Time Warner board meeting and exclaim that Lil' Kim's songs must be banned. As an example of what she calls "pornographic," Tucker quotes "No Time": "No money, money / No

licky, licky / Fuck the dicky, dicky and the quickie" (1996). Kim's lyrics could be (and have been) read as part of a long musical history of black women taking a stance for sexual and economic self-satisfaction (Rose, 1994; Davis, 1998). However, alternative voices are now silenced as deviant, as false articulations of blackness, and therefore irrelevant. The primacy of familial and traditional values nearly overrides any focus on social/sexual inequalities. But the insistence on making an artist like Kim irrelevant also shows the centrality of her work. Despite the attempts to repress and regulate personal and interpersonal black conduct, artists like Kim have emerged as part of a hip hop-inspired black bourgeois aesthetic.

This aesthetic rejects both black petit-bourgeois respectability and ghetto authenticity. Its practitioners accept the black bourgeois notion of upward mobility without rejecting the desires and consumption habits of the black working class. This new black aesthetic offers a new identity outside the workplace by endorsing the consumption of luxury goods. As a form of "dressing up," it also offers a status for subordinate groups that blurs distinctions between themselves and their oppressors (Kelley, 1994, 167–69). They are changing what it means to be black and middle class in ways that make our proponents of traditional values cringe because they refuse to be disciplined into puritan characterizations of normative middle-class behavior. They have all the trappings of the middle and elite classes but wear Versace and Armani in a different way, drive their Bentleys to different places, and play out private inequalities in public arenas.

This black aesthetic potentially de-naturalizes the divides of black/white, male/female, authentic/commodified, and challenges normative notions of hip hop as a space that can purify the impure. It debunks the contention that if hip hop were practiced in its truest form, it could bring in the straying brothers and sisters who lack "knowledge of self" or who "ain't keepin it real," as if such pronouncements of identity were ever stable. The artists remind us that "in concept, hip hop was never anti-capitalist, pro-black or intentionally avant-garde. Up until Public Enemy, hip hop's intent was never to shock the world but to sell the market on its novelty and profitability" (Tate, 1997, 70). Hip hop as a musical form could never follow the traditional association of commodification with cooptation, because the revolution of hip hop was fought out within the circuits of the market. These artists have begun to discover that a black politics can also be organized within the processes of consumption.

In the same way as we consume these artists, they consume other American cultural icons. Through their performance of gangsters, rich women, and corporate culture icons, the new gangsta rappers like Biggie, Lil' Kim and Jay-Z are living the American dream of commodity obsession and appropriation. However, the appropriation of cultural icons is not a new formulation. Throughout the 20th century, Americans of all hues who have been marginalized as ethnic or "other" have utilized the "gangsta" as a site of socio-economic mobility. In this particular moment, the grammar of the gangsta's "hustle" or "game" has become the language of the culture industry. Hip hop artists and other culture workers have become "playas," and those who attempt to stop black progress in the game have become dubbed "playa haters." These workers have aesthetically, and begun to materially, appropriate the culture industry as a site for black institution-building and contestation.

Their music describes the American entrepreneur, for whom competitiveness is a way of life. While they don't like government restrictions any more than the Republicans and endorse rampant individualism within the markets, they also expose how the fervor for deregulation extends to everything except certain genres of the American music industry, genres which dominate the world market. In addition to money makers, these lyricists speak to the inequalities, restrictions, and uneven developments that have been aimed at African-Americans and women in their quest for the "American dream."

In the current backlash against gangsta rap, however, may be heard a decline-and-fall narrative that understands hip hop to be over-commodified and calls for a return to the roots of street

parties and the "yes yes y'all" freestyle rhyme, which exemplifies a pre-commodified, undiluted era. This can be heard in KRS-One's 1997 hit, "Rapture," where the hook to the song says, "step into a world where hip hop is real." In the video, we see the re-invocation of a bygone era in the historic Boogie Down South Bronx, where breakdancers and graffiti artists don the early 80s fashions of warm-up suits and Puma sneakers while performing a corrective memory of the old-school concert as a utopic space.

But this utopic space has been (re)constructed in 1997, where people no longer perform or consume hip hop in the same ways. This video intentionally decontextualizes hip hop's transformations in the pursuit of a fictive realness. Such an excavation of a hip hop past doesn't question whether hip hop was ever purely outside the circuits of commodification or consistently and totally oppositional. Rather, it assumes the location of the South Bronx and the rhyming of KRS-One as correctives to contemporary hip hop. Through performances like the one above, hip hop becomes visually fixed through the designation of which images and behaviors will exemplify an "authentic" black cultural practice. However, the new gangsta/playa aesthetic is not a full embrace of marketplace ideology and commodified cultural production. The identities produced therein are important sites for a black politics at the end of the 20th century.

The general critiques circulating around gangsta rap highlight the patriarchal masculinity, drugs, sex, gunplay, and consumption habits without either remembering the Dapper Dan and Gucci days of hip hop's "golden age" or noting the earlier progressive move that gangsta rap was making against the evolution of nation-conscious hip hop in the early 90's. What many now term "positive" or conscious rap had begun to evoke a sense of gatekeeping that designated who was and was not authentically black.

"Moving on Up": Black Respectability in the Era of Nation-Conscious Hip Hop

The massive economic and cultural reorganization of life in the 1980s pulled black people in all directions. At the same time that a black middle-class was growing (in part due to affirmative action), a larger critical mass of African-Americans were left behind in the urban enclaves of all the major U.S. cities and rural locations. The Brooklyn Heights location of the *Cosby Show* and hip hop's "Boogie Down" South Bronx were talking to each other in previously unthinkable ways. The desire for upward class mobility through the market was confronting the black cultural form of hip hop, which in some ways was marketable because of its origins in urban poverty. The urban origins of hip hop and its artists' desire to become, as Eric B. and Rakim stated, "Paid in Full" (1987), were met by black audiences, who were grappling with what it meant to be paid and black. Up to this point, authentic blackness in hip hop was associated with the inner city. When African-Americans became more upwardly mobile in the 1980s, with (for example) many black youths entering the nation's elite universities, anxieties grew within the black middle class over its relationship to blackness. Black people's "moving on up" was accompanied by a sense of alienation from authentic spaces.

