

[Working Draft: Last Revision: 04-06-2007]

Oppositional Culture, Hip-Hop, & The Schooling of Black Youth

Chapter 5: *Hip-Hop Folk Theories of Social Mobility Without Education: “Drugs, Basketball, & Hip-Hop”*

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*Introduction*

The school of hard knocks narrative is the primary basis of hip-hop's folk theory of social mobility without formal education. As captured by the Jay-Z shoe campaign advertisement, the streets provide an alternative knowledge space where aspiring youth can be mentored by older males, demonstrate their intelligence, and learn the skills needed for future success. Instrumental folk theories of social mobility—stories about how people get ahead in life—is an important component of the “I” in John Ogbu's cultural ecological model of student achievement. Minority folk theories of success and social mobility help rationalize how and why some people are successful in life while others fail. Implicitly, folk theories are a form of ideology, they help justify and legitimize choosing one possible course of action over another. These cultural scripts help define the meaning of success while providing a framework for reaching that definition of success.

Stakeholders in the social development of black youth understandably condemn hip-hop, particularly the “gangsta rap” subgenre, which tends to normalize and/or glamorize drug dealing, sex-trafficking, and violence as profitable or “cool” enterprises. Overall, my stocktaking of hip-hop lyrics substantiates the concerns that depictions of drugs, sex, and murder abound in the music. However, the goal of this chapter is not to critique the habitually hyper-violent, hyper-misogynistic, and hyper-materialist themes in the music. Rather, I explore the discussions of the opportunity structure, definitions of success, role modeling, community and parental beliefs, and general work norms that surround these narratives. How hip-hop's folk theories of achievement imagine black success without the need for formal education is the focus of this chapter. The cultural logic of these activities often go overlooked by critics but hold the key for understanding the contours of an oppositional culture that eschews academic achievement for the streets.

I find that hip-hop's dominant folk theory of achievement holds that black youth who lack athletic and rhyme skills *must* pursue drugs and street crime. According to many of the lyrics, "people like us" have only three viable routes to success: drugs, sports, and hip-hop. This vision of the opportunity structure reinforces claims that education does not lead to success in the adult labor market and helps rationalize the decision to abandon academic achievement. Street stories contribute to an image of economic success that cannot be reasonably obtained through education or legal means. As embodied in Jay-Z school of hard knocks story, drug dealing is often portrayed as the first step towards a lucrative career in hip-hop. Interestingly, while hip-hop lyrics tend to mock working hard at school or regular 9-to-5 jobs, there is a strong work ethic that encourages success in the three spheres through hard work, dedication, and sacrifice.

## *Section 1: Visions of The Opportunity Structure and Social Change*

### *The View From The Bottom*

Taking the role of delegates for the faceless black masses, hip-hop artists actively construct minority folk theories of social mobility. Often referred to as “representing,” lyrics explain “where we’re from,” “what we do,” or “how we do it.” As a kind of folk ethnography, lyrics claim to be accurate cultural records of the black community(ies), ranging from the types of foods blacks like to eat, the local dialect, favorite dances or ways of celebrating. Hip-hop’s lyrical ethnographies extend to the more serious topic of social mobility—how we “make it” or “come up”—to use the hip-hop terminology. Autobiography and second-hand accounts of significant others including friends, family, and neighborhoods are used to describe what opportunities are available for future success, and how black Americans might go about seizing these opportunities.

Because these stories often involve processing the accessibility and success rates of different strategies used by the artists, people they know, and the general “we,” hip-hop purports to be the voice from the margins of society. To borrow Derrick Bell’s (1992) metaphor for race and poverty, hip-hop proposes to shed light on the “faces at the bottom of the well.” Or to reference William J. Wilson’s (1987) take on the so-called black “underclass,” hip-hop claims to represent the challenges, hopes, and prospects of the “truly disadvantaged.”<sup>1</sup> Hip-hop proposes to represent the people of the projects, the block, the corner, the ‘hood, the ghetto, or “the trap.” In doing so, artists provide explanations for the anti-school behaviors of “at-risk” youth, those poor and minority children who are most likely to leave (or be left behind by) our nation’s education system.

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<sup>1</sup> My analyses suggest that white and Latino life in “the trailer park” and “the barrio,” respectively, gets subsumed in the generalized ghetto. “Blackness” and poverty are so conflated in hip-hop that these rare glimpses into white or Latino issues seem to be synonymous with the black underclass.

