

ABSTRACT

LYNCH, KRYSTAL ANDREA. *The Minstrelization of Hip Hop and Spoken Word Authenticity: Expressions of Postmodern Blackness.* (Under the direction of Dr. Sheila Smith McKoy.)

Because of the need to preserve hip hop culture in postmodern American, a question that should be asked is, how is hip-hop music relevant to postmodernism and how is postmodernism relevant to the African-American experience, specifically that of African-American youth culture? This current hip hop generation is chronologically and ideologically removed from the Civil Rights movement of its parents and grandparents and ambivalent to the history of African-American people in general. For a generation that has marginally benefited socially from the struggles of the past, postmodern blackness is a reality. Postmodern blackness is defined as intraracial solidarity, cultural authenticity, and social awareness with the purpose of rousing and empowering black culture through music. Postmodern blackness supplies the foundation for understanding hip hop culture and the people who thrive within the culture.

Race plays a primary function as a mark of authenticity within the hip hop culture where white hip hop artists signify a demarcation of racial identity. This new racial identity enables white hip hop artists to comfortably put on blackness as a viable means of self-definition, thereby engaging in the blackface minstrel tradition. The analysis white appropriation of black cultural becomes a normative consumptiveness as the artist avidly upholds postmodern blackness. In a strong sense, white hip hop artists redefine hip hop culture with a multiracial movement that transcends color. This thesis also emphasizes the importance of realness and authenticity in hip hop culture by comparing and contrasting the spoken word movement with commercial hip hop. In light of hip hop's obsession with

“keeping it real,” what the spoken word poets constitute as real African American experience and how that experience fulfills the postmodern black paradigm will be analyzed. Each of these poets employ feminist social critique of commercial hip hop’s (ab)use of women. By privileging the female voice in spoken word through the work three spoken word poets, postmodern blackness, as defined by commercial hip hop and its marginalizing effect on women, is challenged.

Both white appropriation of hip hop and spoken word advance postmodern blackness by expanding the implications of the definitions of blackness and whiteness and utilizing hip hop culture as a medium for addressing gender concerns and racial identity. Postmodern blackness encompasses the spoken word artist’s need for authenticity and authentication. Similarly, white hip hop artists also appropriate and assimilate to postmodern black identity, not only as a means of authenticating their music, but also as a means of racial transformation. The active manifestation of postmodern blackness becomes social awareness, because social awareness recognizes that a large collective voice produces ripples of reflection in a predominantly white society. Though today’s hip hop music scene is largely commercialized, commodified, and homogenized, there remains a remnant of dedicated hip hop advocates who strive to preserve and revitalize the culture.

**THE MINSTRELIZATION OF HIP HOP AND SPOKEN WORD AUTHENTICITY:
EXPRESSIONS OF POSTMODERN BLACKNESS**

by

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Biography

I have enjoyed the study of writing and literature since I was a high school senior. I acquired my Bachelor of Arts in English from East Carolina University in Greenville, NC and conducted English graduate study the University of North Carolina in Greensboro before completing my Master of Arts degree at North Carolina State University. My research interests include postmodernism and womanist theories and their relation to cultural criticism.

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Towards a Definition of Postmodern Blackness in Hip Hop Culture

Born in the early 1970s in the South Bronx, rap music originated in the neighborhood parties where MCs (masters of ceremonies) spoke rhythmically over record-spun music. In the beginning the DJ (disc jockey) was the premier focus of the party. He spun the records supplying the music to which the partygoers danced. The MC was only there to boost the crowd and keep them dancing. As time went on, the MCs began “rapping” or speaking rhythmically to the beats of the music, imitating the intonations and inflections of local radio DJs. Soon the DJ took the backseat to the emerging MCs who would “battle” each other for lyrical supremacy. Even then, rap music and the rapper symbolized the limited, yet empowered, voice of young Black people brought up in a post-Civil Rights America. From then until today American hip-hop music has evolved, grown, and according to some critics, digressed ideologically. Beginning with the early block parties, to the commercial success of Run-DMC, to the neo-gangsta rap of current acts such as 50 Cent, all subgenres of hip hop have taken their spots in the hip hop limelight.

Hip hop is generally defined as a North American-based resistance culture. The socio-artistic expression of hip hop takes the forms of break dancing, graffiti art, block parties, DJing (dee-jaying), MCing (emceeing), and rapping, or rhythmically speaking over disco break beats. Hip hop was a revolt against the saccharine-saturated disco era that did not speak to the plight and concerns of Black youth, much the way modern dance was a revolt against the repressiveness and rigidity of classical ballet that kept women bound in pointe shoes and male-inspired phantasmal roles. Hip hop usurped disco and continues to usurp contemporary R&B as the voice of Black youth culture and as the aesthetic expression of postmodern blackness.

Defining postmodern blackness is tricky. It is useful to consider that postmodern blackness suggests a hybrid of identification signifiers. One may wish to recognize that there are

several postmodern blacknesses. Mark Anthony Neal speaks about the “post-soul” generation, meaning a generation of Black youth born in the early seventies and afterward who have come of age in the “afterglow” of the Civil Rights era.¹ This post-soul generation has lost some appreciation for the civil rights struggles of the past, and like myself, has grown and matured with racial integration as an afterthought. There are several overlapping factors that have contributed to the post-soul aesthetic Black youth experience today including the trafficking of drugs into the Black communities, such as Bronx, NY, along with the corresponding crime.² Since this post-soul generation has moved into a postmodern Black existence, the current expression of the postmodern Black experience is exemplified within hip hop culture. The disdain for current commercialized hip hop and affinity for the preceding “old school” hip hop has become a significant cross-cultural source of contention. Common, a hip hop artist, poetically illustrates this tension in “I Use to Love H.E.R.” where he laments the commodification of violence in gangsta rap and longs for a return to hip hop’s less commercial roots.³ The postmodern Black experience has also witnessed minstrelization in hip hop culture, a return to caricatured representations of black masculine bravado and the subsequent objectification of women. These representations of blackness are positioned paradoxically with the “sell-out” persona of some hip hop artists whose music and commercialization threaten to weaken the cultural strength of postmodern blackness. Because of the threat of homogenization, postmodern blackness thrives on an authenticity that differentiates itself from white mainstream

¹ Mark Anthony Neal, “‘You Remind Me of Something’: Towards a Post-Soul Aesthetic.” Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic (New York: Routledge, 2002) 1-22.

² Evelyn Gonzales, The Bronx (Columbia History of Urban Life) (New York: Columbia UP, 2004). See also Jeff Chang, Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004).

³ Common, “I Used To Love H.E.R.,” Resurrection, CD, Relativity, 1994.

culture while constructing a culture all its own, one that is free from the pressures of white mainstream conformity.

By contrast, the Civil Rights Movement showcased what may be considered traditional or essential blackness, mainly because Black people had a single social cause to rally under and were held together by common religious faith. Black people under the umbrella of the Civil Rights movement may be more inclined to say blackness can be universally defined; however, they miss the significant transform that social and economical conditions inflict on Black culture. For many Black youth in the 1970s and 1980s, there was no continuous civil rights movement for them to be involved; drugs and crime ravaged their neighborhoods; schools were not providing adequate education; gangs ran the streets; and many Black inner city youth had never been to church. These Black youth needed a common theme to rally behind and a common diversion to solidify the fragmentation of their lives.

Out of this social, economical, and cultural desperation, hip hop was born. Hip hop is post-soul because it has broken away from what many of the Civil Rights generation perceive as traditional blackness (i.e. faith in God, integration, common cause). In its origin, hip hop is postmodern because it is a resistance culture. It resists white male hegemony, the bleakness of inner city life, and the negativity of gang life and crime. Today, hip hop is a contemporary postmodern art because it even resists modern blackness (i.e. Civil Rights era) and the social mission that era has come to represent. The problematic homogenization of hip hop is also evidence of its postmodern status as is evidenced by the commodification of hip hop through its use to sell products, its use to advertise, and its conformity to predictable formulas and patterns that are palatable and easier to digest for white consumers. Paradoxically, hip hop resists homogenization, hence the various subgenres of hip hop delineated by geography (East Coast,

West Coast, Midwest, and “Dirty” South). Postmodern blackness in hip hop music involves identity construction of blackness, pastiche and borrowing exemplified in sampling (electronically lifting segments of music and the collage of sound as the foundation for hip hop songs), and in the instance of spoken word, the denaturalization of patriarchal values via feminine authenticity.

Concerning identity, I believe there are several postmodern blacknesses, wherein postmodern blackness is described as multifaceted and heterogeneous. Postmodern blackness is an acknowledgement that blackness is diverse, complex, multidimensional, and socially constructed while it seeks to de-naturalize the social construction of whiteness. Myself, growing up as middle class African American, never having lived in the inner city and an outsider to hip hop culture, am a vicarious type of postmodern blackness. Postmodern blackness is all Black experiences combined from the Black celebrity to the street poet. Hip hop music and culture is but one dimension of postmodern blackness, and my focus on this matter is the way hip hop music captures the postmodern Black aesthetic in many Black youth.

Hip Hop and Academic Discourse

Many social and cultural scholars have taken a keen interest in legitimizing hip hop as a topic of serious academic study. Michael Eric Dyson has written extensively on hip hop culture including books Between God and Gangsta Rap and Holler if You Hear Me, a biography of rapper, Tupac Shakur. Though his work has added invaluable insights to the discourse, it falls into the common trap of tracing the evolution of hip hop. Dyson’s 1987 essay, “The Culture of Hip Hop,” largely chronicles hip hop’s “infancy” beginning in 1979 with the Sugar Hill Gang’s

“Rapper’s Delight” to the controversy over gangsta rap and the censorship wars that ensued.⁴ In between, he discusses hip hop highlights such as Melle Mel’s “The Message,” Queens-born Run-DMC’s meteoric rise to fame, the dearth of pop-friendly rap such MC Hammer and Tone Loc to the transition into the “conscious” or political rap of KRS-One. However, Dyson neglects the early inspirations of hip hop to focus on the social pathologies of Black culture illustrated and intensified by West Coast gangsta rap.

Along the lines of hip hop veneration, the noted poet and activist, Nikki Giovanni, celebrates hip hop culture with the words “Thug Life” tattooed on her arm and her poem “All Eyez on U” as a tribute to the late Tupac Shakur (see Appendix A):

but he will not go away as Malcolm did not go away as Emmett Till
did not go away your shooting him will not take him from us
his spirit will fill our hearts his courage will strengthen us for the
challenge his truth will straighten our backbones (30-33)

These lines signify the tragic trajectory many young Black men take as they succumb to the violence of the streets. Giovanni’s words speak to the sorrow of Black death but also exudes the nurturing love that Black women have for their sons, a love that believes in the promise and potential held by these young men such as Tupac. Her comparisons of Tupac to Malcom X and Emmett Till, a young boy lynched for supposedly whistling at a white woman in Mississippi, demonstrates her devotion to seeing the lives and deaths of young Black men accounted for and never forgotten.

These scholars have made great inroads into the serious academic discussion of hip hop, giving validation and credence to a culture that has been largely demonized by conservative groups and commodified by the entertainment industry. Although all of these scholars focus on

⁴ I place “infancy” in quotes, because hip hop’s beginnings stem back into the early 1970s. See Alex Ogg and David Upshal, The Hip Hop Years: A History of Rap (New York: Fromm International, 2001).

some aspect of authenticity, postmodern blackness, Black culture and white appropriation of Black culture, very few of them relate these elements to spoken word. The spoken word facet of hip hop culture has been widely ignored and only seen as relevant to coffee houses and disgruntled English majors, but what many scholars fail to realize is that spoken word seeks to restore the authenticity that has been lost in most commercial hip hop. Cornel West, prolific professor, writer and speaker, has taken the challenge of engaging in hip hop culture with his writings. He also recorded two spoken word albums, Sketches of My Culture (2001) and Street Knowledge (2003). Because of the controversy that surrounded his recordings and the criticism he incurred from the academic community at Harvard, West has moved to Princeton and has continued contributing to the discourse concerning hip hop culture. I believe the criticism surrounding West's engagement with hip hop culture stems from an academic elitism that segregates hip hop culture from the larger implications of postmodern theory. West's investment in spoken word may be a sign that rigorous academic theorization ultimately lacks the basal and organic elements necessary to fully comprehend Black culture.

Another bone of contention that scholars have avoided is the minstrelization of hip hop, although the evidence for such a condition in hip hop is painfully obvious when white artists such as Vanilla Ice and Eminem both become platinum-selling artists in a predominately Black art form. The role white hip hop artists play in the reinforcement of postmodern blackness acts as an extension of the blackface minstrel tradition. By examining how postmodern blackness finds its way into white cultural norms, I will also show how these cultural norms are transformed and how white masculinity is redefined through white participation in hip hop culture.

Public Enemy as an Example of Postmodern Blackness

Though there are some commercial hip hop artists today such as Common, Mos Def and The Roots who foreground social awareness in ways that criticize current gangsta rap trends, it was mostly the hip hop artists of the mid to late 1980s who championed a pro-Black message as its mark of authenticity, thereby subscribing to a postmodern Black aesthetic. I choose to focus on the music of the late 1980s hip hop group, Public Enemy (PE), as an example of postmodern blackness because they regularly criticized white hegemonic practices, especially the media's portrayal of African Americans, and they held to a strong Black national rhetoric with an emphasis on social, economic, and political empowerment and an Africanic revisioning of history. The words of Sonia Sanchez ring true for both spoken word poets and rappers who use the medium of rhythm and rhyme to articulate their voices:

These new poets, these hip-hop poets heard the sound and picked it up. And they did the same thing we did with poetry and sound, they did the sound, the pace, the pace of sound, the swiftness of sound, the discordant way of the beat of sound, but above all it was that fast beat. [...] You had to have a fast ear to hear it cuz other wise they would play it and done been gone. (Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam, xv)

Sanchez's observation of the swiftness of hip hop aptly applies to PE whose music is characterized as "PSA add-ons to an angry, minimalistic-with-a-vengeance rhythm of revolution" (Potter 51). PE was one of the very few hip hop groups who avidly mobilized Black youth and the hip hop community in the 1990s to launch hip hop into social and political relevance.

Through the work of PE, postmodern blackness is defined as cultural authenticity, intraracial solidarity, and social awareness with the purpose of rousing and empowering Black culture through music. Cultural authenticity appeals to Black pride and ownership in their creative and productive efforts. It also appeals to a perceived spiritual superiority juxtaposed

against supposed white authenticity that simultaneously consumes and rejects blackness. The power of intraracial solidarity (in contrast to the Civil Rights focus on racial integration) is its creation of a universal cause and compassion for African Americans of all social and economic conditions. Social awareness is perhaps the most active manifestation of postmodern blackness because it recognizes that a large collective voice can exact ripples of transformation in a white dominated society.