The icons of Afrocentricity and Africa itself served as bridges between upward mobility and historically black experiences. The notion that success and academic achievement were necessarily white experiences was met with a wave of Afrocentricity, where the study and consumption of Afrocentric goods and literature could justify a class distinction without raising issues of black authenticity. Designer wear and bourgeois habits were legitimized with, respectively, kente cloth and reconstructed Yoruba origins.

Concurrently, as hip hop became more mainstream, the nation-conscious Afrocentric genre grew. It does not seem a coincidence that in 1988, the formerly "criminally-minded" (1986) KRS-One took on the role of Malcolm X in "By All Means Necessary" (1988) and Long Island-based Public Enemy, who in 1986 were "rollin in their 98 Olds-mobile" began to state that "It

Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold [Them] Back" (1988). In part, nation-conscious rap became a cipher to understand blackness in arenas of upward mobility and hip hop's national growth. As well, this music shared its terrain with an African-American and white college-age audience who used African and Black Power fashions, hairstyles, and rhetoric to demonstrate political acts of rebellion and resistance. The academic Afrocentricity of Molefi Asante countered dominant academic politics by positioning "Africa" at the center of study and analysis (1987, 187).

Afrocentricity served as a powerful tool for African-American students as their professors and administrators questioned the validity of integrating multicultural education into the canon and strengthening African-American Studies programs. The aesthetic of the "African" became a stance where students could mount a counterattack against the academic claims that African-Americans had no culture worthy of the canon. Afrocentricity served as a safe space in threatening academic waters, a complement to nationhood rhetoric within the Reagan/Bush regime, and a language to maintain borders around the definition of hip hop during its national expansion.

The move toward empowering black populations outside urban spaces through a kind of Afrocentric/nation-conscious hip hop form was not entirely new. Its roots are visible in the collective known as the "Native Tongues," which was roughly comprised of the Jungle Brothers, A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah, Monie Love, and De La Soul (Boyd, 1995, 299). Their origins point even further back toward the Universal Zulu Nation of the Bronx-based Afrika Bambaataa, who in the late 70s was hell-bent on not just transmitting his Kraftwerk-inspired "techno funk" to the nation, but on making the "Planet Rock."

Native Tongues followed in Bambaataa's footsteps by not letting their musical influences or artistic vision be impeded by fictive standards of how hip hop should sound. For example, De La Soul's first single "Me, Myself and I" ironized earlier rap posturings by counterpoising the popular b-boy stance to "being one's self." De La Soul is known for initiating hip hop's breakaway from the recycling of the same James Brown beats by introducing the samples of everything from Steely Dan to Disney. Introducing a class consciousness, De La Soul was also clear about being from a relatively affluent Long Island background, stating that this heavily influenced their sound and aesthetics, which ran contrary to the stereotypical urban style. Within this distinction, they rejected what had become the authentic style of sweatsuits, gold chains, and Kangol hats by presenting their bohemian style of flowered shirts, dreaded hair, and African medallions.

Released in 1988, "Me, Myself and I" attempted to open a space where blackness could be understood through parody and the interrogation of multiple identities within hip hop, while simultaneously making subtle political statements to the nation at large:

> Glory, glory hallelu
> glory for plug one and two
> But that glory's been denied by
> kudzids and gookie eyes
> people think they dis my person by
> stating I'm darkly packed
> I know this so I point at Q-Tip and he
> states "Black is Black"
> mirror, mirror on the wall
> shovel chestnuts in my path
> please keep all nuts with the nuts
> so I don't get an aftermath
> but if I do I'll calmly punch them in

the 4th day of July
cause they tried to mess with 3rd
degree
that's Me, Myself and I

In this song, De La Soul is exploring issues of cultural individualism within blackness through an ironic reference to American patriotism. They are asking that the rhetoric of cultural freedom be applied both inside and outside of "the race." But the political impetus of this Afrocentric style became statically and dangerously interpreted as the only option within blackness, a turn that may have prompted De La Soul to title their second album *De La Soul Is Dead.* The "Soul" in Afrocentric rap began to articulate an essentialist position that equated musical "soul" with a particular black nationalist, Afrocentric identity, instead of allowing for a multiplicity of black experiences to be heard. Afrocentric versions of nation-conscious rap deployed the sunny disposition of Egypt and a re-imagined Egyptian/African culture as sources of racial legitimacy in the face of racial oppression. But in its attempts to create a powerful picture of black life, Afrocentrism expected blacks to live up to an imagined identity based on a particular version of African-American history and painted over issues of gender with broad strokes. Black life was articulated primarily in the voice of black men, and if not from men, then from the position of patriarchy.[5]

The "fertile" soil of Egypt and "Mother Africa" were fetishized as female objects, primarily valuable for their production of melanin babies, otherwise known as the "original black man." Taking material from Asante, psychologist Frances Cress Welsing, and even 18th century white scholars (like the biologist Gregor Mendel), the melanin in black skin or the culture of African people is understood as making the black man naturally good, artistic, and superior.

As Jeffrey Decker has stated, work by the artist Isis was emblematic of this phenomena. In her music video "The Power of Myself Is Moving," she plays the part of a fertility goddess along the Nile: "I'm a self coming forth a creature bearing life / a renaissance, a rebirth" (1990). Even through a female voice, the message evokes the patriarchal order where women are revered solely for their inherent nurturing and reproductive skills. Because the black woman bears the seed of the black nation, she is viewed as an "object" that must be protected from both interracial and intraracial contamination.