The view of the opportunity structure in hip-hop is almost exclusively from the perspective on the streets and gritty inner-city corners. While black poverty is real, this perspective of the opportunity structure is a narrow one, as most Americans, black Americans included, do not live in the “ghetto.” Most blacks are not poor and a relative few live in what looks like an inner-city “ghetto.” If professional occupation is the benchmark of middle-class life, more than 50% of black workers are middle-class (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). Based on family income twice the official poverty line, at least one-third of black families can be considered middle-class (Frey, 2003). Despite the representations of childhood poverty that permeate hip-hop, social science statistics show that about 19% of black children (versus 6% of white) live in concentrated poverty, neighborhoods where more than 40% of one’s neighbors are also poor, and these numbers have been improving since 1990 (Jargowsky, 2003). Year 2000 Census records also indicate that about one-third of all blacks live in the suburbs (versus 71% of whites), a relocation that is in part due to the highest median-income ever recorded for blacks. More than 51% of black households reported incomes above \$50,000 (American Demographics, 2001). To be sure, relatively affluent blacks are still confronted with less favorable family, neighborhood, and school conditions than comparable whites (Gosa & Alexander, 2007). But the objective realities provided by official statistics suggest that the dominant hip-hop worldview is reflective of what only a small segment of the black population *might* face on a daily basis. Hip-hop narratives about the opportunity structure tend to obscure the black middle class by conflating the life chances of the poorest black youth as the challenges of most, if not all, black youth.

The dominant image of the opportunity structure is thoroughly bleak. Hip-hop lyrics indicate that drugs, basketball, and hip-hop are the only ways blacks are likely to be successful. These are umbrella categories, as drugs, basketball, and hip-hop are better thought of as clusters

of jobs. Drugs encompass all of the illegal activities of the streets, including robbery, prostitution, gambling, or selling stolen goods. The sum of these street occupations are often summarized as “hustling” for short, but all of these activities are interlinked in the political-economy of the drug trade. Basketball, of course, is only one many professional sports that involve balls, though careers in the National Basketball League (NBA) and National Football League (NFL) are the most common aspirations and destinations for black male youth. And third, hip-hop involves not only being an emcee or DJ, but the entire entertainment industry which surrounds it, including fashion and television.

Hip-hop lyrics tend to send the message that these are the only three ways in which black youth might hope to be successful in life. For example, Flip describes the three options he had available to him, “Look I came from nothing/I was broke as hell/I had three options sports, rap or jail [drugs]” (“Ballers,” *Roy Jones Jr. Presents*). Representing the entire West Coast (the “westside”), Mack 10 explains that there is only two things that “real niggas” do, “[gang]bang or ball...we don’t do shit else...Nigga that’s it, that’s all, what else is there to do?” (“Bang or Ball,” *I Got The Hook-Up! Soundtrack*). The album entitled *Sports, Drugs, and Entertainment* by Cam’Ron encapsulates the worldview expressed in his lyrics, as he applauds those getting rich by killing, selling drugs, rhyming, and pimping women (“Where the Fuck You At”).

### *“Shit Done Changed”: Hip-Hop’s Theory of Intergenerational Change*

The American ethos holds that education is the “great equalizer.” Education provides the concrete skills and eventual acculturation into American ways (e.g., American accent, exposure to cultural norms) that lead to success. As the American Dream goes, education—mixed with a dash of hard work and a tablespoon of stick-to-it-ness—can propel the most disadvantaged

citizen to the heights of American society. Black Americans throughout most of their tenure in this country have been faithful celebrants of the importance of education for upward mobility.

No modern review of black history neglects to detail the black community's strong emphasis on education and learning. In every historic epoch, from slavery, emancipation, Jim Crow, to *Brown V. Board* in the Civil Rights Era, blacks appear to be in a heroic struggle to secure education (Fordham, 1996). Black slaves risking their lives by secretly learning the alphabet; black sharecroppers saving their pittance to send their children to school, or to build their own one-room schools out of logs; and blacks risking fire hoses, police dogs, and lynching to fight for equal education are common examples of this struggle for education. According to the historian Lois Benjamin, "education at any cost" was the rallying cry for generations of blacks. Benjamin (2000: 47) writes:

"Education, an avenue for opportunity that had been blocked during slavery, was regarded as a way to empower, uplift, and serve the Black community and as a principal path to collective and personal upward mobility...Get an education and nobody can take it away from you"

However, based on oral interviews and life history analysis with three generations of black women around the country, Benjamin (2000) concludes that there have been large shifts in cultural beliefs about the role of education in black life, a claim buttressing the research of Ogbu and Fordham (Ogbu, 1974; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1996). Benjamin finds that for blacks of the World War I generation, who were primarily educated by other blacks, education was associated with black resistance—a mechanism of "social reform, uplift, and liberation" (5). Blacks of the WWII generation also vigorously pursued education and training, through the G.I. Bill for example, but envisioned it as a pathway to collective mobility. The civil rights movement of the 1960s, according to Benjamin (2000), sparked a cultural shift involving the flagrant dismissal of white authority and an emphasis on individualism defined entirely by economic success.

This strong emphasis on education as *the* path for individual and collective uplift makes it difficult to believe that a single black youth would say out loud that drugs, sports, or hip-hop—not education—is the way to achieve upward mobility. But as many hip-hop artists quaintly say, “shit done changed” (e.g., T.R.U., “Final Ride,” *TRU 2 Da Game*). According to the voices of hip-hop, there has been a shift away from educational and traditional occupational aspirations to seeing education as unimportant and pursuing crime, rhyme, or sports. Hip-hop artists theorize that the development of the drug economy, a fundamental breakdown in the family, and neighborhood disorganization has altered the once steady rhythms of black life.