PE defines authenticity not only as musical motivation or an act of cultural preservation but as a social contrast between Blacks and whites. The song, “Who Stole the Soul?” (see Appendix A), foregrounds authenticity whereby blackness (as defined by PE) signifies authenticity and whiteness signifies inauthenticity. For PE, authenticity is embodied in blackness resulting in the creation of soul, or organic humanity, while white inauthenticity absorbs or consumes marginal cultures while simultaneously rejecting the very culture it consumes. This song blasts white mainstream culture that absorbs the favorable aspects of blackness it likes (jazz, street slang, fashion) by monetarily consuming them while rejecting intimate relationships with African Americans. Chuck D, the leading voice of PE, asks, “Who did the crime?” of soul stealing and relates back to white mainstream culture (“Who Stole the Soul?”). One aspect of “soul stealing” is exemplified in white appropriation of Black music, particularly jazz, blues and soul music. PE plays on the name of Wilson Pickett, a soul singer of the 1960s, by asserting that the mainstream music industry “[p]icked Wilson’s pocket.” Again, the “soul stealing” is repeated as the “Same kinda thing they threw at James,” a reference to James Brown, the “Godfather of Soul” while “Redd” plays on the name of Otis Redding, another soul singer.⁵ PE describes the “Intentional rape system” as the commercialization of music that ravishes Black

⁵ Mark Anthony Neal, “Rhythm and Bulls**t?: The Slow Decline of R&B,” *PopMatters* 3 June 2005, 24 June 2005 <<http://www.popmatters.com/music/features/050603-randb.shtml>>. Neal addresses the corporate involvement of “soul stealing” in relation to artists such as Wilson Pickett, James Brown and Otis Redding.

music and style, creating the bastard child of modern rock and roll and other Black music derivatives. The system “pimps” blackness and uses it as a cultural asset for white consumption while simultaneously condemning it. PE asserts that the system steals the soul of Blacks and leaves a skeletal remains of a once rich substance, likening the metaphor to stealing of the soul to stealing of gold in South Africa. PE believes that Blacks must reclaim what is truly Black in order to retain cultural identity.

However, Black authenticity juxtaposed with white inauthenticity is not observed only in musical styles but also in interpersonal relationships. PE comments on interracial non-communication in living spaces as an introductory discourse into the intertwining of Black and white lives:

Why when the Black move in, Jack move out
 Come to stay Jack moves away
 Ain't we all people?
 How the hell can a color
 Be no good for the neighborhood? (“Who Stole the Soul?”)

PE critically addresses the marginalization of the Black presence and of the interpersonal and social distance between whites and Blacks in America. In a humorous way PE comments on “white flight,” the exodus of middle-class whites from their neighborhoods once Blacks begin to take up residence. PE criticizes white mainstream culture for simultaneously appropriating the blackness it enjoys while repudiating and shunning the physical presence of Blacks, thereby creating environments of exclusion. PE appeals to these offending whites and their sense of humanity (“Ain't we all people?”) and presents authentic blackness as something “good for the neighborhood,” asserting that blackness is beneficial to the social climate of the community. PE also appeals to a sense of moral superiority Blacks engender to assuage the effects of racism.

PE further observes the duplicitous inauthenticity of whites towards Blacks through the symbol of Jack:

Jack was nimble, Jack was quick
 Got a question for Jack (ask him)
 40 acres and a mule, Jack, where is it?
 Why'd you try to fool the Black?
 It wasn't you? But you pledge allegiance
 To the red, white, and blue
 Sucker that stole the soul! ("Who Stole the Soul?")

Here PE condemns the lack of honesty and the intellectual integrity of the white community, and concludes that their words are unreliable. Drawing historically from the forty acres and a mule promised to ex-slaves after the 1863 Emancipation that many never received, PE feels here that the reclaimed soul is the privilege for Black people to exercise agency as an extension of their blackness.

Through the reclaimed soul, authenticity exists in direct correlation to the postmodern Black identity through the practice of remaining true to Black sensibilities whether they are defined through music, hairstyle, or political views. Postmodern black authenticity thrives on creation and innovation. Russell A. Potter, author of Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism, insightfully comments that Chuck D "insists that blackness is something that has to be *made*, whose making cannot be negotiated without taking on the ideologies and myths of race" (121, emphasis in original). However, the construction of blackness does not negate authenticity, but "rather [...] within the African-American dialectics of identity that hip-hop moves, authenticity and constructivism are not antagonistic but mutually resonant" (121). Potter describes black authenticity as a creative and productive survival mechanism that enables Blacks to tolerate unfair social discrimination.

Social awareness and political power are perhaps the most active manifestations of postmodern blackness, because both recognize that a large collective voice can produce ripples of transformation in a white dominated society. A trend that we see in late 1980s hip hop is that community equals solidarity. PE's "Brothers Gonna Work It Out" (see Appendix A) encourages the solidarity and unity of Black men in their respective communities to work together for the purpose of racial uplift. It is a common theme of many of PE's songs to take up arms and rally the battle cry against the social ills that plague Black men such as underemployment, limited education, and the hazards of urban life. Such hazards have social, economical and political effects. The social consequence is a breakdown in intraracial relationships where trust and cooperation between Black men become corrupted by competition and suspicion. Economic hazards manifest themselves in ghettoized communities making job security essential and yet hard to obtain. It also insures that a socially and economically oppressed individual will not likely take interest in civil and federal issues if he is solely focused on daily survival.

Closely examining this issue in "Racism, Historical Ruins, and the Task of Identity Formation," Arnold Farr describes the process that many African Americans undergo to construct and achieve a sense of identity in a racially restricting society. He states: "The quest for solidarity by African Americans is an attempt to heal a broken humanity, it is an attempt to regain a feeling of worth and belongingness" (19). The strong need for community is central to reconstructing postmodern blackness. With this goal in mind, Chuck D speaks to various Black men, "the brothers in the street/Schools and the prison," to foster this needed community. He speaks to the downtrodden, the educated, and the disenfranchised. These young men need the motivation to push forward into an actualized identity. The lyrics speak to the long established

absence of positive Black men in their communities due to imprisonment, drug use, and death. Farr affirms PE's sentiment that it is "through the solidarity with other African Americans that we are able to begin the necessary healing process that will allow us to regain our human dignity" (19). Whether this speaks to working along side Black women or solely focusing on the men, PE calls the brothers to "work it out":

Hate to bust their bubble
 'Cause we rumble
 To condition your condition
 We're gonna do a song
 That you never heard before
 Make you all jump along to the education
 Brothers gonna work it out. ("Brothers Gonna Work it Out")

Chuck D addresses two separate audiences, an outside "their" and an inside "you." The "their" is undefined and is open to different possibilities. The "their" most likely refers to those outside of the Black community, mainly the mainstream community which is socially indifferent to the issues, such as racial discrimination and illegitimacy ("Teach a man how to be a father"), that Black men face. Chuck D "[h]ate[s] to bust their bubble," meaning that he is determined to exceed the expectations of the group he is addressing. What these expectations are is not clear. But he goes on to qualify this statement by admitting to a level of aggression the white mainstream may not be comfortable with: "'Cause we rumble/ From our lower level," meaning that the level of aggression comes from an inner emotional place that the outsider cannot relate to. This statement is not a solely intellectual rhetoric but it is also an emotional treatise. As Chuck D exhorts Black men "To condition your condition," he indicates that transformation is results in a new state of being. PE wants to mold the identity of blackness by addressing the condition of Black men and reconditioning it through a vigorous social workout. "We're gonna do a song/ That you never heard before" flows from the previous lines substantiating that this

conditioning is new and innovative. It is not the mainstream American conditioning that attempts to strip distinction from the individual; rather it is a radical intraracial conditioning that allows the Black man in particular to redefine himself from within. PE asserts that reconditioning happens through education (“Small chance a smart brother’s/Gonna be a victim of his own circumstance”).

Chuck D more specifically addresses his audience in relation the importance of intraracial solidarity between black men:

Our goal indestructible soul
Answers to this quizzin’
To the brothers in the street
Schools and the prisons
History shouldn’t be a mystery
Our stories real history
Not his story. (“Brothers Gonna Work it Out”)

Even more specifically now, the solidarity agenda is spelled out and presented that “goal” and “indestructible soul” go together. Either the goal of the action of working it out, solidarity, is to create an indestructible Black soul; or the goal itself, stemming from the soul, is indestructible. This indestructibility extends to the nature of Black identity, which in PE’s view is perpetual and enduring despite the fact that blackness is constructed as violently criminal in the nightly news and reconstructed as stoically impersonal in TV and movies. The result of manipulated Black souls is a falsely constructed history that Blacks must put back together. Farr further expounds by saying, “there already exist a Black identity and Black solidarity in terms of shared history. However, this history is a history of ruins from which we are challenged to create ourselves” (20). Part of PE’s goal is to reconstruct Black history so as to render it affirmative rather than mysterious, though the reconstruction of blackness may encourage the kind of essentialism, or universalism, most postmodernists are adamantly against.

Continuing in this thesis, I will discuss postmodern blackness and its implications. As a continuance of the above discussion, I intend to address postmodern blackness as an expanded feminine interpretation within the spoken word genre. Additionally, I will explore the far-reaching effects of postmodern blackness by examining its influence and transformative properties through selected white hip hop artists.

In Chapter 2, “Hip Hop Minstrels: Blacking Up the White Rapper,” I argue that white hip hop artists signify a demarcation of race identity in which whites may comfortably put on blackness as a viable means of self-definition. The analysis of white appropriation of Black musical culture becomes a normative consumption as the artist avidly upholds postmodern blackness. Though Eminem is the most famous white rapper of today, I choose to focus on the works of 3rd Bass who appropriated blackness to such an extent that this group are almost engulfed and absorbed into Black culture. In a strong sense, they redefine hip hop culture as a multiracial movement that transcends color.

Gender plays a primary function as a mark of authenticity within the hip hop culture. In Chapter 3, “Realizing the ‘Real’: Feminine Authenticity in Spoken Word,” I argue that the importance of realness and authenticity in hip hop culture by comparing and contrasting the spoken word movement with commercial hip hop. In light of hip hop’s obsession with “keeping it real,” I will analyze what selected spoken word poets constitute as real African American experience and how that experience fulfills the postmodern Black paradigm. Each of these poets employs a feminist social critique of commercial hip hop’s (ab)use of women. Specifically, I will privilege the female voice in spoken word through the work of Jessica Care Moore and Michele Serros, a Latina poet who both critique postmodern blackness as defined by commercial hip hop and its marginalizing effect on women. Through the work of Nzinga R. Chavis, I

deconstruct the term “bitch” as it is used in commercial hip hop and aim to illustrate that spoken word strains to recover female authenticity especially as it relates to a lost sense of spirituality in hop hop culture.

Both spoken word and white appropriation of hip hop advance postmodern blackness by expanding the implications of the definitions blackness and whiteness and utilizing hip hop culture as a medium for addressing gender concerns and racial identity. As argued in my thesis, postmodern blackness encompasses the spoken word artist’s need for authenticity and authentication. Similarly, white hip hop artists also appropriate and assimilate postmodern Black identity, not only as a means of authenticating their music, but also as a means of racial transformation.

Hip Hop Minstrels: Blacking Up the White Rapper

Postmodern blackness is a term popularized by Cornel West and further developed by bell hooks in her essay by the same name. The implications of acknowledging postmodern blackness can be unsettling for a group of people who are still in the process of defining and redefining themselves. However, as understood by hooks and as I have note previously, postmodern blackness is an acknowledgment of the variety of experiences within African American culture and a rejection of the idea that blackness is essential, or universally defined (“Postmodern Blackness” 129, 132). Hooks argues that Blacks must resist the temptation to define themselves as a monolith, a people who speak, think, reason, and live identically. Instead she calls for reconsideration among Blacks that postmodern theory can apply to them in very relevant and practical ways. Though she criticizes white postmodern theorists and academics for failing to apply theories concerning “difference” and the “Other” to remedy racial inequalities, she largely lays the responsibility on the shoulders of fellow African American that they must take the initiative in engaging postmodern theory to construct their own sense of identity (“Postmodern Blackness” 133).

In continuing the application of postmodern blackness to African American experience, hooks cites rap music as evidence towards this identity paradigm shift:

It is no accident that ‘rap’ has usurped the primary position of rhythm and blues music among young black folks as the most desired sound or that it began as a form of ‘testimony’ for the underclass. It has enabled underclass black youth to develop a critical voice, as a group of young black men told me, a ‘common literacy.’ Rap projects a critical voice, explaining, demanding, urging. (“Postmodern Blackness” 132)

However, hooks fails to take into account that the hip hop music she lauds for its critical voice largely engages in essentialism. It is important to understand that Blacks who created hip-hop music were, and still are, constantly constructing and reconstructing blackness, and as a result,

hip hop music forces essentialism and postmodern blackness to work paradoxically with each other, creating an ontological tension that is difficult to resolve.

I define postmodern blackness (as derived from my analysis of the music of Public Enemy) as intraracial solidarity, cultural authenticity, social awareness and political power with the purpose of rousing and empowering Black culture through music. The power of intraracial solidarity is its creation of a universal cause and compassion for African Americans of all social and economic conditions. Cultural authenticity appeals to Black pride and owner in their creative and productive efforts. It also appeals to a perceived spiritual superiority juxtaposed against supposed white authenticity that simultaneously consumes and rejects blackness. Social awareness and political power are perhaps the most active manifestations of Black essentialism because both recognize that a large collective voice can exact ripples of transformation in a white dominated society. The implications of postmodern blackness's influence are further expanded through whites' mimicry, appropriation, and ultimately putting on blackness accentuates the progressive movement towards a postmodern Black identity. Although these white artists work in the tradition of the minstrel, they ultimately strengthen the development of postmodern blackness by troping stereotypes of blackness.

Contemporary hip hop music in many ways resembles a type of minstrelsy that historically marks essentialized notions of blackness, yet paradoxically, it strengthens postmodern blackness through the medium of hip hop music. While white identity in hip hop culture is a continuance of the blackface minstrel tradition, the appropriation of Black cultural expression reinforces postmodern blackness rather than diminishes it because white hip hop artists tend to draw their inspiration not from white perceptions of blackness but from Blacks themselves. Many white musicians and artists have attempted to reach across the racial divide in

search of new and different modes of expression that they deem lacking in their own artistic endeavors. As a result, sincere attempts to reach across the ontological divide serve a double purpose: acknowledging the validity of Black artistic expressions, thereby acknowledging the various identities that Blacks have constructed for themselves while also contributing to new definitions of whiteness.

Michael Eric Dyson, who has analyzed, critiqued, and thoroughly engaged in social issues concerning race, is especially devoted to promoting discussions that challenge commonly held views of blackness and whiteness alike. Dyson comments on the intricate dynamics of white privilege, especially in relation to appropriation of Black artistic expression:

Interrogating whiteness ... opens discursive space for a post-appropriationist paradigm of cultural and racial inequality, and economic injustice that often mediates, say, black-white artistic exchanges, where black ideas, products, styles, and practices are stolen, borrowed, or appropriated without attribution or reward. But it also accents the revisioning of whiteness through the prism of black cultural practices, especially as white subjectivities are reconceived and recast in the hues of transgressive blackness.” (“Giving Whiteness a Black Eye” 129-130)

White privilege has allowed many white artists to “spice up” their music with more “ethnic” and “authentic” Black sounds to naturalize the supposed artificiality of white music. White performers have regularly derived their material from a “stereotyped representation of Black culture,” and widely patronize blues and rock & roll, originally invented by Black musicians (Daley 161). A handful of white artists in the last thirty years have risen to musical prominence by adopting R&B music styles, largely marketing to their music to white *and* Black consumers. Michael McDonald, George Michael, Michael Bolton, Jon B, and Justin Timberlake, have all successfully borrowed and adopted R&B and soul music to define and advance their musical

careers.¹ The prevalence of white artists who adopt Black music styles bears striking similarities to the nineteenth-century minstrel performers. White appropriation of Black music identifies the racial signification of minstrelsy and how minstrelsy relates to today's white hip hop artists.