As stated earlier, the absence of any discussion of intraracial class conflict is a crucial oversight in Afrocentric work. However, anxieties over class-based behaviors emerge through a rigid representation of regional differences and gendered behavior. One of the key groups to articulate this phenomenon was Arrested Development, which Todd Boyd rightly lauds for relocating hip hop outside urban spaces into the landscapes of the rural South, while also criticizing the group for its romanticization of this locale: "Arrested Development argues for a kind of cultural innocence or purity. This notion of purity is exemplified through a juxtaposition of the harsh urban realities of the street prominent in contemporary rap and their embrace of the premodern "country," the simplicity of a rural landscape" (1995, 300). Arrested Development promotes the romantic rural by defining and denigrating its other: the urban subject.

This rural-urban dichotomy creates a class hierarchy between the positive images of pastoral Afrocentric rap and the depressing dangers of urban experiences. A binary, expressed this time in terms of the "true black self," is established between the haves and have-nots: "Now I see the importance of history / why my people be in the mess that they be / many journeys to freedom made in vain / by brothers on the corner playing ghetto games" (1992). This trope of "knowledge to be acquired" through mastering designated Afrocentric texts and behaviors is understood as the entryway to authentic blackness. The revisionist Southern history of Arrested Development (AD) can easily be mapped onto the "return to family values" narra-

tive, best depicted in idealization of rural New England communities by white conservatives like Newt Gingrich. In both narratives, place and family space became the loci for the creation of "proper values." As well, both rhetorics claim to speak from the position of the popular or "everyday people," while masking their privileged class positions.

Scholars like Boyd have prized AD for their positive and progressive gender politics. However, I am skeptical of such a position, because the voices of their women rappers are constrained by their role as a prize. In AD's work, the "black queen" serves as an object that must not be contaminated by "niggas." In the video "People Everyday," black men are performing the stance of the "urban nigga"—drinking 40's and grabbing their crotches—when an "African queen" approaches and one of the men grabs her butt. Simultaneously, Speech[6] can be heard in a voiceover criticizing their behavior: "My day was going great and my soul was at ease / until a group of brothers / started buggin out / drinking the 40 ounce / going the nigga route / disrespecting my black queen / holding their crotches and being obscene" (1992). The woman is given no agency and the nigga performs the stereotypical deviant role that gives the African the opportunity to do his duty and step in to protect his queen. An analogy is made between the ability of the African man to protect his woman and the intrinsic strength of the African identity: "That's the story y'all / of a black man / acting like a nigga / and get stomped by an African" (1992). Even in the midst of gender inclusion, masculine aggression rears its ugly head. The radical right's vision of the patriarchal family is upheld, but now in blackface and kente cloth. But what happens when the nigga speaks back?

"The Nigga You Love to Hate": Class Conflicts in the "G-Funk" Era

Rather than evading the nigga, gangsta rap actually engaged and mimicked the position of nigga as other, as performance. In the next section I, along with Robin Kelley and other scholars, postulate that the earliest manifestations of gangsta rap attempted to speak back to the middle-class-oriented position of nation-conscious rap. Kelley argues that, "L.A. gangsta rappers are frequent critics of black nationalists [as well]. They contend that the nationalist focus on Africa—both past and present—obscures the daily battles poor black folk have to wage in contemporary America" (1994, 212). In some regards, nation-conscious rap assumed that everyone agreed on the definition of "knowledge of self" and, in turn, blackness. Gangsta rap, however, provides another perspective on black life.

As well, gangsta rappers saw no inherent negativity in the term "nigga," defining themselves as niggas in defiance of the dominant society, both black and white. As hip hop was continuing to expand, more tensions arose around the definition of hip hop as a representation of blackness. Although hip hop originated and was most successful in urban New York and on the East Coast, the emergence of gangsta rap shifted the focus in hip hop to the lived experience of the post-industrial city on the West Coast, particularly Los Angeles.

The highly popular N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitude) album, *Straight Outta Compton* was released in 1988 at the same time that nation-conscious rap was becoming popular. However, it wasn't until the early 90s—when N.W.A.'s *efil4zaggiN* (Niggaz 4 life) reached number one on the *Billboard* charts before it was even released, Snoop Doggy Dogg was introduced on the *Deep Cover* soundtrack, and Dr. Dre's multi-platinum album *The Chronic* was heard on every street corner and video station—that everyone was forced to realize that gangsta rap was a force to be reckoned with. The West Coast began to dismantle New York's monopoly of hip hop and critiqued nation-conscious rap's politically correct disciplining of black bodies. Unlike the critiques of black nihilism that wax nostalgic for a bygone black community (West, 1993), gangsta rappers aren't anti-nationalist or apolitical, but they do oppose a political correctness which obscures the historical realities of class, gender, and locational difference within the representation of black communities.

On "Dre Day," Dr. Dre retorts: "no medallions / dreadlocks / or Black fist it's just that gangsta glare / with gangsta rap that gangsta shit, / brings a gang of snaps" (1992). Instead of seeing this position as exemplifying a movement of anti-politics, I see it as a shift in the way in which politics is articulated. In hindsight, it is an attempt to break the stranglehold of nation-conscious rap on hip hop expression. The political language of nation-conscious rap, in its most general sense, was traded in for the grammar of the hood and the particular day-to-day struggles of black people.

In gangsta rap, the nigga acquired a locational and economic specificity. Kelley argues that the experiences of young black men in the inner city were not universal to all black people, and furthermore, that "nigga does not mean black as much as it means being a product of the post-industrial ghetto" (1994, 210). This process exposes the limitations of politics based on skin color. Gangsta rap can be understood as resistance, where the nigga is seen as a performative identity that is not solely accessed by a black constituency.