The black community of hip-hop’s imagined past (before the 1980s) is envisioned as a peaceful place. All blacks behaved as one happy family, there was no violence or drugs, and children were relatively well-mannered. However, as G-Unit member Lloyd Banks explains, the drug economy is leading many young blacks to dropout of school to pursue drugs/hip-hop:

We gamble on ball courts  
 Keep the paint peelin’  
 You either play ball or rap if you ain’t dealin [drugs]  
 I’m stuck in the past  
 Shit changed since the 80s (What)  
 I know ladies that got babies wit babies  
 Out here its basketball and speedbags [drugs]  
 And guns that’ll stiffin’ you up like freeze tag [the kids game]  
 (“G-Unit Soldiers,” *50 Cent is the Future*).

Banks observes that the aspirations of black youth have changed since the 1980s crack cocaine epidemic. Instead of education, drugs, basketball, and hip-hop are now the major ways of making in the world. There is a hint in Banks’ lyrics that this generational change comes at a cost.

Teenage pregnancy is common (“babies wit babies”) he says. But his nostalgia stops short of condemning drug dealing. In fact, the remainder of song is about the spoils of drug dealing and hip-hop including “houses with TVs hanging from the ceiling[s]” and other economic symbols of success.

The image of sweeping generational change provided by Paris is an example how black life in the past is often remembered. In this excerpt Paris reminisces about the black community in the “days of old”:

Reminiscein' back when I was only a child  
 Back in the days of livin' carefree lifestyles  
 As long as we wasn't caught, bein' bad was cool  
 And we were never at a loss for something to get into  
 Children in the neighborhood, down at the park  
 Sunny days when we played at the old schoolyard  
 Where kickin' it live [carefree partying] was a familiar scene  
 Kenny M. and Big Gene know what I mean

Versus the horrors of black life today:

But nowadays it seems life just ain't the same  
 Everybody's involved in the [drug] game or a gang  
 And when we die, it seem like nobody cares  
 It ain't no love in they cold-hearted stares  
 Thinkin' of payback, of makin' a hit  
 Now Cowboys and Indians become real-life shit  
 And life means nothin' when the heart is cold  
 It ain't the same as the days of old.  
 (“Days of Old,” *Sleeping With the Enemy*)

The drug economy has sparked a breakdown in the spirit or “heart” of the black community, one that has altered changes in the behavior and aspirations of black children. Paris admits that he and his friends were bad at times, throwing rocks or causing trouble at the playground, but nothing like today’s youth. According to Paris, many children only aspire to act like and become criminals.

While Paris links this shift to the burgeoning drug economy and the Republican government policies of the 1980s, he pleads with blacks to resist “blaming the white man.” According to Paris, blacks were once proud “kings” and “queens” but have lost the self-confidence to go beyond selling drugs and killing other blacks. Speaking on behalf of the entire hip-hop generation, Shyheim echoes Paris’ observation. Shyheim refers to today’s youth as the “lost generation.” Reflecting on his decision to leave school to sell drugs, he claims this is part of

a larger generational shift where youth are only interested in hip-hop and drugs (“Life as a Shorty,” *The Lost Generation*).

The theme of a great generational shift often pervades research about the so-called hip-hop generation. Kitwana, who is often cited as the inventor of the hip-hop generation label, proposes a radical cultural shift (“crisis”) in values and aspirations between the Civil Rights and Hip-Hop Eras. According to Kitwana (2004: 77), this generation of youth is overly focused on hip-hop and/or sports: “it is nearly impossible to find a kid on the block who doesn’t think he can be the next Puff Daddy or Master P, Chris Weber, or Tiger Woods.” “Nearly impossible” is an overstatement, but the observation that hip-hop black youth are adopting a different set of priorities is repeated in several high profile works across the ideological spectrum. Black Nationalist philosopher Tommie Shelby (2005), cultural-linguist John McWhorter (2005), liberal correspondent Juan Williams (2006), and conservative writer Shelby Steele (2006) all point to the appearance of the new black folk theories of success.

Social scientists often link globalization, the out-migration of the black middle class, and the resulting economic dislocation and social segregation of the poor in cities to a shift in norms (e.g., Wilson, 1996; Massey & Denton, 1992; Anderson, 1999). Hip-hop lyrics tend to provide more micro-level accounts as to why the folk theory of drugs, sports, and hip-hop now competes with education as the dominant theory of black mobility. According to the hip-hop theory of social change, black youth struggle to make sense of the conflicting messages received from parents and street adults about education and social mobility. These two community forces are explored in order.