The hip hop group, 3rd Bass, which entered the hip hop scene in 1989, is an example of white appropriation of hip hop culture. The group is comprised of two Jewish 20-year-old MCs (masters of ceremonies) and one Black DJ (disc jockey who supplies the music). The group differed from the Beastie Boys by taking on a distinctive urban sensibility that earned them respect as serious hip hop artists.² Though 3rd Bass had its detractors, they proved that Jewish “white boys” could indeed deeply and convincingly engage in a predominately Black culture. The two earnestly tried to “prove their right to be immersed in hip hop culture despite hostility from the press, some fans and other crews” (Kulkarni 135). MC Serch (Michael Berrin) and Pete Nice (Pete Nash) hailed from Queens and Brooklyn, respectively. The social-locational connection to New York and tenure on Def Jam Record's roster (along side LL Cool J, The Beastie Boys, and the legendary Run-DMC) afforded them greatly needed street credibility to garner Black and white fans (Huey). Originally focused on making music for New York's Latino quarters, the two became a duo under the direction of Sam Sever (Huey). Berrin, a former DJ and Nash, a university English major, created clever, socially conscious, and culturally viable music with a decidedly Black aesthetic.

¹Lynn Norment, “Michael Bolton: ‘How Black Music Changed My Life,’” *Ebony* Dec. 1995, 28 Dec. 2004 <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1077/is_n2_v51/ai_17934744>.

² I choose to focus this section on 3rd Bass, a lesser known and less successful hip hop group, over Eminem, because I view the 3rd Bass's work to be more in line with black sensibilities and fitting more with the postmodern black paradigm. As noted by Neil Kulkarni, 3rd Bass desired to be considered as true hip hop artists and were “enraged by the Beastie [Boys] seeming carelessness about the dangers of perceived, cultural imperialism” (135). They were truly devoted to the cause of hip hop. Though Eminem has a stronger following than 3rd Bass ever enjoyed, it must still be noted that 3rd Bass emerged during the height of hip hop's black nationalist and pro-black movement. This was also the time when postmodern blackness began to be articulated more clearly and defiantly before dropping off in the mid 90s and giving way to west coast gangsta rap. 3rd Bass continued along in the tradition of using hip hop to undermine the status quo and empower black.

3rd Bass casts themselves, to use Dyson's phraseology, "in the hues of transgressive blackness" by way of their white working class background, close association with Black and hip hop culture, and Black engineered musical production that recommends them to Black audiences. The similarities between the minstrel performers and the racial signification of minstrelsy and today's white hip hop artists demonstrates a deep psycho-social phenomenon that cuts to our collective expressions of racial identity. By specifically analyzing the works and thoughts of the hip hop group, 3rd Bass, we see that tropes of blackness performed by whites redefine ideas of whiteness, reinforce stereotypical blackness, and as a result, ignore the complexities of postmodern blackness. 3rd Bass extends the heritage of blackface minstrelsy in hip hop music by appropriating tropes of blackness to revision whiteness as current and culturally progressive while also reinforcing postmodern blackness.

Race and the Minstrel Tradition

Before I engage in a detailed analysis of 3rd Bass's work, an historical knowledge of the minstrel shows of the 1890s and early 1900s will help us understand white fascination with Black music and will historically highlight how whites readily put on blackness as a means of entertainment, white supremacy, and evidence of the "transgressive" nature of Blacks. Minstrelsy was a nineteenth-century performance of white males dressed as African-American slaves and northern freemen for the double purpose of white supremacist entertainment and Black degradation in which white male performers blackened their faces with burnt cork and enacted caricatured representations of male and female Black slaves. Thus the presence of white performers in a predominantly Black medium is nothing new and is, in fact, an extension of America's minstrel past.

David Roediger discusses the minstrel tradition at length in The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class. He describes the psycho-social phenomenon of the white male fascination with Black masculinity and the need to take on blackness as an expression of transgressive whiteness. The act of a white man “blacking up” with burnt cork or lamp Black helps develop the idea of a transient white identity, one that is able to morph at will according to its own purposes. The ability for a white person to “black up” at will presented a doubleness of superiority. Not only were whites believed to be superior to Blacks culturally and socially, but also blacking up also demonstrated white beliefs in their physical and moral supremacy, in that “Whiteness enjoyed (and enjoys) the power to represent, to engage in the representation and objectification of the [black] Other” (Yancy 16). The act of blacking up also presented the powerful ability to become Black at any given time and also define Black behavior; white minstrels became and defined blackness simultaneously. As a result, the act of “blacking up” also solidified white beliefs in Black wantonness and lack of morality and mental soundness:

To black up was an act of wildness in the antebellum US. Psychoanalytically, the smearing of soot or blacking over the body represents the height of polymorphous perversity, an infantile playing with excrement or dirt. It is the polar opposite of the anal retentiveness usually associated with accumulating capitalist and Protestant cultures. Painting oneself hearkened back to traditional popular celebrations and to paint oneself as a Black person, given American realities at the time, was to throw reason to the winds. (Roediger 118-119)

Performing in minstrel shows was “cutting loose” from societal norms and constraints. Whites saw blacking up as a way to free themselves from religious and cultural encumbrances. By “blacking up” today’s white hip hop performers are subconsciously engaging in transgressive behaviors they would otherwise have no social permission in which to engage. The Black body represents not only perversity, but for these white performers it also becomes a freedom to be

transgressive and remain mentally immature. The perversity in black face minstrelsy serves as a liberation of the natural self, unencumbered by any standards of social decency:

[T]he minstrel show “Negro” presented white society with a representation of the natural self at odds with the normative self of industrial culture.’ The minstrel’s genius is then to be able to both display and reject the ‘natural self’, to be able to take on blackness convincingly and to take off blackness convincingly. (Roediger 116)

The most baffling consequence of whiteness is that although it thought to be normative, whiteness is also seen as unnatural, at least in terms of its outward social expressions. Normative does not mean natural; it is a composite of social constructions assigned to the white individual at birth which the individual is therefore burdened with until he makes the decision to break away from these social norms and become transgressively white by taking on “otherness.”

Today’s minstrel performers are simultaneously unnaturally white and pseudo-naturally postmodern Black in that they are performing what they deem to be natural Black behavior, which they mistakenly equate with primitiveness or incivility. Minstrelsy appalls and appeals, because it convincingly demonstrates the perceived abject otherness of blackness, physically, mentally, and socially and morally. Roediger states that post-Civil War “coon songs [...] project[ed] onto Blacks values and actions that aroused both fear and fascination among whites. Such actions [...] could thus be ‘experienced and condemned at the same time’ ” (116). By embracing the Black body and behavior, today’s white performers can display the natural self that every human being supposedly possesses but condemn naturalness in the Black body while trumping the suppression and mastery of the natural self in the white body.

3rd Bass’s representations of Black manhood are particularly telling of whites’ fascination with blackness. Not unlike the nineteenth-century minstrel performers who “tried to broaden [their] accents to sound like Negroes” (Lott 53), MC Serch and Pete Nice adopt the dialect and vernacular of Black Brooklyn and Queens youth. Just as white minstrels “consciously walked

like young Negroes, mocking their swinging gait, moving [their] arms the way they did,” similarly, 3rd Bass adopted the mannerisms and body language of young, Black urban dwellers (Lott 53). MC Serch, in particular, styled his hair in a high-top fade (where the hair is closely shaved on all sides of the head and ascends to a cylindrical apex an inch or more from the top of the head), a popular Black male hairstyle during the late 1980s. By specifically analyzing the works and thoughts of 3rd Bass, we see that tropes of blackness performed by white hip hop artists actually reinforce postmodern blackness by attempting to demonstrate that the Black male identity is one that can be appropriated as a viable existence regardless of one’s race. Unlike the Beastie Boys and current hip hop phenom, Eminem, 3rd Bass truly appealed to hip hop culture’s dress, appearance, hairstyles, and vernacular. 3rd Bass’s intermediate position between the Beastie Boys and Eminem in the chronological history of white rappers symbolically marks an evolution in white male appropriation of Black masculinity.³ Juxtaposed with their contemporary, Vanilla Ice, 3rd Bass proved their authenticity by readily identifying with blackness rather than caricaturing it.

³ Hip hop is destined to be a predominately black artistic expression, because there have been very few whites in the thirty year history of hip hop music that have been able to crack the racial code of rap music. Acts such as Vanilla Ice, who was banished from the hip hop scene in the 1990s and has settled into punk metal music, and Snow with his faux reggae style, had brief success in hip hop. Vanilla Ice’s first and only hip hop album sold three million copies. Beastie Boys, 3rd Bass enjoyed more acceptance in the hip hop community because of their appeal to the streets (i.e. New York) and subsequent authenticity. *To the 5 Boroughs* (2004), the latest Beastie Boys album pays homage to the birthplace of hip hop music and culture. Even though the last two artists have enjoyed success in hip hop, neither of them had thorough crossover appeal. The Beastie Boys, though staying true to New York, still sound like three whiny white boys from Brooklyn, and they made no real attempt to mask their whiteness, adding punk and rock elements to their music. Therefore, their appeal stayed mainly with white audiences. The Beastie Boys (1988-2004) are marketable but not gangsta. 3rd Bass successfully portrayed an image of blackness but did not have crossover appeal. Vanilla Ice was the most minstrel-like of all of them, successfully caricaturing blackness and selling millions of records, but eventually rejected for his lack of street credibility.

The Minstrelization of Hip Hop

Postmodern blackness in commercial hip hop music manifests itself through the essentialized expressions of masculine bravado and posturing, objectification of women (to varying degrees), and a pro-Black aesthetic popularized by acts such as Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, and De La Soul. I selected 3rd Bass's songs "Brooklyn Queens" and "The Gas Face" (see Appendix B) for analysis because they embody the hip hop notions of Black maleness, a space on the continuum of postmodern Black identity. In a sense, 3rd Bass performs Black male performance, by taking on one of many manifestations of American blackness. Eric Lott insightfully summarizes this phenomenon by saying: "Black performance itself, first of all, was precisely 'performative,' a cultural invention, not some precious essence installed in Black bodies; and for better or worse it was often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world" (39). Representations of blackness in hip hop, are just that: representations. These tropes serve to uphold postmodern blackness by reinscribing blackness as normative and a socially acceptable identity.

3rd Bass verbally play on their social-locational origins and perception of women in hip hop culture in the song "Brooklyn-Queens" from 1989's The Cactus Album (see Appendix B). This song conjures the minstrel in the caricaturizing of marginalized women. George Christy and Barney Williams popularized the Negro wench performance in the 1840s by blacking up, cross-dressing, and presenting a masculine, sexually transgressive Black womanhood (Lott 159-160). Not unlike the nineteenth-century minstrel performers, 3rd Bass describes women who are stereotypical "around the way" girls, gold diggers, opportunistic manipulators, and sexual aggressors who illustrate what Lott describes as "the apparently profane and murderous power of women" (159). Although their assessments of women are not as vile as some of their

contemporaries, they still uphold a postmodern Black male sensibility that questions the motives of women and marginalized their involvement within the hip hop movement. In this sense, women are peripheral and foils of Black masculinity. As white hip hop artists, 3rd Bass consider the women they rap about as appendages to their newly emerging white male identity.

3rd Bass's "tribute" to women of New York upholds some of the most disturbing trends of postmodern blackness by imitating the stereotypical bravado of the Black man who objectifies Black women, or women in general. Despite 3rd Bass's pro-Black aesthetic, they still fall victim to the tiresome commercial hip hop cliché of portraying women as sexually aggressive, scheming and obsessively materialistic. Part of this song's complexity is that the races of the women are never mentioned. The purposeful absence of race throughout "Brooklyn/Queens" suggests that 3rd Bass's exclusion of race effectively demystifies blackness experience by illustrating social and political complexities between male and female interactions across racial boundaries.

In the first verse, MC Serch comments that "Fellas are laughin', gassin' the past ho," already engaging in sexist, degrading language. Next, an aggressive "Girl steps to [him] and pushes the issue/ 'That knot you got, is that money or tissue'?" ("Brooklyn Queens"). He characterizes the woman as sexually aggressive when she interprets his "bulge" as sexual arousal, then highlights her materialism when he informs the listener that the bulge is actually a wad of money. MC Serch utilizes the stereotype that Black women are promiscuous and applies the stereotype to raceless women as an extension of his male bravado. Masculine bravado is again highlighted as both MCs recount instances when various women chase them down because they are celebrities. This showcase of self-aggrandizement illustrates the masculine bravado perceived to be a main ingredient of the postmodern Black identity, which is an attempt at forging a sense of strength and self-determination, albeit at the expense of women. Pete Nice

also characterizes a woman who is obsessively materialistic and is only interested in him because of his fame:

‘I’m Pete Nice...you want my autograph?’
 She said, ‘From 3rd Bass? I could do this.’
 Listen closely, slowly took a swig of intoxicants
 Cause the Brooklyn Queen’s a gold digger. (“Brooklyn Queens”)

MC Serch encounters yet another aggressive female in verse three who gives him a “sex look.” He brushes her off and scoffs when she runs to a “retard sportin’ a four-finger ring.” However, Serch’s determination to “scoop the best/ of the Brooklyn-Queens,” maybe demonstrates a desire to dominate and overpower female aggressiveness as means of maintaining his masculine identity (“Brooklyn Queens”).

Coinciding with the 1990’s the “angry white male,” Serch utilizes tropes of blackness to enhance his white masculine identity, therefore distancing himself from the suburban, middle class demographic. The abandonment of white masculinity signifies the endangerment of the white male identity. These were times when white males, especially those considered conservatives and Republicans were anxious about the perceived transfer of power from themselves to racial minorities and women in the government and various social spheres. The rejection of white male hegemonous thought in exchange for Black expressions of masculinity creates a new type of white male, one who is comfortable, and in fact gravitates towards Black masculinity, consequently contributing to the hegemony of postmodern blackness in hip hop. 3rd Bass’s rejection of middle class white masculinity and acceptance of postmodern blackness, gave young white masculinity a broader range of expressions. Like rock music, hip hop affords white males the opportunity to engage in cultural criticism, to participate in anti-establishment activities, and to recover a hypermasculine persona exemplified Black males in hip hop culture.

“The Gas Face” was 3rd Bass’s first single from their 1989 debut, The Cactus Album (see Appendix B). This song is their reaction to situations or persons in life that they deem unfair, “wack,” or detrimental to hip hop culture. Scenarios discussed by Pete Nice include a hip hop artist’s seduction and exploitation by record executives, including a criticism of white supremacist ideologies by MC Serch. The “gas face” is a “dis” (expression of disapproval) to anything or anyone that does not support the authentic hip hop aesthetic.