Thus, we are encouraged to analyze the nigga within the American mainstream, especially since so much of the work in gangsta rap is inspired by popular action-adventure and gangster films and its biggest registered consumers are suburban white teens. Because of this phenomenon, we must think critically about white youth's influence over creating and maintaining the gangsta subject by purchasing the music. The gangsta subject would not continue to exist in commodified form if there were not buyers waiting for the product. Gangsta rap deals in fantasy and evil, constructing marketable stories that tell as much about its white teen listeners' desires as about its practitioners. In what ways do the consumption of and desire for a genre help to continue its existence?

The problematics that supposedly originate in the nigga subject are turned back onto America and its political/economic/racial regime. In Kelley's essay, a Chicano gang member makes visible his relation to the economic order in regard to his "deviant" behavior: "I act like they do in the big time, no different. There ain't no corporation that acts with morals and that ethics shit and I ain't about to either. As they say, if it's good for General Motors, it's good enough for me" (1994, 196). The desires of the "gangsta" are exposed equally as the desires of its consumers and creators, problematizing the belief in a pure pathological difference based on race. In other words, the behaviors of the nigga are found in all segments of American life.

Through the performance of the nigga, the gangsta rapper fights against fixity and attempts to make visible the multiple registers through which the hood, racial pathologies, and the nigga are actualized. In gangsta rap, individualism and criminality are continually tied to America culture. As Ice-T states: "America stole from the Indians sure and prove / what's that? / a straight up nigga move!" (1991). But in this position of rebelliousness, gangsta rap and the nigga became idealized as Ghettocentric, a counter move to the Afrocentricity and white supremacy of the day.

The nigga became the embodiment of black defiance against all comers through a highly masculinist imaginary, where the nigga was strong when he wasn't a "punk," "bitch," or "pussy." The project of uncovering the racially hybrid subjectivity of the nigga is halted when the nigga is flaunted as the only "real" black identity. The tropes of masculinity, promiscuity, and violence become naturalized as inherently black. However, this form of identification is no different from most young men in patriarchal societies who come to associate masculinity with aggression and violence. Blackness as hypermasculine becomes a romanticized position of strength and opposition that hopes to create "safe spaces" of uncontested male power. Furthermore, the belief that black family structures are deviant because of the instability of its women is a narrative that may also be found in gangsta rap.

The male rapper begins to call for the restoration of the patriarchal order, because for him, the female is fixed as a threat to the progress of his success or hustle. In the same way that gangsta rap performs the violence of an idealized America, it also calls upon traditional tales

of black women as scapegoats for problems within the nation(hood). "African-American women are often portrayed as welfare queens making babies merely to stay on public assistance or 'gold-diggers' who use their sexuality to take black men's meager earnings" (Kelley, 1994, 217). This narrative can be found in Dr. Dre's song "Bitches Ain't Shit But Hoes and Tricks," or E-40's "Captain Save a Ho," in which men are chastised for taking care of a woman and her children, especially if they aren't his own. During this song's popularity, a man who listened to his girlfriend or spent too much time with a woman was accused of "having an S on his chest" because he was "savin' em" (his woman was in control). The woman is seen as putting the man's freedom in jeopardy by hustling him for his money and time.

At its most progressive, gangsta rap analyzes the contingent relationship between poverty and a racialized political economy but at the same time can explain women in poverty in terms of a behavioral problem, claiming that all a woman wants is to take you for your goods. Tricia Rose explains how black males fear the assertion of a strong woman's sexuality: within gangsta spaces, there is no guarantee that heterosexual male desires will be met because of women's capacity to reject or manipulate men's advances (1991). This is not a new narrative and indeed is based on longstanding fears of women's ability to trap men (e.g., through pregnancy), when sexual exchange is able to produce money and goods (Kelley, 1994, 219).

Just as the purified space of the black nationalist is insecure, so also is the stability of the gangsta. The terrain where black men attempt to assert their masculinity or evade the issues of class is always highly contested. Male gangsta rappers expose the vulnerability of heterosexual male desire in their exaggerated stories of dominance over female representations of black life.

The degree of anxiety expressed in these heavy-handed fantasies explains both an intense desire and distrust of women and the way in which their (in)subordination disrupts racial authenticity. However, gangsta rap is *not* vying for a sanitized vision of Africa, complete with corrective gender and class relationships. It forces us to deal with the everyday in a way that can't justify the harsh denigration of female and working-class desires, particularly in the marketplace. Gangsta rap seems suited for engaging the social contradictions and ambiguities of urban life.

In the context of racial distinctions, while gangsta rap's white consumers and critics are identifying the gangsta as something "other" than themselves or the white middle-class values they purport to inherit, these artists are parodying "normative" behavior. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue that:

> The "top" attempts to reject and eliminate the "bottom" for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon the low-Other, but also that the top *includes* the low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is ... a psychological dependence upon precisely those others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for this reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central. (5, 1986)

Although gangsta rap has been constructed as deviant from middle-class normativity, examining the social texts of desire and consumption shows its relationship to those very norms. For example, the "vulgar" black female deviance performed or commented on in gangsta rap is not nor can be discretely separated from the sense of entitlement clothed in middle-class normative respectability. The gangsta performance forces those who embrace white middle-class patriarchy to stare the black gangsta in the face and see him- or herself. This shift to gangsta music has allowed black men and women trapped by oppressive systems to reinvent themselves through new performative acts, a reinvention defined by Manthia Diawara as the "defiant tradition in black culture that challenges every attempt to police the black body or mind" (1993, 4).

The Wretched of the Earth: Pleasure, Power, and the Hip Hop Bourgeoisie

Earlier conservative idealizations of black life evaded an engagement with the black body through policing it, whereas Diawara's notion of the "black good life society" "emphasizes the necessity for a productive space which is accompanied by consumption, leisure, and pleasure in black people's relation to modernity" (1993, 7). This engagement with pleasure and commodity consumption addresses realities that black middle-class and black church aesthetic forms often shun.