*Community Force #1: Parents*

When attempting to explain the changes taking place among youth concerning education and their career choices, parents are the usual suspects. The theory that “irresponsible” parents are not providing sufficient guidance or supervision, or just don’t care, is sometimes used to help explain why black youth may ignore education. For example, Big Stan links the drugs, basketball, and hip-hop worldview to a lack of parental oversight. Reflecting on his own experiences in the streets, Big Stan explains that street adults, not parents, were his role models: “In a world with no hope, struggle to get mine/.../So I was taught my values by bad dudes (uhh)/Hustlers and killers/they taught me wrong from right” (“Walk With Me,” *Exit Wounds Soundtrack*). As such, he believes that a lack of parental responsibility has led to his generation becoming “lost” with “no hope”:

You remember when the kid's dream to get to the top  
Was bein' doctors, firemen, even the cops?  
Look at the kids now, lost, no hope  
To get ahead they plan to rap, play ball, or sell dope (oooooh)  
And if you thinkin' we the problem you wrong  
A generation died at the same time our fathers was born

During an introspective look at his own flaws, Big Stan admits that he physically abuses his girlfriend, the mother of his child. He attributes this to what he learned from his family life: “I’ve watched men beat on my mother my whole life/So when I hit my baby mother I thought it was alright.” The inability of parents to pass on positive occupational goals and gender norms leads Big Stan to conclude that “bad parents are destroyin’ the youth.”

Rasheed implicates a relaxed parenting style when positing why this generation of youth lack “common sense” and are deciding to take the “hard way” in life:

Remember back in the day  
Parents givin' us a thrashin'  
Diggin' in that ass like its some kind of passion  
And now I understand why  
Just watchin' my children growin' up  
Make a hustler wanna cry

(“Children,” *Let The Games Begin*)

According to this hip-hop assessment, children of yesterday were kept on a positive development path through the use of physical punishment. A lack of spanking, beatings, and “ass wupins” are said to foster delinquency among today’s youth. In addition to inadequately disciplining children, hip-hop lyrics indicate that parents are not doing a great job of keeping their children in school and off of the streets. Big Jess of the Unknown Prophets, offers this explanation for why he believes youth are not taking school seriously:

I see some of the kids on my bus  
 They probed to cuss  
 It's like they headed straight to jail to be thrown in cuffs  
 Parents don't take the time to monitor their kids music  
 When most of the lyrics are, explicitly abusive  
 Your Son's got dirty clothes  
 Why you sittin' on low pros? [expensive low profile car tire rims]  
 Sendin' him to school with ragidy hair  
 That's a no-no  
 They need to be playin' with yo-yo's instead of bullets  
 Cause kids these days ain't got enough sense not to pull it  
 They hear it on cd's, they see it on TV  
 In doesn't go in one year and out the other believe me  
 You need to read to your kids and be with your kids, you need to listen to  
 Your kids and feed your kids  
 You need to love your kids and provide for your kids  
 You need to make them know you would die for your kids  
 Yo, I feel that kids look up to us as role-models  
 So we gotta give them somethin' positive to follow  
 So this is for the kids runnin' in the streets at night  
 And for those skippin' class when they know it ain't right  
 (“4 Tha Kids,” *World Premier*)

Big Jess is less than kind to parents who are not reading to their children, investing in their educations, or providing adequate in-home resources that might encourage school success. Interestingly, he holds neglectful parents responsible for allowing children to listen to harmful hip-hop music or watch videos that glorify the streets instead of schools. Big Jess says that because of relaxed parenting hip-hop artists have become ad-hoc role models for other people’s children.

Hip-hop artists who don't envision themselves as street "teachers" and "professors" do not like being role models or alternative parental figures for children. Snoop Dogg rejects the position when he retorts, "Do I look like a motherfucking role model?/To a kid looking up to me/Shit, life ain't nothing but weed and money!" ("DP Gangsta," *Da Game Is To Be Sold, Not To Be Told*). The white emcee Eminem, who jokingly admits to being the "hip-hop Elvis" for "stealing black culture," repackaging it, and selling it to white children ("Without Me," *The Eminem Show*), argues that parents need to stop their children from adopting hip-hop artists as role models. As the only recently successful white hip-hop artist, Eminem is the prime target of critics when white youth adopt the perceived negative values and behaviors of black youth/hip-hop. In a tongue-in-cheek manner, Eminem makes his point by pretending to enjoy his position. He offers the following advice to youth:

Follow me and do exactly what the song says:  
Smoke weed, take pills, drop outta school, kill people and drink  
And jump behind the wheel like it was still legal  
I slap women and eat shrooms [mushrooms] then O.D. [overdose]  
Now don't you wanna grow up to be just like me?!  
("Role Model," *The Slim Shady LP*)

Eminem's self-satire is meant to enrage parents. In being more outrageous than normal, he attempts to free himself from the obligation that youth may emulate the clearly negative behaviors that drive the plotlines of his lyrics.

The fact that hip-hop artists often hold parents responsible for listeners adopting the anti-educational messages in their music became clear to me during a late night episode of the FoxNews program the O'Reilly Factor. A segment entitled, "Is Gangsta Rap Hurting America's Children?" featured an intense confrontation between a Philadelphia elementary school principal, hip-hop artist Cam'Ron, and then Jay-Z business associate Damon Dash. The exchange between this principal and these hip-hop icons is telling.