The “gas face” employs tricksterism as a mode of posturing. The trickster figure, used in African and African American folk and literary traditions, is in many ways a passive aggressive response to the oppressions of slavery and subsequent discrimination endured by Blacks. The trickster subverts power through a “grin [that] shows a trick up the sleeve” (“The Gas Face”). This grin is the physical expression of the gas face, but it also refers to the psychological acknowledgement of the effects of racism. Pete Nice addresses a common scenario of the corporate manipulation of young, naïve artists who sign music contracts in ignorance only to be taken advantage of financially:

Put you on tour, put your record on wax (trust me!)
 Sign you life on the x
 You exit, x-off, but what you really get:
 A box of Newports, and Puma sweats. (“The Gas Face”)

Pete Nice utilizes the “x” as a signifier extraction, exclusion and extinction, all symptoms of a racist society that seeks to silence and suffocate Black expression. Music corporations are only an extension of the white hegemonic exploitation that pimps blackness for its own material gain. However, Pete Nice addresses this practice of exploitation, and therefore supports postmodern blackness by alerting the community that intellectual awareness is imperative to keeping oneself true and to ensure one will not be taken advantage of in the record industry or in life.

MC Serch also comments on America's racist past and present by exposing and debunking common superstitions that malign blackness:

Black cat is bad luck, bad guys wear black
 Musta been a white guy who started all that
 (Make the gas face!) for those little white lies
 My expression to the mountainous blue eyes
 Then form a face, and shake my skull cap
 Dismiss the myth, that evil is not black. ("The Gas Face")

In this verse, MC Serch rejects white hegemonic ideology and takes up the cause of blackness, siding with and even appropriating blackness. In one instance he takes up an Afrocentric view of civilization with references to the first chapter of the biblical book of Genesis, "Say, it was night way before the light," which infers that African civilizations predate European ones.

Consequently, MC Serch alludes to the history of America's racist past and ironically replaces whiteness with an idyllic Black identity.

3rd Bass never made it out of the hip hop ghetto because they purposely geared their music to Black sensibilities, even authenticating their "blackness" by dissing (showing disdain or disapproval) and dismissing the commercial popularity of MC Hammer in their 1989 song and video "The Gas Face." MC Hammer represents the fake, inauthentic rapper whose "sell-out" persona threatens to weaken the cultural strength of postmodern blackness. The most humorous section of the song comes at the end where 3rd Bass give a list of shout-outs and disses. Most of the names given may only be known to the crew, but 3rd Bass boldly disparages MC Hammer whose superstardom was peaking due his 1990 monster success, Please Hammer, Don't Hurt 'Em. The music video that accompanies "The Gas Face" is even more telling of 3rd Bass's animosity toward Hammer as a representation of commercialized hip hop. The members of 3rd Bass kick and pummel a three-foot foam rubber hammer, sporting MC Hammer's signature sunglasses, with a baseball bat until it clunks to the floor. This gesture obviously rejects

commercialized hip hop; however, even in their critique of the record industry, white supremacist ideology, and commercial hip hop, 3rd Bass persistently asserts that postmodern blackness reaches beyond the commercial images commonly viewed on television.

3rd Bass upholds a postmodern need to confront the commercialism that threatens to assimilate and destroy true hip hop. This confrontation may engage in posturing, obsess over “dissing” one’s opponents, and assume that only one form of hip hop (namely, underground) is viable and authentic. However, it also exemplifies hip hop’s territorial nature in which hip hop will always be made “by the people and for the people.” This appropriation of postmodern blackness may provide young white males with a sense of identity they feel is lacking in their own communities since many white youth who are engaged in hip hop are disillusioned with the blank heritage passed on to them by their parents. They are children who are disconnected from their ancestral lineage. All they know is that they are American, with little connection to their multi-ethnic pasts that may include obscured Native American and European ancestry. This young white audience is not enamored with its past. They do not yet regard their whiteness as a source of privilege, or if they do, they may wish to reject that privilege for something more noble and authentic. If whiteness is indeed neutral, blank, and empty, it can be inscribed upon with any color, language, and expression to create a new definition of whiteness, which is what 3rd Bass has accomplished in its short career.

White is Black

From this discussion we can conclude that 3rd Bass signifies a demarcation of race identity in which whites may comfortably put on blackness as a viable means of self-definition. Race plays a primary function as a mark of authenticity within the hip hop culture. Because hip

hop culture originated with Black and Latino culture, it makes sense that the racial dimension of authenticity in hip hop music has been contingent historically upon one's blackness. The more "Black" one is, the more authentic he is, where as the more "white" someone is, the less authentic he is and the less likely he will be accepted by the hip hop community. Prime examples are the hip hop community's rejection of white rappers: House of Pain, Snow, and Vanilla Ice, "three successful White artists [...] who appropriated hip-hop musical styles, and [...] were used as symbols of...inauthentic whiteness" (McLeod 141). However, their forays into hip hop music signify that the power of the postmodern Black identity makes hip hop a more acceptable means of artistic expression.

There is "the tendency among white youth to perceive whiteness as empty, noting that by adopting markers of Black self-empowerment such as dreadlocks or hip-hop fashion, white youth simultaneously displace whiteness and its historical connections to racial prejudice and discrimination" (Rasmussen et al. 10-11). To white youth, hip hop is vulgar, transgressive, stimulating, and therefore, more desirable. It is the most visceral representation of blackness that they can obtain, and its thoroughly counter-cultural (read anti-white) stance is just what white youth, who hunger for "authentic" forms of self-expression, desire. This desire to "eat the other" is what fuels the massive popularity of hip hop music. Corporate entities know how powerfully consumptive desires drive white America. As a result, they have created another product that will satisfy their marketing niche perfectly. By introducing a white rapper into the hip hop arena, they are essentially imitating the Other by putting on the mantle of blackness, thereby privileging blackness. This double otherness becomes a parody of a parody in that white rappers are enacting stereotypes of Blacks enacting stereotypes. Examples of imitation "Others" are Vanilla Ice and the Beastie Boys. Arguably, they may be on the opposite sides of the authenticity

spectrum, but they both embody what music markets desire: a white face on Black music. The most prolific white face in hip hop today, no doubt, is Eminem, aka Marshal Mathers, a “white boy” from a working class family in Detroit. No other presence in hip hop has shaken up the culture quite like Eminem; however, unlike 3rd Bass, Eminem owes much of his success to the preoccupation of his whiteness in many of his songs. The fact that Eminem is mentored and produced by Dr. Dre of NWA fame engenders an additional observation that his whiteness has been exploited by a Black man.⁴ Eminem may be the new millennium whiteface performer,

⁴ Eminem has had the most success of all white rappers, brilliantly combining a transgressive whiteness (white trash), convincing street/gangsta persona (blackness), and successfully connecting to the white teenage consumers that have deemed him a multi-platinum artist.

As Queen Latifah insightfully reasons, “ ‘All of us black label owners know we’d sign [a white kid] because white kids want their own hero more than they want ours’ ” (Armstrong 339). Dr. Dre (formally of N. W. A.) capitalized on the otherness of Eminem by signing him to, Aftermath Records, knowing that a skillful white rapper would be most desirable to a young white consumer base. “The substantial salaries of minstrel entertainers engage popular attention, as did the tendency of some highly successful performers and promoters (including P.T. Barnum) to do blackface for a time as prelude to fame and fortune elsewhere. In a real sense, rubbing on blacking was an accumulating capitalist behavior. [...] [M]instrels certainly did claim respectability off stage and did draw attention to the relationship between racial disguise and making money” (Roediger 119).

It must be noted that Eminem comes from a working class background, what some might call “white trash,” as socially and economically disadvantaged white whose “whiteness of ‘white trash’ signals something other than privilege and social power” (Newitz and Wray 169).

Unlike unmarked hegemonic forms of whiteness, the category of white trash is marked as white from the outset: “But in addition to being racially marked, it is simultaneously marked as trash, as something that must be discarded, expelled, and disposed of in order for whiteness to achieve and maintain social dominance. Thus, white trash must be understood as both an external and an internal threat to whiteness” (Newitz and Wray 169).

Herein may lie the motivation for someone such as Eminem who is a socially and economically disadvantaged white who is drawn to hip hop culture. If already transgressively white, in that he is marked and heterogenized by his fallen state of whiteness, now becoming a white Other, he can more readily identify with black Others who share the same socio-economical plight as he. In fact there is distinct double otherness about Eminem. His racial otherness differentiates him from the hip hop norm, and the socio-economic otherness that differentiates him from “hegemonic forms of whiteness.” It may come as no surprise that a white other who feels “discarded, expelled, and disposed of” by the mainstream would gravitate towards a black subculture who have also experience these same injustices. These conditions make it easier for Eminem to appropriate the tropes of blackness, while alienating postmodern blackness. Eminem’s working class status and intimate connections with blacks whom he lived amongst in Detroit gave him enough convincing street credibility he needed to win over black hip hop fans. His background mimics the nineteenth-century minstrel by evidence of his close proximity to neighborhood blacks. Roediger comments that, “early minstrels delighted in claiming to be a ‘student of the negro’ and therefore ‘authentic’ performers [...] Minstrel entertainers both claimed to be pupils, or even kin, of the Blacks they mocked” (116). Though Eminem has never claimed to be related to any black person, his close proximity to blacks and produces a form of social and artistic kinship with other blacks that have influenced his lyrical flow, material, worldview, and image. Eminem’s tutelage under the West Coast gangsta icon, Dr. Dre, illustrates the conventions of the continuous tradition of the minstrel in that Being promoted by Dr. Dre brought Eminem all the street credibility he needed to keep from being rejected by black audiences and to motivate white audiences to consume music deemed authentic.

performing caricatures of whiteness through the direction of one of the “blackest” rappers in the business. Through Dr. Dre, postmodern blackness serves as the template for Eminem’s performance.

Dyson aptly expresses the mutually dependent relationship between whites and Blacks and their roles in the cultural production of whiteness: “To paraphrase Ralph Ellison: ‘I don’t want to know how ‘white’ black folk are, I want to know how “black” white folk are.’ [...] we discover how black whiteness is” (129). Definitions of whiteness are not construed in a vacuum but are dependent on the construction and expression of other ethnicities.⁵ Whiteness, and

⁵ It is important to designate whiteness as a social construction, just like any other ethnic designation. Whiteness studies are useful tools for explaining the formation and variation of the white racial identity. Whiteness studies were introduced into American universities in the 1970s and 1980s and have gained popularity and momentum with no signs of abating. Whiteness studies have risen to prominence and importance because they attempt to answer the questions dealing with white identity and how whites benefit from centuries of racial privilege.

Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray identify five common definitions of whiteness in current whiteness studies: 1) Whiteness is “invisible and unmarked” in the sense that it permeates our culture to such an extent that it is regarded as “natural and normative” (Rasmussen et al. 10). All people living under the umbrella of America are judged and scrutinized by this all-encompassing standard of whiteness, so that “while whiteness is invisible to whites, it is hypervisible to people of color” (Rasmussen et al. 10). 2) Whiteness is “empty” and established through appropriation; “whiteness is defined solely by what it is not” “best understood by a lack of cultural distinctiveness and authenticity, one that leads to attempts by whites to fill in the blanks through acts of cultural appropriation or what bell hooks called ‘eating the other.’” (Rasmussen et al. 10-11); 3) Whiteness is structural privilege; “This claim is synonymous with the notion of white skin privilege” giving whites more access to better jobs, housing, health care, and education by virtue of skin color (Rasmussen et al. 11-12); 4) Whiteness is violence and terror; “used to justify and rationalize the genocide, enslavement, lynching, and public humiliation of people of color for centuries” (Rasmussen et al. 12); and 5) Whiteness is the institutionalization of European colonialism... (10). These definitions of whiteness, though valid in many ways fail to address the complexity of racial identity, often sustaining the white racial dominance it attempts to deconstruct.

Many critics see whiteness studies as an opportunity to deconstruct whiteness as the norm and reconstruct it as one of many ethnicities that populate the U.S., even the world. In contrast to Marxist essentialist notions of race David Roediger cites Barbara Field discussion of race in her essay, “Ideology and Race in American History”: Fields argues that race cannot be seen as a biological or physical fact (a ‘thing’) but must be seen as ‘a notion that is profoundly and in its very essence ideological.’ Race, for Fields, is then entirely socially and historically constructed as an ideology in a way that class is not. Because people really do own or not own land and workplaces, class has ‘objective’ dimensions. Moreover, race is constructed differently across time by people in the same social class and differently across time by people whose class positions differ.” (7) However, some critics dismiss whiteness studies as white aggrandizement and a way for white culture to reassert its prominence in the era of multiculturalism:

[S]ome blacks are skeptical of even progressive versions of white studies: it may be a sophisticated narcissism at work, another white hoax to displace studies of, but especially by, The Others at the height of their popularity and power with an encroaching obsession with the meanings, identities, practices, anxieties, and subjectivities—and hence the agendas, priorities, and preferences—of The Whites.” (Dyson 131)

consequently blackness, is not a singular, fixed reality, but a composite of several realities and identities that possess as much variance as any other ethnicity. Dyson is showing that a fixed, homogenous definition of race is mythical at best and out right deceptive at worst, because the myth of homogenous race perpetuates the marginality, inferiority, and even social destruction of the Other.

White appropriation of blackness becomes a way to consume blackness as normative when the artist actually upholds postmodern blackness rather than destroying it. Tropes of blackness defined by today's hip hop culture are emulated by whites and have created a new definition of whiteness. As evidenced by 3rd Bass, white can be Black. Whites can posture, wear baggy clothes, live in the inner city, speak Black slang, display masculine bravado, and deliver varying doses of misogyny. People who view blackness and whiteness as unvarying and one-dimensional are forced to reexamine their perceptions when a white hip hop group can apply postmodern blackness to their art and at the same time redefine whiteness for their generation. As a result, postmodern blackness displaces white patriarchal rule by becoming a cultural marker in the same way race was used to perform the same function. Ultimately, white cultural appropriation of postmodern blackness has become culturally valid within the multiple ideas of postmodern blackness.

Realizing the “Real”: Feminine Authenticity in Spoken Word

Hip hop was as young, naïve, confused, sometimes innocent, and sometimes as mischievous as I was, and as I grew up, hip hop grew with me, and along the way took on all my baggage, my dreams. I felt hip hop, and hip hop felt me. And I know everyone who loves the music feels the same way I do. For many people hip hop was that first friend, the first to talk to us, the first to understand.

--Brown Sugar

Extracted from the female narrative voice-over in the movie, Brown Sugar (2002), the above passage highlights the significance of the female narrative in a male-dominated culture. The voice of the main character, Sydney, demonstrates that though hip hop has always been a male dominated art, many women are devoted to the preservation and continuance of hip hop music. Women in hip hop culture, specifically spoken word, have found a way to address realness and authenticity that is culturally and gender specific. They critique mainstream hip hop’s representations of realness by reinscribing the female voice and experience back into hip hop.

Most academic discussions of hip hop range from simple signification to a mere recitation of cultural chronology. Very few have written about the impact of female emcees since hip hop’s inception, and it is no wonder considering the industry’s deliberate erasure of hip hop’s herstory. Nelson George, a well-known pop culture critic, largely dismisses female emcees in Hip Hop America, stating that if there were never any female MCs, their absence would not have altered the trajectory of hip hop music (184). Tricia Rose in her book, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America, attempts to address this void in hip hop discourse, but limits her focus to the well-known artists of the 1990s such as Queen Latifah, Salt-N-Pepa and Yo-Yo. Though female emcees are not being discussed in this thesis, I will discuss the presence of feminine sensibilities within hip hop spoken word and how female poets are writing the authentic feminine voice back into hip hop culture.