These traditional forms have historically functioned within ideologies that separate intellect and pleasure, mind and body, and have been articulated within the binary of a harsh middle class/working class divide. Historically, it has been black people's responsibility to link pleasure or freedom with the non-material. L.A.-based gangsta rap reopened a space where it is not sinful to link black pleasure with materialism. Rather than finding a politics through positive imaging, the "black good life" seeks a politics through performance and refashions identity through irony and play. If moral and cultural correctness is seen as denial, then open representations of sexuality and grotesque and carnivalesque characterizations/eroticizations of violence can be understood as potentially liberating.

The performance of so-called deviant acts and direct confrontations with black stereotypes create black industries, as well as make visible the social construction of what appear as natural black characteristics. These performances expose the interracial and intraracial formation of the nigga identity and "take ethical decisions away from the church, out of the moral and religious arena, and place them squarely at the feet of material well being and pleasure" (Diawara, 1993, 7). I argue that the backlash against the new cadre of male and female gangsta rappers, whether it be voiced by C. Delores Tucker, William Bennett, Rev. Calvin Butts, or hip hop purists, is mobilizing around an ethic that purports to speak "for the people" but in actuality does not. The gatekeepers of "authentic blackness" are anxiety-ridden over public displays of the black good life society, exemplified in the emergence of a new hip hop identity; a black middle-class aesthetic that will not be policed by traditional notions of morality and class status.

Confident in the freedom offered by the pleasures and profits of performing gangsta, New York-based Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Jay-Z, and The Notorious BIG are exemplars of this hip hop shift. Consequently, these artists are specifically attacked for their lines of commodity endorsements from Versace to Lexus and for their obsession with Italian-American mobsters. Yet, in the same way that white supremacy has created the nigga as a repository for its own not-so-laudable activities, "gangsta/playa" rappers have taken white American commodities as signs of achieving "the dream." By performing the roles of Italian-American mobsters and movie characters, they continue to question the idea that gangsta behaviors in hip hop are inherently an extension of deviant, let alone black, culture. At the same time, their gangsta performance critiques the notions of blackness expressed through ghetto authenticity or black bourgeois respectability. This version of gangsta rap questions the fictive boundaries placed around class status as a means of social exclusion.

One way in which upward mobility has historically been policed is by the coupling of class status with behavioral dictates. As working-class blacks advance financially through the entertainment arena, they are expected to change their behaviors in a way that "properly" suits their new economic status. However, the privacy traditionally afforded middle-class citizens is not given to these black cultural workers, who are placed under strict scrutiny as if their social advancement warranted a special kind of public attention. So many perceptions are shaped by the "you can take a nigga out of the hood, but you can't take the hood out of the nigga" narrative, that entertainment and sports pages begin to look like the Metro section. But I wonder if these entertainers are becoming more of an embarrassing spectacle, or whether there are

larger anxieties about the changing composition of the American middle and upper class? This belief that particular behaviors can be linked to a specific class standing hardly ever makes visible that entrée into the normative middle-class space has historically been acquired and maintained through not-so-middle-class behaviors.

Instead of reacting to "culture of poverty" rhetorics by disassociating blackness from American culture, these gangsta collectives have crowned themselves Junior M.A.F.I.A., The Firm, and Roc-A-Fella (Rockefeller) Records. They problematize the lines drawn between legality and illegality, morality and immorality, by articulating not the culture of poverty but mainstream American culture. This American tale potentially tears the racial and economic structure of U.S. life away from the current trends in neo-Social Darwinist ideology (i.e., that there is something particular to black culture that is intrinsically deviant). Critics of gangsta rap hold to the claim that inherent to the middle-class identity are distinguishably different values. The lyrics of the new gangstas make it clear that the rhetoric of individualism pays homage to traditional mainstream values that are being used "to redistribute more income, wealth and power to classes that are already most affluent in those aspects" (Gans, 1995, 7).

Born amidst the same media that chain black identity to cultural pathology, this new black-entertainment middle class has viewed the slippery slope of ethical behavior in American life. They were children of the 1980s Yuppie and Buppie culture, when conspicuous consumption was a normative, elite class behavior. These artists have witnessed on television and movie screens the prominence of John Gotti, Manuel Noriega, and Saddam Hussein, all as a result of U.S. state intervention. For them, corporate culture *is* gangsta culture. Could witnessing and experiencing life within the American context have possibly encouraged and nurtured the violation of so-called family values within marginal communities? Jay-Z, owner of Roc-A-Fella Records, seems to think so:

> Your worst fear confirmed
> me and my fam'(ily) roll tight like the firm
> gettin' down for life, that's right, you betta learn
> why play with fire, burn
> we get together like a choir, to acquire what we desire
> we do dirt like worms, produce g's [thousands of dollars] like sperm
> Til legs spread like germs ...
> I sip fine wines and spit vintage flows—what y'all don't know?
> 'Cuz you can' knock the hustle
> Y'all niggas lunchin' punchin' a clock
> function is to make and lay back munchin'
> sippin' Remy on the rocks
> my crew, something to watch
> notin' to stop
> un-stoppable ...
> you ain't havin' it? Good me either
> Let's get together and make this whole world believe us, son
> at my arraignment screamin'
> All us blacks got is sports and entertainment—until we're even
> thievin' as long as I'm breathin'
> can't knock the way a nigga eatin' fuck you even
> (1996)

These lyrics might easily seem to promote illegality, self-indulgence, misogyny, and crudely hedonistic tendencies; however, they also provide a critique of the socio-economic structure

that prevents many African-Americans access to decent wage labor. Jay-Z makes clear that large populations of African-Americans are still excluded from middle-class consumption except through sports and entertainment. On Jay-Z's latest album, he is inspired by the hook in the theme song from the musical *Annie*. While the song refers to a little white orphan, Jay-Z argues that "instead of treated we get tricked / instead of kisses we get kicked / it's a hard knock life" is an archetypal "ghetto anthem" (1998). Both sets of lyrics endorse a hustler's mentality, a strategic manipulation of the opportunities made available in light of socio-economic inequalities. This perspective suggests that consumption and pleasure could serve as working-class critiques of middle-class ideals and also utilizes the trope of the gangsta/playa to appropriate the terrain of the "free" market for black institution-building.