Concerned about hip-hop's negative influence on his impressionable students, the principal asks Cam'Ron whether or not he believes his music is "positive" or "negative." Cam'Ron responds that he is simply a "ghetto reporter," he rhymes about the realities today's youth see everyday in their neighborhood: "I'm not a liar. So what I tell you goes on in my album, that's what goes on on the streets of Harlem." Next, Cam'Ron and Damon Dash claim that they are in fact positive influences on youth, as their music promotes "entrepreneurship." The show collapses into a 3-way yelling match between O'Reilly, Dash, and Cam'Ron, as O'Reilly questions the assertion that street hustling, drugs, and dreams of a hip-hop stardom could be considered a "positive influence." O'Reilly, like the principal, doesn't believe that albums like Cam'Ron's *Sports, Drugs, and Entertainment* is a positive message for youth.

After the yelling subsides, Cam'Ron defends himself by shifting responsibility to the parents and schools. When asked again if he "cares" that his music might have a negative influence on student performance, Cam'Ron offers the following response:

I care, but you've got to talk to their parents. Why are they in school? They have to have parents to be in school. Somebody sent them to school. If that's the case [if they don't have parents], homeboy [to the principal], whoever's minding the television -- you need to have parent-teacher conferences with your students. Whether it's they aunt, they cousin, they sister, somebody's sending these kids to school. They're not 11 years old staying at home by their self. I can't go home and talk to these students. You need to have more parent-teacher conferences if you have problems with your students (FoxNews Transcript, 2003).

Cam'Ron apparently overlooks the idea that everyday he "talks" to students about the value of drug dealing and pimping through his lyrics. Likewise, Cam'Ron also seems aloof that addressing a school principal as "homeboy" might be interpreted as exactly the type of disrespect for school adults that the show was about. Instead, Cam'Ron argues that parents and/or teachers are solely responsible for whatever problems are exhibited by youth, even if it may be a result of listening to hip-hop.

The belief that black parents in particular are taking a relaxed role in the academic and social development of their children is a finding in local studies (e.g., Ogbu, 2003). While most parents appear to want their children to do well in school, these studies question whether black parents are actively involved or invested in the children's educational experiences. According to Ogbu, black parents, even middle-class black parents, utilize a “laissez-faire” or hands-off approach to managing their children’s schooling. That is, while they believe education is important, they are not involved in the daily management of their children’s education experience. Instead, they expect schools to be in control of their children’s development. Ogbu posits that this hands-off approach leaves the flood gates open for black youth to develop oppositional beliefs about the value of education. In the void, black youth may come to believe that alternative routes to success (sports and entertainment especially) are more appropriate for blacks than schooling.

Recent articles in the *Boston Globe* (Robertson, 2005) and *Time Magazine* (Steptoe & Arbor, 2004) implicate the parenting styles of black parents as contributing to the black-white achievement gap. In these articles white parents are described as “bulldogs” for their children’s education, they attempt to leverage every advantage in order to elevate their children’s education. In contrast, black parents interviewed didn’t know the names of their children’s teachers. Adding to the belief that parental dedication to education may be waning, a provocative and incendiary article appearing in *USA Today* reports that black households are decreasing their spending on books while increasing their spending on expensive Cognacs and luxury cars (Young, 2004).

Despite these highly publicized and borderline inflammatory stories of black parents asleep at the wheel, large-scale, national analyses typically fail to pick up on any negative

parental influence. Analyses of the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS: 88) (one of the largest datasets available for the connections between parental behavior and students outcomes) by Cook & Ludwig (1997) reveal no racial differences in levels of parent/adult involvement of 10<sup>th</sup> graders after controlling for basic socioeconomic variables. These data show black parents working hard, involved and attempting to be in control, and doing their best to keep their children in school and achieving.

Some of these descriptions of parents that don't read to their children, spend their money on expensive consumer goods instead of books, and allow hip-hop (and/or television) to raise their children echoes controversial claims made by Bill Cosby in recent years. In his nationwide tour of black churches, local colleges, and community centers, "America's Favorite Dad" Bill Cosby has berated poor/black parents for "managing their children with a cell phone," and failing to keep track of their children's schoolwork. Calling for the return of personal responsibility, Cosby has been quoted as telling audiences to make their children "pull up their pants" and adopt "African American literacy" over the "yo-yo what'z up" dialect of hip-hop (Tucker, 2004: 11).

By many accounts, Cosby's harsh words continue to be met with roaring applause and support, at least by those attending the rallies. NPR journalist and historian Juan Williams (2006) observes in his pro-Cosby book *Enough* that this no holds barred, "keeping it real" approach may be energizing blacks around the country to reemphasize the importance of education. At the same time, Michael Eric Dyson (2006) dedicates a little under 300 pages arguing that "Bill Cosby is Crazy" and "the black middle class has lost its mind": a clever summation of his point that Cosby is "blaming the victim" and engaging in "class-based warfare" against the black poor. Dyson argues that Cosby's attack on black parents is a less humorous reinvention of Lewis'

(1966) *culture of poverty thesis* and Moynihan's (1965) *The Negro Family*, which focuses on black pathologies and disorganization instead of racism and structural barriers.