The feminine voice in hip hop culture finds its expression most readily received in spoken word. Female spoken word poets enjoy more freedom in conveying authentic representations of themselves that women are routinely denied in commercial hip hop music. Authenticity in the spoken word movement differs from the hip hop movement in that “keeping it real” involves conveying street sensibilities, coarse language, the preoccupation with the meticulous portrayal of street life, and the realities of Black people in their communities.¹ In twenty-first century America, we find that “[c]ontemporary culture is a conglomerate of free floating signifiers which perpetuate a state of alienation and anomie. We become obsessed with 'authenticity' and 'the real' because we feel the emptiness of postmodern life” (“Authenticity & Modernism/Post-Modernism: Representations of the Other in American Advertising”). This obsession with realness and authenticity is especially critical to the formation and preservation of hip hop culture, because it is in the quest for the real, that hip hop can inoculate itself from outside interference and form its own identity. “Keeping it real” involves creating a persona that aims to counter mainstream culture. There seems to be this superstitious aversion to mainstream success, even though it is the mainstream artists themselves who perpetuate this image of authenticity the most. The “keeping it real” mantra, so crucial to commercial hip hop, seems to focus on the most negative aspects of Black life. If songs exclude guns, gangs, and

¹ Now more than ever is there a high demand on authenticity in America. In the age of digitized information, images, and music, people long for a time when life was uncorrupted by the ease of technology. The desire for authenticity comes from all corners of the culture. Whole food and organic markets are the latest rage promising foods free from pesticides, hormones, irradiation, and other human alterations. In the arts, people are turning to handmade crafts to replace a lost sense of true craftsmanship. Even in personal health, body care has taken on a whole new attitude towards natural alternatives and home therapies that threaten to usurp the dominance of traditional Western medicine. Desire for the real show that consumers are paying a premium for these natural, organic, chemical-free products everyday; authenticity is expensive. The advent of postmodernity has had a significant impact on cultural concerns for authenticity. Current culture’s tendency to mass produce cultural tastes has left a psychological vacuum in the minds of many consumers, which has left a void for postmodernist practices to take hold and fragment cultural homogenization.

struggling, then the music is not “real.” If songs exclude pimping and abusing women, then the music is not “real.”

It is no wonder in this postmodern era that hip hop, now a 30-year-old cultural expression, begs for the return to the real, an expression of culture that is neither contrived nor premeditated, but grounded in the daily experiences of urban youth nationwide. The generation that most patronizes hip hop craves authenticity the most because this generation sees the effects of artificiality every day. One cannot help but wonder if hip hop was ever wholly organic and authentic since it was derived from homogenized, disco break beats; however, in its early years, hip hop may have saved music by rescuing it from the clutches of corporate executives and delivering it into the hands of young Black and Latino Bronx youth who desperately needed a viable musical expression of their own. As predicted by Cornel West in a 1987 interview, rap has become “highly packaged, regulated, distributed, circulated and consumed” (“The Political Intellectual” 289). Although the commercialization of current hip hop music uses the medium of rap as its primary means of expression, spoken word is becoming a signifier of the authenticity that has been lost in hip hop and has begun to expand its vernacular space. Spoken word, the hip hop Other, is regarded as authentic and may be viewed as a retreat back to a time when politicized art was spoken and expressed “by the people and for the people.”

A general understanding of the spoken word movement and its relation to hip hop is necessary to understanding how spoken word influences our understanding of postmodern blackness. Historically, “African Americans combined strong oral and musical traditions with call-and-response methods of communication to provide a genesis for contemporary African-American poetry” to which spoken word and hip hop are indebted (Miazga, “The Spoken Word Movement of the 1990’s”). The interplay between spoken word and rap is often ambivalent.

Essentially, while rap is predominately musical and spoken word is predominantly poetic, both are intertwined in the hip hop culture, trading and borrowing from one another to create and awkward partnership that legitimizes the existence of the other (Miazga, “The Spoken Word Movement of the 1990's”).

David Dodson sheds some further light on the ambivalence between the act of rapping and spoken word:

[W]hile rap is poetic, rap is not poetry. Spoken word, on the other hand, is poetry and therefore is not rap. Poetry is a literary form encompassing many styles and using words to convey the things behind the things. Rap is just talk and rap music is music based on the manner of speech. With poetry, it's the way the words are written that develops the style. With rapping, it's how the words are uttered that develops the style. (“Rap Wars: Spoken Word Strikes Back”)

Dodson further asserts that spoken word poets “tend to separate themselves from the subject of their poetry to better interpret what those they imitate cannot” and that this separation leads to inauthenticity on the part of the spoken word artist because he or she is further removed from the reality of the subject than a rapper. Though this may be true in some cases, I disagree with Dodson's assessment of authenticity in spoken word. Overall, I believe that the very otherness and underground origins that spoken word possesses garner a greater advantage to project authenticity convincingly.

No matter how disillusioned many hip hop aficionados have become with the music, the freshness of hip hop's formative years can be recaptured through cultural preservation. The process of preservation moves on into the 21st century with a contingent of spoken word poets, such as Tony Medina, Louis Reyes Rivera, and Sonia Sanchez, who through spoken word are returning hip hop to its socially conscious history and delivering much needed political commentary that is dismally absent from today's commercial hip hop. Perhaps the most overlooked art form in hip hop culture, spoken word provides a fresh way to represent reality

through rhythm, rhyme, and social commentary. Spoken word may well be hip hop in its purest, most distilled form, extracted from the urban landscape, repackaged as a potent alternative to the trappings of commercialization, and representative of a truer example of postmodern blackness.

Academic Discussions of Authenticity in Hip Hop

Spoken word has gone academic, or maybe it is best to say that the academic community is paying more attention to hip hop culture than ever before. Authors such as Michael Eric Dyson, Todd Boyd, and Nelson George have all made headway in promoting popular cultural study as a worthwhile endeavor. All three have contributed immensely to the cause and serious study of hip hop as a cultural and literary artifact along side the works of Shakespeare. In Michael Eric Dyson's provocative biography of the late Tupac Shakur, Holler if You Hear Me, he addresses the urgent need for the hip hop community to negotiate and substantiate authenticity within the culture, specifically in music. Choosing to focus on authenticity, Dyson notes, "But it is also a useful lesson to Black youth about the limits of the real and its relation to the represented" (142). Dyson juxtaposes orthodox blackness, what we may understand as a Civil Rights aesthetic and an idealization of blackness that celebrates social progress and pathologizes Black social ills, from authentic blackness, an acknowledgment that there is an unsavory side to blackness that subscribers to the orthodox do not want to face (144). Overall, Dyson's definition of authenticity has less to do with an expressive voice than it does with transgressive behavior, and he solely focuses on Black authenticity as it applies to males in hip hop culture.

As I previously indicated, Cornel West, speaker, philosopher, and theorist, left his prestigious position as one of the premier African American studies professors at Harvard for Princeton over his controversial interest and production of a spoken word CD, Sketches of My

Culture (2001). He since has made another spoken word CD titled, Street Knowledge (2003).

Both albums serve to legitimize spoken word as a viable creative form that is not just appreciated in the coffee houses, but is also seriously explored in academia. Songs like “The ‘N’-Word,” “The ‘B’-Word” and “The ‘N’-ization of America” from Street Knowledge demonstrates that West is eager to address social and political issues using the medium of spoken word to reach not only other academics but also critical thinkers within in the hip hop community who otherwise might turn deaf ear to the rants of America’s ivory towers. West’s switch to spoken word is a signal of his appeal to Black authenticity.

Andreana Clay insightfully shares from her essay “Keepin’ It Real: Black Youth, Hip-Hop Culture, and Black Identity” that “Several representations of the production of Black culture conclude that there is an ongoing identity struggle within the Black community. This struggle has been centered on identifying who is “authentic” (1348). This being said, spoken word attempts to continue what was started 30 years ago, forging a postmodern blackness that rejects commercialization and commodification of Black bodies and Black death and reinstates blackness as poetic, progressive, and organically in tune with the community.

Although my focus is to examine the authentic expression in spoken word, it is important to understand the markers of authenticity in hip hop music, because the contrasts between commercial and spoken word are largely underscored by expressions of authenticity. Kembrew McLeod questions the topic of “realness” in “Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation.” Within his essay, McLeod defines authenticity using six semantic dimensions: social-psychological, racial, political-economical, gender-sexual, social-locational, and cultural (139). The social-psychological dimension of authenticity involves

“staying true to yourself” in contrast to “following mass trends” (139-140).² The racial dimension involves the idea that Blackness is seen as more authentic whereas whiteness is less authentic; the more white one is, the less likely that person will be accepted by the hip hop community (141).³ The political-economic dimension of authenticity in hip hop music is best described as underground/“street credibility” versus commercial “selling out” (McLeod 139,141).⁴ The gender-sexual dimension of authenticity is usually recognized as the hard versus soft hip hop (McLeod 142).⁵ Hard expressions of hip hop involved highly masculine characteristics and expressions. This is in opposition to soft hip hop that is generally characterized by feminine attributes (McLeod 142). The social-locational dimension of authenticity within hip hop music is the common debate between the streets and the suburbs.⁶

² Being true to oneself is one of the highest orders of a hip hop artist, because this type of authenticity requires an artist to develop his own style, aesthetic, and unique traits that distinguish him from other artists. More than just creating a gimmick, which is not authentic, the artist’s style should be his calling card by which others in the community recognize him. McLeod observes “the social-psychological dimension highlights the valorization of individualism and the demonization of conformity” (140). An artist should not let mainstream society or corporate entities dictate what his style, message, or appearance should be. Art should be completely determined by the individual without outside interference.

³ Because hip hop is a black-originated culture, it makes sense that the racial dimension of authenticity in hip hop music is contingent upon one’s blackness. Prime examples are the hip hop communities rejection of white rappers. McLeod mentions House of Pain, Snow, and Vanilla Ice, “three successful White artists...who appropriated hip-hop musical styles, and ...were used as symbols of...inauthentic whiteness” (141). Their successful, yet very brief forays into hip hop music signify the hip hop community’s intolerance of inauthenticity.

⁴ The characteristics of underground hip hop would include means of musical distribution that avoid radio or television, such as “12-inch singles and hip hop clubs” (141). Of course, the contrast to underground hip hop would be the variety that is largely disseminated through radio, MTV and BET, well-crafted for the widest audience possible, not just the core hip hop community (141).

⁵ Soft hip hop, or pop-oriented hip hop, is considered to be feminized. An example is the music of MC Hammer, which has the negative reputation of “selling out” to major corporations, garnering a large number of fans outside the core hip hop community, and abstaining from most gangsta narratives. Gangsta narratives chronicle the lives and experiences of usually, young, inner city men who are or may have been involved in criminal activities and hostile environments. Again this is very similar to the underground/commercial and hard/soft dichotomies where the underground and hard aspects of hip hop music are deemed to be more masculine and therefore more authentic where the commercial and the soft hip hop are feminized and inauthentic.

⁶ McLeod explains social location as involving “the community with which a hip-hop artist and fan identifies him or herself. Often artists and fans play with the symbols associated with White-dominated U.S.

The final dimension of authenticity in hip hop music is cultural, or the old school versus the mainstream (McLeod 143).⁷ Like McLeod, I believe authenticity, an integral part of postmodern blackness, is crucial to understanding hip hop music because authenticity preserves Black cultural traditions that are constantly under assault from mainstream culture.

In many ways, some of McLeod's definitions of authenticity run contrary to much commercial hip hop today and actually privilege underground hip hop, echoing the underground position of spoken word. Commercial hip hop is market-driven, not message-driven; it caters to what the masses desire. It does not necessarily adhere to the social-psychological aspect, because many artists' songs are ghostwritten and the record companies they work for construct their public images. For example, it is well-known in the hip hop community that Kanye West's number one single, "Jesus Walks" was actually written by a Chicago MC named Rhymefest.⁸ Such practices really serve to undermine creative ingenuity and contribute to a culture of pretense. Hip hop authenticates itself by means of blackness, at the exclusion of whiteness, and if a white person wants to become a hip hop artist, he or she must subscribe to acceptable expressions of blackness before he or she is accepted as in the case of white rap phenomenon,

suburbia. They contrast them with a very specific and idealized community that is located in African American-dominated inner cities, a social location that is often referred to within hip-hop as "the street." For many, keepin' it real means not disassociating oneself from the community from which one came—the street. Moreover, it means emphasizing one's ties to the community (which partially explains why so many hip-hop artists mention the name of their neighborhood in their songs)" (142).

The social-locational dimension of authenticity is so important to understanding the reception of hip-hop, because fans want to believe that an artist is truly living what he or she is rapping. This is especially true of fans that live in the U.S. suburbs and have little to no experience with inner city life. Part of the appeal for suburban hip hop fans is that hip hop presents a version of reality that is raw, uncut, and uncensored. It is the opposite of the cookie cutter subdivisions, strip malls, and virtually trash free surroundings of a homogenized environment. Hip hop artists' shout outs, or declarations of allegiance, to their respective neighborhoods serves to connect their fans, suburban and inner city, to the idea that their respective raps originate from a real place, time, and spatial influence, therefore solidifying their authenticity.

⁷ The cultural dimension of authenticity compares and contrasts the "old school" sensibility of community with contemporary commercial preoccupation with fame and materialism.

⁸ "About Operation Slap a Dropout," Ban Kanye West from the Grammys, 2005, 20 July 2005 <<http://byroncrawford.typepad.com/kanyegate/about.html>>.

Eminem. If true hip hop measures itself by a political-economic criterion, then commercial hip hop fails miserably, because most of it is apolitical, stripped of much the social commentary that made it powerful and relevant in the late 1980s.

Authenticity in the spoken word movement is the opposite of hip hop music. The comparisons from McLeod's discussion include the political-economic, psycho-social, cultural semantic markers; however, the contrasts between commercial hip hop and spoken word reside in the areas of racial, gender-sexual, social-locational semantic markers. Authenticity in spoken word is open to many different races and ethnicities. This broadness creates a multiracial, multiethnic community that defines authenticity as an ecumenical opportunity of expression. Spoken word is largely accessible to women, and it is the very presence of women that gives spoken word its integrity. Unlike hip hop music, spoken word artists are not as concerned with identifying with a certain geographic location. The lack of geo-locational specificity demonstrates that the spoken word movement's preservation of the art is not entirely dependent on regional affiliation and loyalty. Because the spoken word community is worldwide, laying claim to one major city or neighborhood works against the overarching philosophy of the spoken word movement. This loosely based community gains its cohesiveness by promoting an ecumenical culture. The large female contingency undermines male territorialism, opening the community to practice not only multiculturalism but multisexualism as well.

The spoken word movement subscribes to a different sort of realness that at times compliments commercial hip hop, but at other times it contradicts it. Spoken word artists are not afraid to speak about the more sensitive issues of life such as poverty, crime, and racism, but they are also not afraid to celebrate life, love, and joy. Because women constitute a large portion of the spoken word movement, issues particular to women are more prevalent. Women have a

much stronger voice in spoken word than in the male-dominated commercial hip hop, because the medium lends itself to more contemplative introspection. Spoken word is not constrained by concerns of musical production and media exposure, which is centered on a market that specifically caters to male-dominated hip hop. In contrast, spoken word aspires to counter caricatured gender stereotypes and foreground realistic portraits of femininity. Spoken word focuses on the art of poetry and the signification of words. In fact, the signification of words is paramount to the movement. It is faith in the word that gives spoken word its potency. The power of the word has always been an ally for women, because once a word is spoken, it has a spiritual, creative power that utters into existence what had not existed before. Words cannot be retrieved; a word once printed, figuratively, cannot be erased. In light of an historical silencing of women's voices, spoken word enables the woman's voice to become central to art form.