Another example of this manipulation of black identity is the platinum-selling artist, The Notorious BIG (aka Biggie Smalls). Before his untimely death, Biggie was one of the artists who freed hip hop from the tight grip of the "keepin it real" persona. After the Ghettocentric turn, rappers were forced to write their rhymes as if they reflected authentic lived experience. So as "keepin it real" in gangsta rap became prevalent, artists competed with one another to see who could depict the most devastatingly grim "personal" narratives. Biggie, however, was unabashed about his goal of upward mobility within the narratives of his ghetto background. He did not feel that he had to stay in the ghetto or necessarily back up his lyrics with authentic acts. In his first single, "Juicy," Biggie remarks, "fifty-inch screen / money green leather sofa / got two cars / a limousine / with a chauffeur / phone bill about two g's fat / no need to worry / my accountant handles that / and my whole crew is lounging / celebratin' everyday / no more public housing" (1994).

In his short career, Biggie took advantage of what was marketable and was never bound by the New York-centric formalism about how real hip hop should sound. In fact, he worked with Luke Skyywalker, Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, and even Michael Jackson, collaborations that would suffice to bar most from the "authentic" hip hop nation. He didn't totally leave the hood behind, but he was more self-conscious in his "performance" of the gangsta lifestyle.

On a number of occasions, Biggie stated that The Notorious BIG was nothing but a character or role that he performed; *he* was Christopher Wallace. In fact, the name "Biggie Smalls" comes from the 70s film *Let's Do It Again*, starring Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby. Biggie even goes as far as to assume the role of a white movie figure, Frank White, from the film *King of New York*, and concluded his rhymes by exclaiming "MAFIOSO!"

This performance of Mafia culture begs the questions: whose culture is deviant? Isn't the acceptance of certain gangsta ethics in mainstream entertainment deviant? The rise of Roc-A-Fella, Death Row, and Bad Boy, with their commodification of illegality, cannot be divorced from the actual rise during Prohibition of the Irish-American Kennedy family or the Italian-American Gambino family. Likewise, these artists' conspicuous consumption habits cannot be seen as distinct from the mansion-and-yacht stories of Larry Ellison at Oracle, Jim Clark at Netscape, and Bill Gates at Microsoft, complete with feuds over who has the biggest "Cyber Boy Toy" (Kaplan, 1998), whose Horatio Alger narratives have served as models for this country's "formal" economy.

The posthumous indictment of Biggie at his 1997 memorial by Khallid Muhammad couldn't be more correct: "wearing the white man's clothes, showing up on TV dressed like you're Al Capone Baby Face Nelson, ugly as you are" (Marriott, 1997). Indeed, Biggie's is an ugly and messy performance that illuminates the muddled realities of racial and national identity and concurrently unfolds along the axis of gender. Even in his misogynist lyrics, Biggie wasn't shy about passing the mic. He gives props to "the honeys getting money, playing niggas like dummies" (1994). From this gangsta genre emerged a cadre of women artists headed by Lil' Kim of Junior M.A.F.I.A. and Foxy Brown of "The Firm."

These women questioned normative notions of male-female relations; in their stories, they

acquire capital, express dissatisfaction with sexual partners, and reverse stereotypical gender roles. Foxy Brown declares:

> No more sex me all night
> thinking it's alright
> while I'm looking over your shoulder
> watching your whole life
> you hate when it's a ball right ladies this ain't hand ball
> nigga hit these walls right
> before I call Mike
> in the morning when it's all bright
> eggs over easy
> hope you have my shit tight
> when I open my eyes
> while I'm eating getting dressed up
> this ain't your pad
> I left money on the dresser
> find you a cab
> (1996)

In most scenarios, black males monopolize blackness through a relegation of the black female to the role of fetish, but here men have become the objects of desire. When patriarchal desires suddenly become articulated in a female voice, these desires are deemed "unnatural." Questions emerge as to what is ladylike and why a woman can't get hers like any man?[7]

Female identity in these musical texts becomes performance by coupling highly materialistic and aesthetically violent and excessive personas with infectious beats and rhymes.

The rhymes make it obvious that the relentless pursuit of status, power, and sexual satisfaction is not gender-specific, and thus reverse the objectification of women as sexual objects by viewing men as accesses to pleasure and capital accumulation, if necessary, through sexual exchange. Lil' Kim debunks the old myth that women only give sex for love and men only give love for sex; she makes it clear that the terms on which masculinity will be recognized will be her economic and sexual self-satisfaction:

> I knew a dude named Jimmy
> he used to run up in me
> night time pissy drunk
> off the Henne and Remy
> I didn't mind it
> when he fucked me from behind
> It felt fine
> especially when he used to grind it
> he was a trip
> when I sucked his dick
> he used to pass me bricks
> credit cards and shit
> I'd suck 'im to sleep
> I took the keys to the jeep
> tell him I'd be back
> go fool with some other cat ...
> it was something about this dude I couldn't stand

something that coulda made his ass a real man
something I wanted
But I never was pushy
the motherfucker never ate my pussy
(1996)

In a *Vibe* interview, Lil' Kim describes this sexual commerce as the American way: "Sex ... Money is power to me. It's not power alone, but you wanna have money to get the girls. To me, men like what women like, or they learn to like it" (Good, 1997, 176). She and her fellow female artists have understood that "sex sells" and have indirectly initiated a transformation of the color-coded and gender-laden rules by which social relations are scrutinized. This is in no way a proto-feminist position; neither Kim nor Foxy increases the value of women's sexuality. Nonetheless, their performances in the cultural marketplace open up a dialogue about "natural" gender roles and explore issues of female pleasure.