The argument over the extent to which black family life is contributing to weak educational norms is unlikely to end anytime soon. But it is interesting to note that in this debate, some of what is coming out of the hip-hop lyrics sounds more like Cosby than Dyson. The uncomplicated link between youth's educational choices and "bad" parenting made by the artist Benefit, "Raise your children wrong...And they'll walk a crooked path difficult and long" ("Blind Following," *B.E.N.E.F.I.T.*) could easily be on the soundtrack for Cosby's movement. Or Lil' Tee's rhyme to "Place the blame on our parents for not raisin' us right/It's obvious because we feel that misbehavin' is right" ("Another Robbery," *Ready 4 War*) fits nicely into Cosby's rhetoric.

### *Mama Tried But Failed*

It is "obvious" to Lil' Tee and Dr. Cosby that parents are to "blame," but hip-hop lyrics are divided on whether parents are responsible for youth eschewing education to seek success on the streets and/or hip-hop. Stories about role modeling older hustlers on the corner or dropping out to pursue a hip-hop career often describe the Herculean efforts of black mothers to stop their children from leaving school. Many hip-hop artists say that their mothers yelled at them, beat them, and/or reasoned with them to stay in school and to obtain a 9-to-5 job. ESG, for example, recalls that he "caught an ass whooping" and had "all his privileges taken away" when his mother discovered that he had quit school to sell drugs ("First Brick," *City Under Siege*).

The single black mother appears in hip-hop as a stoic figure. Unlike black fathers that are described as cowards or worse for their inability to support their families or for leaving

altogether, these black mothers are honored for their attempts to keep the family together; to keep children off of the streets and in school; and to put food on the table by working two jobs. Above all, these mothers are said to provide unconditional love for their children that end up in a life of drugs and crime.

The failed but honorable attempt of black women to protect their children is a reoccurring theme, especially in many of Tupac's songs about black youth. His lyrics reveal how drug addiction and poverty can complicate the attempts by black mothers to keep their children on a positive developmental path. In what he calls a "ghetto nigga's lullabye," he takes the role of a black boy contemplating how to make it out of poverty. Tupac describes his mother and father:

Mama tried to raise me, but had too many babies  
Papa was a motherfuckin' joke  
Used to find dope in his coat  
And nearly choked when he'd tell me not to smoke  
(“Ghost,” *Tupac Resurrection*)

Although “mama tried,” her attempts are appreciated but considered futile by Tupac as he describes the aspirations of wealth that black youth acquire from older black males on the corner. “On the corner, where the niggaz slang they crack...I daydream about the dope world.” By the end of the song, Tupac is out of school and fully enrolled in the school of hard knocks, learning a life of crime. Similarly, Keith Murray describes how his mother tried to raise him “right,” but was consumed by her drug addiction. When he was 15 years old, his mother disappeared on the streets. In a tragic turn of events, Murray finds himself on the same drug corners, selling crack to his mother (“My Life,” *It's a Beautiful Thing*).

Master P, who says he was raised by killers and drug dealers, recounts how much pain he caused his biological mother by selling drugs on the streets. According to Master P, his mother would cry and plead for him to do something else with his life. It was older gangsters and big homies (older males) that told Master P that he should pursue a legit job in hip-hop:

And all the old G's tell me all the time  
 P get out the dope game  
 Stick with your raps & go legit  
 And it wont be long till ya make your motherfuckin hit  
 ("I'm the Funkiest," *Understanding the Criminal Mind*)

Master P ignores the pleas from his mother, but the direction he receives from street adults gave him the motivation to pursue a career in hip-hop. Though mothers are held in high esteem in the lyrics, the power of a mother's love is no match for the lure of the block.

The same conflict is present in narratives about quitting school and refusing to pursue careers outside of hip-hop. The autobiographic tale of Phife Dogg details the conflict that occurred when he decided to dropout of high school to pursue his hip-hop career fulltime. His West Indian mother begins at the beginning of the song asking Phife what he is going to do with his life. She asks:

Malik, what are you gonna do with your life?  
 Are you gonna stand on the corner?  
 Are you gonna sit around with your friends?  
 You wanna wear new sneakers, you wanna have nice clothes  
 How 'bout gettin a job?  
 How 'bout finishin school?  
 How 'bout gettin your life together?  
 Don't you wanna prosper, don't you wanna be somebody?  
 ("Beats, Rhymes & Phife," *Ventilation: Da LP*)

However, Phife Dawg/Malik has a very different path in mind for becoming successful in life, one that doesn't involve the linear mobility path of school to work. Being somebody, in his eyes, involves hip-hop, and he is willing to (temporarily) sell marijuana in order to fund his demo tape.