Spoken word shares the Black vernacular tradition of hip hop music. Deliberately underground, protestive, and covert, spoken word expands hip hop's emotional and psychological depth and attempts to disseminate knowledge in a palatable manner. Spoken word poets have a history dating back to Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets of the 1970s. Of The Last Poets, Dodson says: "[They] are spoken word poets because they use poetic devices such as rhyme, metaphor, alliteration, simile and more in combination with their natural speech or rap to create rhythmical performances. To understand their poetry, it's important to hear or see it performed" ("Rap Wars: Spoken Word Strikes Back"). They and other artists combined soulful music with lyrical expressions that helped set a precedent for contemporary hip hop.

Spoken word poets stem from all socio-economical backgrounds, from Ivy League professors to street poets. Like their commercial cousins, spoken word artists rhythmically read or recite their poetic works before an audience, sometimes with music, but often times not. What

differentiates spoken word artists from commercial hip hop artists is the construction of their poetry, the more consciously social and political focus of the poetry, and their intended audience. Spoken word fills many gaps left by hip hop's commercialization by concentrating on the content of the message rather than a superficial package and promotion. Spoken word authenticates itself by appealing to self-expression, social and political commentary, and self-conscious awareness of gender and race, contributing to the postmodern Black paradigm.

Black and Latina Expositions of Femininity

The most progressive aspect of spoken word is the prevalence of female lyricists who utilize spoken word in the way they have been prevented from doing in the current hip hop industry. Many of these female lyricists are stuck in the margins of commercial hip hop. If they do not conform to the over-sexed, porn star image of Lil Kim and Foxy Brown or the dime-a-dozen booty shaker, a staple of rap videos, they are largely left invisible and rendered silent by the warped representations of women in hip hop.⁹ Spoken word quite literally has given a voice to numerous women who desire to engage in hip hop culture in critical, culturally relevant ways.

Jessica Care Moore, publisher of Moore Black Press and author of The Words Don't Fit in My Mouth, provocatively unearths the effects of hip hop on herself as woman who embraces the culture but abhors the sexist and misogynistic messages hurled at her in the name of "keeping it real" in her poem, "I'm a Hip Hop Cheerleader" (see Appendix C). By Moore's definition, a hip hop cheerleader is a woman who has a deep affinity for hip hop, with much of her social and political worth invested in the art form. She cheers from the sidelines because accessibility to the hip hop game has been denied her.

⁹ Foxy Brown and Lil Kim are both notorious for incorporating hard core personas with explicit sexual content in their music as a means of negotiating power in male-dominated hip hop.

In the first fourteen lines, Moore addresses hip hop's male-dominated atmosphere, which alienates her and other female hip hop enthusiasts who would otherwise desire to contribute to the art. She states that her words are merely "words of proverbs/ of prophets who never get heard/ because the microphone is just another phallic symbol/ that allows jack to be nimble" (lines 6-9). In Moore's observation, hip hop culture has privileged male lyrical performance with the implication that only men can display virtuoso skill on the microphone. Moore connects spiritually with her words, speaking as a female prophet to whom no one will incline his ear, recognizing the connection of hip hop authenticity to mainly male expression.¹⁰ Yet she asserts her authenticity by showing that she strives to be heard and included in the hip hop culture.

Moore envisions herself as every woman who helped create, maintain, and sustain hip hop. She is the woman who is "carrying hand grenades and blood red pom poms/ screaming from the sidelines of the stage [she] built" (2-3). Later she eats "her words/ and [becomes] and instant interlude/ a cute break between the music," devouring herself as a act of self-protection from the men that may devour her voice with misogynistic lyrics (31-33). Moore suggests that women have silenced themselves into invisibility, perhaps to escape shame. They have resigned themselves to singing the hook, or chorus, on a rap song. This common hip hop convention clearly marginalizes women to decorative roles, which renders them powerless to supply their voices in the substance of rap lyrics. Eventually, she reconciles "despite all your rhymes with bitches/ I know you need me/ complete thee believe me" (72-74). She is determined not to be affronted by misogynist lyrics, while she asserts that male-dominated hip hop lacks the feminine voice and thus remains culturally stagnant. A hip hop cheerleader comes full circle from powerlessness to purpose. Rather than subtract from her authenticity, Moore confirms it by

¹⁰ This silencing signifies the erasure of the female voice in religious texts as is seen in Brown's The Da Vinci Code and as I will discuss later in Chavis's view of female spirituality.

embracing the feminine influence, long-suffering, and eventual ownership of hip hop through her voice, her “weapon of choice” (83). Thus she rejects the violent explosiveness of masculine grenades for the utterly cool, utterly feminine power of her voice. Moore’s work is an example of how spoken word provides a powerful platform for women of color to use their voices in ways mainstream hip hop will not allow.

However, before Moore finds the weapon in her voice, she acknowledges that the current state of hip hop has left her altered, ashamed, and violated. While “jack” monopolizes the microphone, he leaves “jill with a man who can’t climb a hill/ and a bucket of spit/ she can’t drink or find her reflection/ inside she hides” (11-14). These lines tellingly reveal the potentially adverse effects of male-driven hip hop on women. Moore suggests that hip hop lyrics are full of bravado but they diminish men as well by denying refreshing “water” for their communities to drink and by denying the women of a viable image of themselves. Because of failed attempts to engage in hip hop, these women retreat into silence. Yet some women take another route, engaging in hip hop but being violated:

I’m a hip hop cheerleader
 I buy all your records
 despite the misogyny
 not looking for the blood in me
 respond to me
 I feel molested hip hop fondled me (45-50)

Here is a woman’s plea to be heard, to have her humanity recognized, and to long for a dialogue with the men who are supposed to love her. Moore engages in the criticism of male-dominated hip hop music by rendering a more honest image of postmodern Black femininity.

Similarly, Michele Serros, author of How to Become a Chicana Role Model, explores hip hop’s influence on everyday male-female interaction in her poem, “Mr. BOOM BOOM Man” (see Appendix C). Serros characterizes Mr. BOOM BOOM as a man who has been influenced

by the cultural images produced by hip hop lyrics, and through the voice of the female speaker questions her reluctance to accept the “hip hop cheerleader” role exemplified by the “cool girls” who “like the cars that go:/ BOOM BA BOOM” (35-37). Just as the microphone serves as an extension of phallic symbolism, Mr. BOOM BOOM’s tricked-out Nissan mini truck is a hip hop trope of hypermasculinization. His “baby lavender twinkle lights/ hugging a chrome-plated license plate...the automatic tinted window” along with his booming stereo system all point to the same ostentatious images in hip hop music videos where the scantily clad women swoon over this magnificent display. The speaker further describes him as wearing a “fifty-pound medallion/ heaving a hickey-stained neck/ closer/ to the center of his manhood:/ his beeper.” These elements symbolize commercial hip hop’s materialism and displaced priorities that exchange organic communication for an electronic simulacrum of interpersonal relationships. He also possesses “a flash/ of gold gilded teeth,” which symbolizes the primacy of masculine rhetoric of hip hop culture. He further infuriates the speaker with derogative speech:

*Hey!
Sen-yo-reeeeta!
mamacita!
You speak English?
Hey...YOU
I'm talkin' to you...
-aaah, you deaf bitch! (47-53)*

The description of Mr. BOOM BOOM Man can be read in two different ways. First, he can be read, along with the car description, as a trope of Black masculinity. His ethnicity is never mentioned, but his description matches what many would deem a young Black man, a “performance of an intra-ethnic construction of that identity” (Clay 1350). However, his “hickey-stained neck” suggests that he may be a lighter complexioned Hispanic male. Serros keeps his racial identity ambiguous to signify the absorption of postmodern Black identity by

various ethnicities and marginalized people. Second, he can also be read as the speaker's perception of blackness through the lens of her understanding of hip hop. But her conception of hip hop images is just as limiting as her perception, because she is disseminating a stereotype of blackness that is damaging, exaggerated and one-dimensional. His performance of blackness is but one layer in the onion of hip hop and postmodern blackness. His characterization relies heavily on constructions of blackness that he deems to be authentic, as defined by commercial hip hop; the loud stereo bass acts as an aural extension and expression of himself, thus invoking a psycho-social authenticity marker. His interaction with the female speaker exemplifies his concepts of Black masculinity as he brazenly addresses her with little respect, decorum, politeness, or cultural consciousness of what is appropriate social interaction. Through her poem, perhaps inadvertently, Serros highlights the need for a redefinition of blackness to show that postmodern blackness strives for authenticity that includes and transcends Mr. BOOM BOOM's stereotypical description.

Serros sketches and critiques a persona of feminine authenticity by displaying the emotions her speaker experiences as she anticipates her encounter with Mr. BOOM BOOM Man. Elements of dread and trepidation mark the speaker's emotional authenticity as she awaits Mr. BOOM BOOM at a stoplight. The "[d]istorted bass/ nearly three blocks away" signifies distorted conceptions of Black masculinity: loud and brutish. Her hope that she "won't have to deal/ with him" echoes the sentiments of many young women who receive unsolicited attention from young men who have taken their relational cues from commercialized hip hop. Yet, Serros takes the opportunity to authenticate herself through the speaker by co-opting the masculinized discourse of hip hop to launch her protest against it:

I wanna yell out,
Yeah, I speak English,

*Pig Latin too
so Uckfay Offay
Mr. BOOM BOOM
Take your fade
n f-f-fade away! (56-62)*

Serros needs to authenticate herself through this poem, because even as the speaker retreats from interaction, Serros determinedly interacts with the man by articulating what the narrator is afraid to voice. Though the narrator “remembers” a suitable retort that she never vocalizes, Serros has written and spoken it, modeling how a woman might confront masculine incivility. In this sense, Serros takes on masculine attributes, but silences the intensity of her disdain by masking her words with playful language. She attacks hip hop’s definition of masculinity and attacks female marginality through the act of writing and voicing her opposition through a satirized persona, thereby effectively constructing her authenticity.

Spiritual Explications of the Hip Hop Bitch

While Serros critiques hip hop machismo in her attempt to authenticate her voice, Nzinga Regtuinah Chavis questions the authenticity of gun-slinging, ego-tripping, whack-rhyming MCs who are more corporate creations than rugged street reporters. Chavis’s poem, “Enter(f*#@ckin)tained” (see Appendix C) spews forth deep-rooted cynicism and frustration with not only the hip hop industry, but also with would-be spoken word poets whose main objective is to become a commercial success at the expense of the art form and consumers who are culturally unaware of how they mentally engage with hip hop music. Furthermore, a portion of Chavis’s poem officiates a movement to imprint women back into the music that has severely marginalized them, explicating gender concerns that inhere under the social awareness space of the postmodern Black paradigm.

Chavis boldly critiques the marketing and advertising efforts of the hip hop industry. These efforts seek to authenticate the rapper by providing him with a street image that he may not actually embrace reality. Chavis suggests that many rappers who present a gangsta image, are presenting just that: an image, “Like promotional ads depicting weapons/you don’t know how to shoot/Or like flyers and CD covers/showing cowards as criminals or punk-ass lovers” (lines 6-7). Dyson expresses this same criticism of the hip hop industry containing many artists who live lives quite unlike their rap lyrics (Holler if You Hear Me 168).

Despite commercial hip hop’s curious need to fabricate reality, Chavis spends most of his time castigating rappers for lyrics that denigrate Black women. He asks: “does the bitch you rhyme of/resemble what you in denial of in need of spirituality”? (9-10). Purposefully, Chavis juxtaposes “bitch,” an obviously hateful word used against women, with “spirituality,” a word that connotes positive transcendence. He demonstrates that the female segment of society is just as vital to any man as spirituality, no matter how dismissively women are treated in hip hop, suggesting that women are spiritual anchors in the hip hop community.

The connection between women and spirituality is not new. By recalling historic representations from the temple prostitutes of classical Rome, to the Greek goddesses of the Pantheon, to the Black matriarch that regularly attends Sunday service, Chavis attempts to redeem femininity through its close association to spirituality. He also parallels “bitches” and “spirituality” as cheapened commodities that are only useful to male hip hop artists in extremely narrow and marginal approaches. The semantic distances between “bitches” and “spirituality” demonstrates Chavis’s ability to psychologically distance himself from commercial hip hop artists and grants him latitude to intensify their misogyny. In comparison, Dodson presumes that when spoken word poets “separate themselves from the subject of their poetry” they “perceptibly lose

some authenticity in their pieces.” However, Dodson is shortsighted in his assessment of spoken word simply because where rappers tend to rely on and reinforce gender stereotypes, spoken word poets such as Chavis expose this semantic (t)error by deconstructing characterizations, such as the term “bitch.” Most commercial rappers use this term in the most limiting, one-dimensional way. Jay-Z’s song, “Bitches and Sisters” (see Appendix C) from The Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse, characterizes specific women who get what they deserve, work men’s nerves, hold men up, slow men up, and tell lies (29-35). Though Jay-Z tries to categorize the aforementioned attributes as those belonging to “bitches” his characterizations of “sisters” still marginalize women, relegating them to the background of the male rapper’s crew, or close associates. The “sister” occupies no other function other than to hold him up, stand by his side, and stay out of his business.

Chavis counters the commercial hip hop generalization by implying that the reason rappers limit themselves to this characterization is that they are missing a critical spiritual element in their music that would lend diversity and broader definitions of womanhood. Therefore, Chavis engages more authentically with the treatment of women in hip hop because he uses his poetic sensibilities to subvert deep-seated misogyny. Though most of “Enter(f*#@ckin)tained” reads like a rant, Chavis is not without warrant, for his main goal, through spoken word, denounces the negative excessiveness of hip hop and returns social awareness to a gluttoned art form.

There is current tide of intolerance that is threatening to engulf the hip hop industry. Community leaders, hip hop activists, and enthusiasts are losing their patience with the tirade of negative Black images emerging from music videos and CDs. Fed up with rap wars, degrading images of women, and crass commercialization, the grassroots hip hop community is reaching

out to less visible, less radio-friendly, and less media engineered art. In the words of Chavis: “I need poetry as shock therapy to revive me!” (13). Perhaps the remedy for hip hop’s authenticity blues is a stanza or two of poetry that repositions “realness” back into the mouths and lives of artists who are unconcerned with commercial success, yet desire to breathe socially conscious life back into the culture’s lungs.

Spoken Word’s Authentic Stride

Because of spoken word’s poetic construction of sounds, various rhythms, colors, and shapes, the art form lends itself to the fragmentary nature of postmodernism and away from the homogenization of commercialized hip hop. The emphasis on the small narrative, the variations in locality, and the fragmentation of experience are all celebrated in this postmodern art form. The multi-voiced aspect of this poetic movement is the very foundation of its authenticity, simply because this level of multiplicity is not easily marketable by the mainstream. Spoken word’s “realness,” its authenticity, lies in the fact that its diverse community, composed of African, Hispanic, Native, Asian, and white Americans, brings fragmented, individual life narratives and vignettes to the pages and stages of American life.