However, the power in articulating bodily pleasure is not purely narcissistic; indeed, it is not just about individual freedom but also concerns the transformation of institutions. Transgressions of black/white, male/female binaries have led artists to challenge the "old-school" belief that "real" hip hop must reside only outside the market. We then begin to remember that hip hop nationalism or nation-conscious rap was created through commodification and market growth. Even the idea of a hip hop national consciousness was raised through the market and utilized market tools, including records, tapes, and stage shows. For example, the "Fresh Fests" of the mid-80s did more than make money; they became a medium to circulate and exchange dance steps, clothing styles, lyrics, and ideas. The commodification of hip hop fashions and aesthetics became a common point of reference for its fans nationwide. The concept of a national consciousness or hip hop nation was not diluted but was in many ways strengthened through the circuits of mass media.

Technological advances within the market such as the music video have revealed the regional and aesthetic diversity of hip hop. Music videos allowed regional artists the space to craft personal and social narratives and "represent" their home not only with visuals but by contextualizing the style and delivery of their rhymes to a national audience without fear of retribution. An example of the power of musical/visual context is the artist Tongue Twista from the group Do or Die. Before Do or Die's breakthrough single "Po Pimps" (Emotions), Tongue Twista had been considered a one-hit wonder in the late 80s, when he was performing Afrocentric styles, wearing African beads and Cross-Colors gear. His claim to fame was recognition by the *Guinness Book of World Records* as "the world's fastest rapper." But thanks to the space opened up by music videos and other alternative outlets, we may now learn that his rapid rhyme style can be located within a Midwest/Southern-influenced hip hop aesthetic identifiable by its staccato delivery blended with doo-wop harmonies and laid over rich Stax-style horns and bass lines. In addition, music video production has enabled the formation of black directors, camera operators, and production crews. Due to video training, these positions have bypassed the white male unions that control apprenticeship systems and employment networks. A perfect example of this breakthrough is F. Gary Gray, who started out directing hip hop/R&B videos and who in 1995 parlayed these skills into a highly successful feature film, *Friday.*

For the regional developments in gangsta/playa hip hop, technological innovations have made it easier and cheaper to own recording studios and gain access to other professional recording resources. Ironically, when conservatives like C. Delores Tucker led the backlash against "gangsta rap," its listeners were drawn closer together. The major labels that produced gangsta rap decided to stop manufacturing it at the same pace. However, while the production side submitted to "public opinion," consumers utilized music technologies to rework the genre

based on regional tastes. The consumers of gangsta rap realized that they had more in common musically with the South, West, and Midwest than with the Northeast. For so long, New York had dictated what "real hip hop" is and how it should sound and look.[8] In the face of resistance from both conservative movements and "old school" purists, independent compilations were circulated locally that included artists from emerging Southern and Midwestern versions of California-based gangsta rap. Due to the regional desire for the music, car-trunk distribution turned into independent label empires.

This process has encouraged the formation of semi-independent hip hop labels nationwide, including Death Row and Ruthless Records in Los Angeles; Sick Wit It Records in Vallejo, California; Rap-A-Lot and Suave House Records in Houston; Fully Loaded Records in Decatur, Georgia; So So Def Records in Atlanta; Blackground Records in Virginia; and the Cash Money Clique in New Orleans. While these developments are laudable, it has not been easy for female artists to take advantage of this phenomenon. With the notable exceptions of Queen Latifah, Missy Elliott, and Lil' Kim, women artists/entrepreneurs have not been able to utilize this gangsta grammar to build independent labels. However, artists have been encouraged to look at the relationship between work and culture and to understand the business side of music. The No Limit Empire, headed by Master P, is something to take special note of. P inaugurated the two-pronged strategy of high production (between April 1996 and March 1997, his label released seven albums) and business autonomy that is more reminiscent of West Indian dancehall culture: "You have a product, a rap product. It belongs to you. And you're just going to give somebody 85% of what you make on the product? To do what? Organize your life, basically call you in the morning and tell you to be across town at such and such a time ... shit, I can wake my own damn self up" (Green, 1997, 100). The only aspect of P's business that is not self-contained is a distribution deal with Priority Records.[9]

Probably the most important aspect of P's business is his engagement with multiple media. Unlike conventional black media entrepreneurs, he feels that nothing is beyond his grasp. Instead of trying to pitch a film deal to a movie conglomerate, P conceived, marketed, and created his own visual autobiography, *I'm 'Bout It.* He released it himself, taking it straight to video and distributing it through record stores and the Blockbuster Video chain. In 1997, the film had sold over 250,000 units and has surpassed video giants like *Jurassic Park* in weekly sales.

The strategic marketing of P's film projects used the subversive strategies of the new independent labels. Each No Limit CD is packaged with ads about upcoming work. His projects are a success because he eliminates intermediaries and up-front advances from other sources. P states: "Of course they gonna pop some money at you ... but how much money can they pop at me that I ain't already seen? That's how white boys do ya. That's how they get our ideas, our inventions" (Jackson, 1998, 74). Master P's aim is to maintain ownership over the means of production by being clear about the consumption habits and tastes of his consumer base.

Whether an artistic flop or a stroke of marketing genius, *I'm Bout It* has been hailed as paving the way for a new wave of independent hip hop films from cities outside New York or L.A. While Master P was working on his second film, a comedy called *I Got the Hookup,* other black entrepreneurs and aspiring film-makers had been given an example of how to be "playas in the game." From Bruce Brown's D.C.-based *24–7* (1997), which is driven by a hip hop and go-go soundtrack, to Robert Hayes's urban crime drama *Winner Takes All* (1998), which depicts the post-industrial landscape of Louisville, Kentucky, a wide range of black filmic expressions abound. The strength of this new wave of filmmaking lies in its manipulation of technologies as a means of autonomy. The first wave of hood films in the early 90s (*Boyz in the Hood, Menace II Society*) were largely dependent on multimedia conglomerates for distribution and heavily targeted by the gatekeepers of "official" depictions of black life. But the new movie-makers no longer have to bow down to revenue sources or critics. They can go

straight to TV or DVD or sell films in record stores. These filmmakers are breaking the rules of conventional budgets, subject matter, marketing, and distribution (Shaw, 1998, 102).