Adolescence involves a pulling away from parents, at times directly challenging their authority. As a youth culture, we should expect hip-hop to contain a certain amount parent-child conflict. Songs like "Parent's Just Don't Understand" (*I'm The DJ...He's the Rapper*) by Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince, for example, that detail ubiquitous conflict between parents and children about appropriate school clothes or battles over use of the family vehicle fall into this category. But this conflict over the importance of education and whether the streets and hip-hop

are really ways to make it in life goes far beyond youth exuberance and the desire to make one's own way that defies parental authority. The stories told by hip-hop lyrics represent a generational dialogue over the meaning and source of black success.

Lyrics by MC Eiht support my claim that what is occurring is a larger generational struggle between black youth and parents over the role of education in upward mobility. MC Eiht dedicates "Hold Up" (*N' My Neighborhood*) to the masses of black youth engaged in this conflict with parents: "We sending this one out right here/To all the young thug and young hustlers out there/You know I'm sayin', grown up with their moms strugglin' in the hood." The family situation that he describes is a familiar one: single mother in poverty who is trying desperately to keep the family afloat by working several jobs. According to MC Eiht, his mother offered the following advice about the importance of education: "Get A's in school/Keep your head up high and don't run with the fools'/That was the lesson, always listen to moms/Bible she totin, always quotin' from Psalms." Out of respect, MC Eiht pretends to listen, but says he, like other black youth, has figured out a "better way" to get paid that doesn't involve working demeaning jobs for whites. By the second verse, MC Eiht is skipping school to sell drugs and is able to bring home money to help with the bills. His mother is hurt by his decision leave school. The song offers an apology to all single mothers concerned about their children working the streets. Although the street path is "hard sometimes," MC Eiht promises his mother that he will use his street knowledge to launch a legal career in hip-hop, and will use his money to make up for the stress he caused her.

*Community Force #2: Role Models for Success*

The desire to gain employment in the street economy is the most common reason given for dropping out of school and avoiding the world of regular work. Often, hip-hop songs detail how criminals appear to be the only people in their network of intimates who are not poor. Street corner drug dealers or the pimps are the ones, the only ones, who are portrayed in retrospective narratives as being on their way to making it.

The lack of adequate role models, especially parental male role models, is part of the reason for leaving school and pursuing the drug trade. Jay-Z's autobiographic tale of turning away from real school to the school of hard knocks begins when his father leaves. Jay-Z recalls seeing his mother receive little pay for working hard in a regular job, which convinced him to work in the streets ("Get By Remix," *Get By 12*). Similarly, Flea explains that he turned away from school and working a regular job because of not having a positive male role model in the home, "Left my books to be a crook, left my job just to rob/.../I sold drugs 'Cause all I ever knew were crooks and thugs" ("Dead in a Year," *Don't Give a Damn*). Single mothers appear to do their best, but in the absence of significant others (fathers) who are successful in legal jobs, the informal teachers on the street corner are said to be the purveyors of the new black achievement ideology.

Indeed, the scarcity of adult males doing anything legal to make a living is a prominent observation in hip-hop lyrics. In explaining why he said "fuck school," Master P lists his role models: "Frank Nitti, Scarface, and John Gotti/Real gangstas, that's bout it, bout it" ("Gangstas Make The World," *TRU 2 Da Game*). According to what hip-hop artists say, street characters are primary force behind spreading the folk theories of crime and/or hip-hop. The conflicting

messages sent by parents and street characters is a common topic, but a song by Ludacris does a good job in capturing what these stories say about this conflict.

On the track “Diamond in the Back” (*Chicken-N-Beer*), Ludacris chronicles the thought process of a ghetto boy weighing his mother’s advice against what he sees on the corner. To better understand what this song is about, it is important to note that Ludacris is using a well-known 1970s R&B sample as the song’s title and chorus to drive the narrative: “I wanna (diamond in the back)/I wanna (sunroof top)/I wanna (diggin' the scene with a gangsta lean).” A “diamond in the back” refers to the diamond antennas characteristic of expensive Cadillac cars in the late 1970s early 1980s. The back window of the car is diamond shaped, thus wanting a diamond in the back is shorthand for wanting to own a Cadillac and live the life of a hustler. This sample comes from the 1970s song “Be Thankful for What You Got” by William Devaughn. In the original song, Devaughn proposes that one doesn’t need to have a fancy car to feel important. Devaughn sang that people should “thankful for what you got/Though you may not drive a great big Cadillac/Diamond in the back, sunroof top...You may not have a car at all/But remember brothers and sisters/You can still stand tall.” Similar to what funk artists like Earth, Wind, & Fire or Sly & The Family Stones were suggesting, the message of the original song is that you don’t have to be rich or a superstar to feel important. Ludacris updates this song, and in the process, demonstrates how much has changed since 1974.