Even in the midst of the multicultural expressions within spoken word, the poetry has been especially useful to the voices of women that are routinely suppressed by their male counterparts in commercial hip hop. Women’s concerns for equal participation in hip hop culture resound the strongest in the context of spoken word. In spoken word, image, dress, and style are not paramount to the message. Women are not judged by external characteristics, but rather by the content and depth of their poetry. The verbal criteria for authenticity afford women a stronger voice in the culture in a way that does not reduce them to a few body parts. Also,

spoken word allows women to engage in the same cultural criticism as men (and vice versa), providing insightful knowledge and balance to women's position in hip hop that would otherwise be derided in commercial settings. As I note in the introduction, authenticity is paramount to the development of postmodern blackness. Postmodern blackness thrives on an authenticity that differentiates itself from white mainstream culture while constructing a culture of its own, one that is free from the pressures of white mainstream conformity.

Conclusion

Scholars, writers, and hip hop enthusiasts have made great strides into examining hip hop as a topic of academic discourse, which supplies legitimacy and affirmation to a culture that has been largely dismissed by conservative groups and homogenized by mainstream institutions. Yet, most academic discussions of hip hop range from a mere recitation of cultural chronology to simplistic explorations of blackness. Hip hop yearns for the return to authenticity, an articulation of culture that is neither fabricated nor manufactured, but instead rooted in the organic experiences of marginalized youth throughout the and nation and the world.

As Potter further observes, the tremendous impact of essentialized blackness in the media causes hip-hop artists utilize tropes of blackness to spark social awareness:

Well aware of the power of media such as television and radio, rappers have managed to bum-rush the Spectacle, to hijack the media by its own devices. If violent black males in hoodies are stirring up fear on the evening news, rappers will represent with guns in their hands, “sending out mad shouts, making devils run naked.” Yet check under the hoods and you will find a different message, a message of solidarity with other African-American communities, a message of survival against the odds....; there is power in language, the power to make oppressors tremble, and more: the power to make them think. (14)

Hip-hop artists use signification to jolt mainstream society into awareness that they are present and willing to do what ever needed to be seen and heard. I agree with Potter that “this might seem in some ways to signal a still *more* essentialized, exoticized blackness [.] I would say instead that it Signifies on white fears about Black culture; its building blocks are stereotypes, and yet the ultimate effect of heaping them up is to render the stereotype untenable” (14). Early hip-hop artists purposefully stacked characteristics of essentialist blackness one upon another in order render stereotypes illogical but cultural unity attainable.

Dwelling among the multicultural locutions within spoken word, the poetry greatly enhances voices of women, which are routinely excised by their male counterparts in commercial

hip hop. Women's concerns, in the context of spoken word, potently argue for equal participation in hip hop culture. Women are evaluated by the content and depth of their poetry rather than external aesthetics. The verbal criteria for authenticity afford women a stronger voice in the culture in a way that does not reduce them to only a few body parts. Also, spoken word permits men to interact in the cultural discourse with women, supplying deft insight and balance to women's space in hip hop that would otherwise be disparaged in commercial industry.

As spoken word harkens to a return to the real, minstrelization causes white rappers to cast themselves in the colors of transgressive blackness through their working class heritage, affiliation with Black and hip hop culture, and Black musical production that makes them palatable to Black audiences. "Blacking up" is how white rappers authenticate their identity. As my comparisons between blackface minstrelsy and the racial demarcation of nineteenth century minstrelsy (see Chapter 3), current white hip hop artists represent a deep psycho-social phenomenon that pierces our collective interpretations of blackness. In this way, tropes of blackness performed by whites redefine whiteness, reinforces the commercialized hip hop definition of blackness, and eschews the intricacies of postmodern blackness. White rappers lengthen the history of blackface minstrelsy in hip hop music by avidly acquiring tropes of blackness to amend whiteness as contemporary and culturally efficacious while also fortifying postmodern blackness.

Furthermore, both spoken word and white appropriation of hip hop expanded the definitions of postmodern blackness. Examples from Moore, Serros, Chavis and 3rd Bass promote intraracial solidarity, cultural authenticity, and social awareness with the purpose of rousing and empowering Black culture through music. Intraracial solidarity creates universal cause and compassion for African Americans of all social and economic conditions. Postmodern

blackness also appeals to perceived spiritual superiority juxtaposed against supposed white authenticity that simultaneously consumes and rejects blackness. The active manifestation of postmodern blackness is social awareness because it recognizes that a large collective voice exacts ripples of reflection in a predominantly white society. Though today's hip hop music scene is largely commercialized, commodified, and homogenized, there remains a remnant of dedicated hip hop advocates who strive to preserve and revitalize the culture.

In light of the need to preserve hip hop culture, one might ask how hip-hop music is relevant to postmodernism and how postmodernism is relevant to the African-American experience, specifically that of African-American youth culture, which is removed from the Civil Rights movement of their parents and ambivalent concerning the history of African-American peoples in general. For a generation that has marginally benefited socially from the struggles of the past, postmodern blackness affords the opportunity to define and redefine African American cultural realities.

Going back to the earlier example of a postmodern blackness through hip hop music, the idea of deconstructing blackness into various parts, proposed by hooks and Boyd, serves the purposes of postmodern blackness because its message of diversity gains legitimacy in the interspersions of differing black experiences. In order for Blacks to create their own identities, postmodern blackness promotes the expressions of a various experiences for all Blacks regardless of social and economic differences to forge a place in America where blackness is seen, known, and understood according to the criteria that Blacks themselves construct. Postmodern blackness, whether exemplified through spoken word or articulated by white rappers, indicates the reconfiguration of Black identity in postmodern America. In this way,

both spoken word and reclaimed hip hop may have found their places on the postmodern continuum.

Appendices

Appendix A

“All Eyez on U” (for 2Pac Shakur 1971-1996) by Nikki Giovanni

as I tossed and turned unable to achieve sleep unable to control
anxiety unable to comprehend why

2Pac is not with us

if those who lived by the sword died by the sword there would be no
white men on the earth

if those who lived on hatred died on hatred there would be no KKK
if those who lived by lies died by lies there would be nobody on wall
street in executive suits in academic offices instructing the young
don't tell me he got what he deserved he deserved a chariot and
the accolades of a grateful people

he deserved his life

it is as clear as a mountain stream as defining as a lightning strike
as terrifying as sun to vampires

there were those who called it dirty gangsta rap inciting there were
those who never wanted to be angry at conditions but angry
at the messenger who reported: *your kitchen has roaches your toi-
let is overflowing your basement has so much water the rats are in the living room
your house is in disorder*

and 2Pac told you about it

what a beautiful boy graceful carriage melodic voice sharp wit intel-
lectual breadth what a beautiful boy to lose

not me never me I don't believe east coast west coast I saw
them murder Emmett Till I saw them murder Malcolm X I saw
them murder Martin Luther King I witnessed them shooting
Rap Brown I saw them beat LeRoi Jones I saw them fill their jails
I see them burning churches not me never me I do not believe
this is some sort of mouth action this is some sort of political
action and they picked well they picked the brightest freshest
fruit from the tallest tree what a beautiful boy

but he will not go away as Malcolm did not go away as Emmett Till
did not go away your shooting him will not take him from us
his spirit will fill our hearts his courage will strengthen us for the
challenge his truth will straighten our backbones

you know, Socrates had a mother she too watched her son drink hemlock she too asked why but Socrates stood firm and would not lie to save himself 2Pac has a mother the lovely Afeni had to bury her son it is not right

it is not right that this young warrior is cut down it is not right for the old to bury the young it is not right

this generation mourns 2Pac as my generation mourned Till as we all mourn Malcolm this wonderful you warrior

Sonia Sanchez said when she learned of his passing she walked all day walking the beautiful warrior home to our ancestors I just cried as all mothers cry for the beautiful boy who said he and Mike Tyson would never be allowed to be free at the same time who told the truth about them and who told the truth about us who is our beautiful warrior

there are those who wanted to make *him* the problem who wanted to believe if they silenced 2Pac all would be quiet on the ghetto front there are those who testified that the problem wasn't the conditions but the people talking about them

they took away band so the boys started scratching they took away gym so the boys started break dancing the boys started rapping cause they gave them the guns and the drugs but not the schools and libraries

what a beautiful boy to lose

and we mourn 2Pac Shakur and we reach out to his mother and we hung ourselves in sadness and shame

and we are compelled to ask:

R U Happy, Mz Tucker? 2Pac is gone

R U Happy?

“Brothers Gonna Work it Out” by Public Enemy from Fear of a Black Planet (1990)

Uh, your bad self
 Help me break this down from off the shelf
 Here's a music servin' you so use it
 Papa's got a brand new funk
 Get down (party for your right)

Huh let's get it on
 Like we said before
 They say the brothers causin' trouble
 Hate to bust their bubble
 'Cause we rumble
 From our lower level
 To condition your condition
 (We're gonna do a song)
 That you never heard before
 Make you all jump along to the education
 Brothers gonna work it out
 And stop chasin'
 Brothers, brothers gonna work it out

Chorus

You got it...what it takes
 Go get it...where you want it?
 Come get it...get involved
 'Cause the brothers in the street are willing to work it out

So many of us in limbo
 How to get it on, it's quite simple
 3 stones from the sun
 We need a piece of this rock
 Our goal indestructible soul
 Answers to this quizzin'
 To the brothers in the street
 Schools and the prisons
 History shouldn't be a mystery
 Our stories real history
 Not his story
 We gonna work it one day
 Till we all get paid
 The right way in full, no bull
 Talkin', no walkin', drivin', arrivin' in style
 Soon you'll see what I'm talkin' 'bout
 'Cause one day
 The brothers gonna work it out
 Brothers, brothers gonna work it out

Chorus

You got it ... what it takes
 Go get it... where you want it?
 Come get it...get involved

'Cause the brothers in the street
 Are willing to work it out
 Let's get it on... we are willin'
 Let's get it on, let's get it on ... we are willin'
 Let's get it on, let's get it on, let's get it on ... we are willin'

Now we are ready if you are ready

In 1995, you'll twist to this
 As you raise your fist to the music
 United we stand, yes divided we fall
 Together we can stand tall
 Brothers that try to work it out
 They get mad, revolt, revise, realize
 They're super bad
 Small chance a smart brother's
 Gonna be a victim of his own circumstance
 Sabotaged, shell-shocked, rocked and ruled
 Day in the life of a fool
 Like I said before to live it low
 Life take you time, time you go slow
 Look here, not a thing to fear
 Brother to brother not another as sincere
 Teach a man how to be father
 To never tell a woman he can't bother
 You can't say you don't know
 What I'm talkin' 'bout
 But one day ... brothers gonna work it out

You got it ... what it takes
 Go get it ... where you want it?
 Come get it ... get involved
 'Cause the brothers in the street
 Are willing to work it out

Let's get it on... we are willin'
 Let's get it on, let's get it on ... we are willin'
 Let's get it on, let's get it on, let's get it on ... we are willin'
 Now we are ready if you are ready

“Who Stole the Soul?” by Public Enemy from Fear of a Black Planet (1990)

Once again this is it
 Turn it up
 Here we go

But this time the rhyme
 Gonna ask who did the crime
 Then let's get down to the nitty gritty
 Like I wanna know who
 Picked Wilson's pocket
 After he rocket it
 Fact he shocked it
 Same kinda thing they threw at James
 An what did to Redd was a shame
 The Black get
 The bigger the feds want
 A piece of that ... booty
 Intentional rape system, like we ain't
 Paid enough in this bitch, that's why I dissed them
 I learned we earned, got no concern
 Instead we burned so where the hell is our return?
 Plain and simp the system's a pimp
 But I refuse to be a ho
 Who stole the soul?

Ain't, no, different
 Than in South Africa
 Over here they'll go after ya to steal your soul
 Like over there they stole our gold
 Yo they say the Black don't know how to act
 'Cause we're waitin' for the big payback
 But we know it'll never come
 That's why I say come and get some
 Why when the Black move in, Jack move out
 Come to stay Jack moves away
 Ain't we all people?
 How the hell can a color be no good for a neighborhood
 Help, straighten me out
 'Cause my tribe gets a funny vibe
 Say I'm wrong for singin' a song
 Without solutions
 All the dancers answer questions
 And try to be the best and
 Let everybody know before I blow
 For the sake of what's right
 I wanna know who stole the soul?

We choose to use their ways
 And holidays notice some of them are heller days
 Invented by those who never repented
 For the sins within that killed my kin

But that's all right
I try do what a brother does
But I'll never know if you're my cuz
That's why I try my best to unite
And damn the rest if they don't like it
Banned from many arenas
Word from the motherland
has anybody seen her
Jack was nimble, Jack was quick
Got a question for Jack (ask him)
40 acres and a mule, Jack, where is it?
Why'd you try to fool the Black?
It wasn't you? But you pledge allegiance
To the red, white, and blue
Sucker that stole the soul!

Appendix B

“Brooklyn-Queens” by 3rd Bass from The Cactus Album (1989)

Verse One: MC Serch

Real cool, cause Brooklyn's cool!
 Friday doin' the last day of school
 Girls steppin' to the mall to swing
 Settin' up dollars for their summer fling
 Cars on the avenue create gridlock
 And there's girls like mad at the bus stop
 Not waitin' on the bus, but waitin' on the cash flow
 Fellas are laughin', gassin' the past hoe
 Girl steps to me and pushes issue
 "That knot you got, is that money or tissue?"
 Feelin' on the bulge, thinkin' it's her own
 I tell her that it's money and she should move on
 She says she's pure from legs to her thighs
 And we should talk over some Chinese and fries
 I tell her to step, but hey that's the scene
 Cause she ain't nothin' but a Brooklyn-Queen

Chorus: repeat 2X

"We are looking for Brooklyn"
 "We are looking for the Brooklyn-Queens!"

Verse Two: Pete Nice

State the rhyme, borough of Brooklyn
 Otherwise known as Crooklyn
 Freaks fortify flesh with gold
 Ears hang trunk, in a slave hold
 Walk past, don't get the time of day
 Played like suede, on a summer sway
 Conversated, till I made her laugh
 Said, "I'm Pete Nice, you want my autograph?"
 Oval Office closed as she heard this
 She said, "From 3rd Bass? I could do this"
 Listen closely, slowly took a swig of intoxicants
 Cause the Brooklyn Queen's a gold digger

Chorus (2X)

Verse Three: MC Serch

Squared away with my digits and tonight's plans
 When I feel a crab grab my right hand
 Slapped her on the back, tried to calm her
 Asking her, "Now what's the reason for the drama?"
 Her next move was straight out of textbook
 "Haven't we met before?" giving me a sex look
 Yo Wisdom, your lyrics are in bad taste
 So I'm forced to give you nothing but the Gas Face
 You better go, for hoppin' on the cab or bus
 Cause you're downtown and you're simply too fabulous
 But get this, ain't this a humdinger?
 She stepped to a retard sportin' a four-finger ring
 Somewhere in the skin tight jeans
 I'm gonna scoop the best of the Brooklyn-Queens

Chorus

Verse Four: Pete Nice

Last exit to Brooklyn I enter
 Carefully the Queen holds my scepter
 Getting numb like a Derelict on scotch
 I'm Dick Lewis, cause baby I'm watchin' you
 scheme on a brother for a knot
 To choose between the have and the have-not
 Do you doubt the shade of vanilla?
 I'll play Elvis and you play Priscilla
 Oh he's no hero, better yet Billy Dee
 Advertise cheap liquor for a fee
 A Brooklyn Queen, rushes Russell Simmons
 That's like Tyson rushin' Givens

Chorus (2X)

[MC Serch] Who's on Prince Paul's cactus?
 'Brooklyn-Queens'
 [MC Serch] Hahaha, yeah check it out
 'Brooklyn-Queens'
 yo, 'Brooklyn-Queens'

"The Gas Face" by 3rd Bass from The Cactus Album (1989)

[MC Serch]
 Aiiyo man, my labelmate, Don Newkirk

Man step to him

[Don Newkirk]

Thanks, Serch!