Conclusion

I don't want to suggest that these transgressions of the black/white, male/female authentic/commodified binaries contain any overtly political agenda, because, as we've seen, two artists have died over these attempts to build black empires. Biggie, who labeled himself the "Teflon Don" (aka Mafia boss John Gotti), was not invincible. Concurrently, young children are performing these identities to death, which only fuels the debate for hip hop's critics. Nonetheless, hip hop cannot be singled out without scrutinizing George Bush's endorsement of the violent and misogynist Arnold Schwarzenegger film *True Lies* as "friendly to families" (Pareles, 1995).

Moreover, hip hop can't be seen as all that is wrong with American life. The cultural oscillations of hip hop and the current gangsta trends bear witness to our national history. This music cannot be divorced from the numerous American-dream stories of this nation. Like early gangsta and Afrocentric rappers, the new rappers are not trying to hold black identity to some place of total opposition to consumption, commodification, or social mobility. They are claiming their U.S. citizenship by partaking of conspicuous consumption and performing the identities of a U.S. gangsta government and elite-class capitalists.

The gangsta/playa and the subject matter associated with this icon can now be understood as a strategy, a work in progress. This is a position of maneuverability, which in its present form doesn't endorse the cult of authenticity that must explicitly be a "pure" counter to the mainstream. Womanhood is not purely fetishized as the African Queen or the Streetcorner Ho. While one can still see black women being singled out as locations of deviance, so-called deviant tropes are seen as central to constructing not only successful black women but also, as Lil' Kim charges, "Miss Ivana ... Zsa Zsa Gabor, Demi Moore, Princess Diana and all them rich bitches" (1996). For so long, space had been the chief signifier of racial difference, and freedom and movement had become white prerogatives. Yet these artists are now turning static space into sites of creative play and parody. They are appropriating and rearticulating each and every identity like music samples, cutting and scratching the rigid binaries until they are no longer comprehensible. Democracy, nationhood, and struggles over identity are being theorized through the circuits of desire and spectacle and are best summed up by Jay-Z, who doesn't ask to "Rock the Vote" or "Just Say No," but "Can I live?"

Study Questions

1. How does hip-hop constitute a facet of black cultural empowerment?
2. What opportunities for the expression of female identities are facilitated within commercial hip-hop?
3. What is the "black aesthetic" and how is it articulated within hip-hop's various art forms?

Notes

1. Jon Pareles, "Rapping and Politicking: Showtime on the Stump," *New York Times*, June 11, 1995.
2. Michel Marriott, "Hard Core Rap Lyrics Stir Backlash," *New York Times*, August 15, 1995.
3. Marriott, "Hard Core Rap Lyrics Stir Backlash."

4. This class-based form of policing black bodies can be found in all aspects of black life. One important example was covered by *Village Voice* writer Lisa Jones in a review of a book entitled *Basic Black: Home Training for Modern Times* (ed., Elyse Hudson and Karen Grisby Bates; 1997). These women attempt to map "down-home training" onto the typical etiquette book: teaching black people how to receive first-class service in a first-class restaurant, telling black folk to avoid talking to characters on movie screens, etc. In music, this backlash can be found in the black media's embrace of the hip hop/soul artists Erykah Badu in 1997 and Lauryn Hill in 1998. Without minimizing these artists' talent, they were both praised for their mixture of Afrocentric/Rastafarian/Five-Percenter ideology and "old-school" credibility. Badu and Hill became exemplars of the "purist" revival against "negative" female artists like Lil' Kim, and have been particularly lauded for dressing and acting with self-respect and dignity.
5. Within the nation-conscious genre, not all groups or artists ignored issues of class or gender, e.g., Queen Latifah or the L.A.-based group The Coup. However, this essay is attempting to take note of a general "common sense" that located black authenticity within the simultaneous reverence for and restriction of the black woman. For example, see Decker's analysis of Public Enemy's song "She Watched Channel Zero." True, as Queen Latifah has commented, the women of the nation-conscious genre were not called bitches or hoes, but "queen" status also restricts the ways in which black femininity can be displayed. The weight of the queen's crown was sometimes too heavy a burden to bear.
6. Speech, the lead rapper of Arrested Development, belongs to a prominent black family in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, that runs a black-owned newspaper, *The Community Journal*, where his op-ed "racial uplift" pieces ran in his series, "20th-Century African." This series was known for its catchy and suggestive byline, "Here's the run-down, so you don't get gunned down." This phrase and column foreshadow the urban/African divide that becomes so prominent in his musical ideology.
7. While Foxy's disruption of gender roles within black communities is encouraging, it appears that her exploration of sexuality also reinforces the same patriarchal order. On her new album, *China Doll*, Foxy locates her sexual freedom within the stereotypical image of the exotic Asian woman.
8. In the 1980s, Miami Bass had been marginalized from hip hop as not "real" because it focused more on beats than lyrics. But as other regional versions of hip hop have gained economic and technological resources, this idea of "realness" was exposed as particular to the Northeast. Although conversation in this area is just beginning to emerge, New Yorkers have tended to see hip hop in other regions as "country," "bama," and unsophisticated. However, newer groups like Outkast and Goodie Mob from Atlanta and Timbaland and Missy Elliott from Portsmouth, Virginia, have gone on to parody and play with stereotypes aimed at the "Dirty South."
9. While it is encouraging that black artists/entrepreneurs are breaking into the production side of the music industry, they have yet to shatter the final frontier of the business: distribution. For example, two of gangsta/playa rap's powerhouse semi-independent labels, No Limit and Death Row, are both distributed by Priority Records. Until these labels develop distribution autonomy, they will be forever bound to the structural dictates of the music industry's multinationals.

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