And now... for the prime minister

Sinister, Pete, N-hi-hi-hi-hi-hice!

Nice, nice, nice

[MC Serch]

Kick em in the grill, Pete!

Verse one: Pete Nice

Gas, past tense, made facially

3rd Bass'll express, KMD

Three blind mice on sight

Zev lover, gave it the first light

A grin shows a trick up a sleeve (huahah)

What a tangled web they weave

Deceivers, stupefied through fable

Say let's make a deal at the dinner table

Put you on tour, put your record on wax (trust me!)

Sign your life on the x

You exit, x-off, but what you really get:

A box of Newports, and Puma sweats (damn!)

Tex feeds and frowns upon emus

To give up gas face he drinks from a thermos

Sub roc cut at you with a clipper

Gas face given, I beg to differ

[MC Serch]

Pete, that was real def man, but I gotta get serious now

Aiyyo Don, step to em again

[Don Newkirk]

Everybody... MC Serch

Verse two: MC Serch

Black cat is bad luck, bad guys wear black

Musta been a white guy who started all that

(make the gas face!) for those little white lies

My expression to the mountainous blue eyes

Then form a face, and shake my skull cap

Dismiss the myth, that evil is not black

But opposite spectrum, this done by red man

With horns on his head, laid down the ill plan
 Got all his helpers, said, make it snappy!
 Tell all the people that their hair can't be nappy!
 Blonde and blue-eyed, or dark-skinned half a "G"
 A disease, created by leprosy
 Don't speak of bleach, bend them to right
 Say, it was night way before the light
 Put aside spooks, Serch leaves a trace
 I've set em correct with the effect of the gas face

[MC Serch]
 Next up Don

[Don Newkirk]
 A special appearance by KMD'S Zev Love Ehhxssss!

Verse Three: Zev Love X

A gas face, can either be a smile or a smirk
 When appears, a monkey wrench to work one's clockwork
 Perkin his brim to the rim of my cup
 Don't tempt me, you're empty, so fill'er up!
 Is I'm talkin coffee or cocoa, is you loco?
 Cash or credit for unleaded at Sunoco
 KMD and 3rd Bass is just ace in the hole
 I mean soul, so make the gas face (huahaha)
 Damn, if looks could kill
 You look like host was a ghost from your grill
 But still, what's the new fed, to recollect
 To our passing phase to facades to Eddie Decker
 For my label reads hood, street might have a tattoo
 Don't pick any card or no rabbit from my hat
 Never a magician if I ever tricked em
 Oh s**t! Another gas face victim

[MC Serch]
 There it is, yo fellas, man
 Why don't you step to the mic, man?

[Zev Love X]
 That's how I kicks it, for 80-deca

[MC Serch]
 Aiyyo, good lookin out don man peace
 Punji, yo who gets the gas face?

[Punji] Little Vic for the gas face
[MC Serch] Tony Dick gets the gas face
[Zev Love X] No gas faces for plugs one two and three
[MC Serch] No gas face for Professor Prince Pa-Paul!
[Unknown] My friend, Tina, gets the big gas face
[Zev Love X] No gas face for DJ SubRoc
[MC Serch] No gas face for KMD
[Pete Nice] Hammer, shut the f**k up! Gas face! Ahuahauh!
[All] whahahaoahh
[Pete Nice] What do we think about Hammer? Haowahwohabhabhabhbhbhb!
[Unknown] G.Y.P.
[MC Serch] Get Yours Posse does not get the gas face
[MC Serch] But P. W. botha gets a gas face
[All] Whoahblblahbha-whooh!
[Unknown] Dante Ross gets the gas face
[MC Serch] Yo stop dissin' Dante on records y'all!
[MC Serch] Elroy, Elroy, Elroy Cohen gets the gas face!
Hahahahahahaha! That's all.

Appendix C

“I’m a Hip Hop Cheerleader” by Jessica Care Moore

I’m a hip hop cheerleader
 carrying hand grenades and blood red pom poms
 screaming from the sidelines of a stage I built
 afraid to part down the middle
 for feminine riddles
 raining words of proverbs
 of prophets who never get heard
 because the microphone is just another phallic symbol
 that allows jack to be nimble
 jack too quick
 leaving Jill with a man who can’t climb a hill
 and a bucket of spit
 she can’t drink for find her reflection
 inside she hides.

inside crooked eyes of amber
 allows her life to be slandered
 if hip hop is conscious
 we must change the standard
 my womb-mate’s been slandered
 i planned her arrival
 of letters and lyrics never sent to those lovers
 who claim that they know her
 but still blow her off as flunky
 not a microphone flunky
 fiending for a quick fix
 no fast cars & hoe tricks
 her mouth matrix is taped
 left her language for rape
 so she ate her words
 and became an instant interlude
 a cute break between the music
 when she was an electric lady
 a black flower rhyme scheme romantic
 a breathe and release tantric with five tongues
 and no one
 understood why her flow was so fast
 asked to slow down
 hesitate—never last
 to the finish I’m gonna win this
 all the DJs gon’ spin it
 when you’re a woman

sometimes all you have is a minute

I'm a hip hop cheerleader
 I buy all your records
 despite the misogyny
 not looking for the blood in me
 respond to me
 I feel molested hip hop fondled me
 I know the conscious brothas follow me
 hollow me with half breaths
 real emcees don't half step
 but I never slept
 took my poems and made food
 put my babies in school taught me
 to wait for no one
 never turn my back from the sun of man
 I know all my fly mommas understand
 got the rifle on my back
 with a mic in my hand
 I'll be the air that you breathe
 I'll be your number one fan
 I'll scream the HEYS
 I'll tolerate all your hoes
 I'm a hip hop cheerleader

there she go
there she goes

self love freed me
 despite all your rhymes with bitches
 I know you need me
 complete thee believe me
 I see you growing in me
 looking out form my belly
 your rhyme schemes are telling
 sang those lullabies to nelly
 walking close to my edge like melle
 doing cartwheels and air splits
 u stage diving into white chics
 when I got your hair pick
 your weapon of choice
 I chose my voice
 'cause I only gotta quarter left
 on this microphone meter
 I got on a short pleated skirt

I'm a hip hop cheerleader

there she go
there she goes...

“Mr. BOOM BOOM Man” by Michele Serros

Here he comes!
distorted bass
nearly three blocks away
I wait
as the mercy of the traffic light
Waitin
n waitin
for it to change
from red to green
so I won't have to deal
with him...
Mr. BOOM BOOM Man.

But my rearview mirror
it doesn't lie
n pumping his system
from my behind
I see his calling card
baby lavender twinkle lights
hugging a chrome-plated license plate
five-digit proclamation:
Double O Bad
coming at me!

A fifty-pound medallion
heaving a hickey-stained neck
closer
to the center of his manhood:
his beeper.
He pulls up slowly...
lowered Nissan mini truck
fill the vacancy on my left
n as the automatic tinted window
makes it slow way down,
I start to wonder
Why
why can't I be like the cool girls
and like the cars that go:

BOOM BA BOOM...?

Dig the way quarters
bounce off vinyl roofs?
Funky, fresh and stooped
they say.

But then a flash
of gold gilded teeth
blinds my thoughts
n Mr. BOOM BOOM
shouts out:

Hey!
Sen-yo-reeeeta!
mamacita!
You speak English?
Hey... YOU
I'm talkin' to you...
aaah, you deaf bitch!

And then
I remember.

I wanna yell out,
Yeah , I speak English,
Pig Latin too
so Uckfay Offay
Mr. BOOM BOOM Man
Take your fade,
n f-f-fade away!

But the light has turned green
n I don't have the time
(or the balls, really)
I take off
FAST
leaving behind
Mr. BOOM BOOM
Bu-foon.

“Enter(f*#ckin)tained” by Nzinga Regtuinah Chavis

You want to be entertained
You want to be entertained
With the bloodstains

That caused my words of pain
 You want to be enter(f*#ckin)tained?

Like promotional ads depicting weapons/you don't know how to shoot
 Or like flyers and CD covers/showing cowards as criminals or punk-ass lovers
 hiding under suspenders/too big to fit in closets
 does the bitch you rhyme of/resemble what you in denial of
 in need of spirituality/but perpetuating criminality/within a hip-hop community
 automatic negative verbal acrobatics/rap industry's traumatic
 mental genocidal suicide/thru rap verbal homicide
 I need poetry as shock therapy to revive me!
 Evil you glamorize/we patronize self-suicide
 Don't need no knife; gun; iron pipe; bat & chain
 (like on the previous cover of a rap magazine)
 When verbal cyanide emanates from the brain
 Perpetratin a lifestyle you should not sustain
 Cuz you just want to *enter(f*#ckin)tain*.
 That was for the punitive rappa n uh/the ho with a flo/but if your' not one
 Then my eyes are distressed/cuz you *dress* like one
 Da positive I caress/but gotta get this sh*t offa my chest.
 Like *cum pouring out of an ass beaten black n blue*
 I disdain hwo you like hearing Niggro words for shock value
 Like a poem with dope words by a whack beat won't sell
 But a whack rap with dope beats sells: real well.
 Or like a female rappa who knows no other/way of selling work w/o her body
 Over-sexy, repelling, smelling (but it's still selling)
 Promotin' punany and dickellect instead of intellect
 Or a rapper who makes me not laugh/who knows not how to create the craft
 Without boring terms like *nigga* and *gangsta*
 Programmed into his and her language to each other
 Your lips form into a mouth-flex/for your next/ego-trip skit
 Like puppets, buttons easily pressed/an audience, missing the message
 While you taint my lines with your cheer/from your reactionary ear/my words are clear
 With this poem you be *enter(f*#ckin)tained* but cook your brain
 With whack-rap killa-gangsta refrains/I maintain: if some of the content/of our music
 is any indication of a people/who were once saved
 then Nat Turner is turning/over in his grave.
 Do you/listen to/the words/you dance to?
 The same tired bullsh*t, why buy & support it?
 Must our music become *sick* for some to like it?
 Record labels/with names that're evil/obsessions with blood & death—that I don't get
 I balk/at your mafia guntalk/your mouth needs some salt
 I'ma fill it with caulk/just B day youngstaz you are
 not the prankstaz who walk/with that fake mobstaz talk.
 You spend you last dollar on the latest CD/called *I KILL ME* on *Negative Energy*
 You man(c) rap artists' pockets phatter/you r new slavemaster

Whose rhymes reveal sickness/hypocrisy in psychology/insanity of mentality
 mental illness/and false reality/giving beatdowns like vigilantes
 The people who died in the crush at City College
 Shoulda gave us more knowledge
 Who'd wanna be heard everyday on Hot 97?
 That sounds (1) boring, and (2) absurd
 I ain't hung up on myself, like that's my word.
 RAKIM/Lauryn Hill/Black Thought/Mos DEF/3rd Message
 Doug-E Fresh/KRS/Bahamadia/Ursula Rucker/Dead Prez
 Erykah/De La Soul/The Roots/The Grandmasters
 Chuck D to Kid Capri/Kool Herc to Kool Mo Dee
 Even Common Sense will tell you/Mo money, Mo cash is redundant
 But it's okay/don't complain/U wanna be *enter(f*#ckin)tained*.
 Come with the real/can't conceal/what I feel
 Even for the "arrogant" poet
 Who entered a poetry slam but lost the contest
 Then challenged the other to see who's the best
 But what is this?!/New rule: I slam/you lose/We Duel?
 What a bullsh*t epidemic poetic precedent!
 Like a fanatic poetic president?
 You actin like a baby/crazy without a bottle
 now you 'bout to topple/just cuz you lost a battle
 Think you the boss?! That slam you lost
 was your friggin Middle Passage/to remind you, it's about the message
 not your flow, your ego, nor the contest!
 Think you hot/but you a poet who forgot
 If actions speak louder than words/then yours do not.
 Some spoken words gotcha goin absurd
 By some who claim to be wordsmiths of the Word
 I be the locksmith like the martial artist
 Who knows the craft/unlockin the fake hold you have
 Over your listener/with your fake wrath.
 SLAMS don't bring reparations
 SLAMS don't win liberation
 SLAMS don't kill MUMIA's death penalty
 Don't let SLAMS cause division among you & me
 While we *entertain* them with our soliloquy
 To the poet and the rapper/to bring this together
 Know the ledge in the lyric/n keep the message in the music
 Buy pozitiv rap
 And (#@X*) a PHAT TRACK IF THE LYRICS ARE WHACK!

“Bitches and Sisters” by Jay-Z from Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse (2002)

(Let's describe a certain female)
 (Let's describe a certain female)
 (Let's describe a certain female)

[Jay-Z]

(Bitch) you know my name and the company I own
 (Bitch) you like my style and you smell my cologne
 (Bitch) don't try to act like my track-record ain't known
 (Bitch) you probably gotta couple CD's in your home
 (Bitch) don't make me say it twice, you acting all up tight
 All sadiddy like, like, like
 You ain't a (Bitch), I ain't no ball player, you ain't gonna get pregnant again
 Hit off with paper, you gonna get hit off and slid off
 Before the neighbors take off to go to work
 So just, take off your shirt, don't hit me with that church shit
 (Bitch) I got a sister who schooled me to s**t you chickens do
 Tricking fools, got a whole Robin Givens crew that I kick it to
 They be hippping dudes, how you chickens move, I be listening to
 (Bitch) (Bitch) (Bitch)
 Don't make me say it thrice, you acting all up tight
 Also diddy like, like
 You ain't a (Bitch), You ain't no better cuz you don't be f**king rappers
 You only f**k with actors, you still getting f**ked backwards
 (Bitch) Unless you f**ked a dude on his own merit
 And not the way he dribbles or ball or draw leverage
 You're a (Bitch), No ma, you're a (Bitch)

(Let's describe a certain female)
 (Let's describe a certain female)
 (Let's describe a certain female)
 Say Jay-Z, why you gotta go and disrespect the women for? Uh

[Jay-Z]

(Bitch) Sisters get respect, bitches get what they deserve
 Sisters work hard, bitches work your nerves
 Sisters hold you down, bitches hold you up
 Sisters help you progress, bitches will slow you up
 Sisters cook up a meal, play their role with the kids
 Bitches in street with their nose in your biz
 Sisters tell the truth, bitches tell lies
 Sisters drive cars, bitches wanna ride
 Sisters give-up the a**, bitches give-up the a**
 Sisters do it slow, bitches do it fast
 Sisters do their dirt outside of where they live

Bitches have niggers all up in your crib
Sisters tell you quick "you better check your homie"
Bitches don't give a f**k, they wanna check for your homie
Sisters love Jay cuz they know how 'Hov is
I love my sisters, I don't love no bitch

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