In the first verse, Ludacris rhymes about the familiar story of being a youth and seeing drug dealers and pimps drive around in Cadillacs:

It's hard growin' up lookin' at drug dealers wit' all this paper [money]  
Wonderin' how I can get me some  
My family's strugglin', I'm buggin', sittin' on my porch  
So confused, chewin' on some bubblegum

Ludacris says that drug dealers and pimps were the only people with money. As such, these characters became his role models. Although his mother warns him about the dangers of pursuing this lifestyle, the stress of poverty is too much for Ludacris. In his explanation of wanting to live the street life, he offers two reasons why he is willing to disobey his mother. First, that he wants the expensive Cadillac *now*, and the second, that money is important for peer status:

I'm sick and tired of ridin' public transportation  
 Been patient waitin' on my set of wheels  
 I'm willin' to do what it takes, whatever the stakes  
 In order to get myself some dollar bills  
 It's too many holes in my socks, and I'm ready to box [fight]  
 Anyone tellin' me I need better shoes

To make money, Ludacris decides to make “some cheddar” by “borrowing” money from the corner store, that is, to rob the local grocery. Ludacris receives a serious beating from his mother after she finds out about his criminal activities.

The last verse of the song is a conversation between Ludacris and his mother, but it can be seen as an intergenerational dialogue between the hip-hop and civil rights generations about their differing views of the opportunity structure and crime:

Why can't I walk with a limp mama[be a pimp]? Wont be no drama [no problems]  
 For goodness sakes, I'm just a kid  
 Had to get my whoopin' in fo's, I was just a po'  
 Like there's no remorse for what I did  
 Gotta learn the hard way, when runnin' them streets  
 How some just creep, really just to eat a meal  
 ...  
 Man, I gotta earn for a livin', aint nobody givin' me nothin'

According to Ludacris, although he regrets his criminal activities, he has little choice but to “rob and steal.” For subsistence, to have a meal and earn a living, he says that he is going to become a pimp. Although he knows it is illegal, he ends by saying “I'm adjustin' to my environment.” The streets are the only tenable script for upward mobility that Ludacris sees, and this observation is repeated ad nauseam in hip-hop. While Ludacris makes no quams about the illegality of pursuing

street enterprises, crime is “just the way of the world,” how poor black youth are able to escape grinding poverty.

The message to stay in school and stay away from the streets provided by mothers is an important gesture, but hip-hop lyrics indicate that older males with wads of cash and nice cars drown out the cries of mothers. Roslyn Mickelson’s distinction between abstract and concrete educational values helps explain why street hustlers (and now rappers) may win this contest for the eyes and ears of “confused” youth like Ludacris. Mickelson (1990) contends that students’ perceptions about education are multilayered and more complex than just thinking school is important or unimportant for future success. According to Mickelson, while all youth tend to espouse the “abstract” American credo that education is important, what predicts academic achievement and the decisions students make is “concrete” evidence that education will pay off for “people like me or people like us.” Concrete attitudes are produced by seeing the importance of education in the lives of one’s network of intimates: family members, friends, and people around the neighborhood. This kind of lived experience provides habitus for school success, an almost natural outlook that hard work through education is how a person “like me” will be successful in life. The remaining abstract beliefs about the importance of education appear to be mediated by the concrete experience of seeing mothers barely survive in legal jobs while street adults cruise around in luxury cars. Given the contrast, it is understandable why Snoop Dogg, and hordes of black youth just like Snoop, would tell his teacher, “I wanna be a motherfuckin hustla” when I grow up (“You Betta Ask Somebody,” *Doggystyle*).

## *Section 2: Street Dreams: The Folk Theory Drugs and The Streets*

### *Crime Pays!*

It would seem that all Americans would like to be financially well-off, and the desire to get rich is not absent from the hip-hop imagination. In contrast to the message that school does not pay off, the streets are where people get rich. To communicate this belief, artists simply invert the familiar adage about crime by saying “crime pays”:

Abel: “Nothin' pays like crime pays” (“Count Your Ones,” *Most Wanted*)

Inspectah Deck: “My crime pays, deep in the metro, nines [guns] blaze” (“S.O.S.,” *Wu-Tang Killa Bees The Swarm Vol. 1*)

Apache: “As a youth, I was proof that crime pays” (“Wayz of a Murderahh,” *Apache Ain't Shit*)

Based on supposed firsthand knowledge of previous crimes, or theatrical scenes that portray the artists engaged in crime, lyrics often indicate that illegal activities on the streets lead to financial success. Achievement on the streets is connected to getting rich beyond one’s wildest imagination. The lucrative financial returns from crime is part of a complex view that getting rich through crime is a symbolic form of resisting white oppression—this is explored in the next chapter. But focusing now on the physical and material wealth said to spring from crime, Beanie Sigel provides an example of how much money can be made on the streets:

Stack chips like Connect Four  
While you prick's try and whip try and stretch more  
Charge less for, that ain't the program  
Get ya lessons from the Snowman  
Like Pillsbury I get the doe man  
 (“It's On,” *The B. Coming*)

Descriptions of wealth in hip-hop often include this kind of creative metaphoric word-play for material wealth. To translate, “snowman” is an illusion to having so much powdered cocaine that you can build a snowman with it. Or, the condition of wearing so many diamonds (“ice”) that your body is as “cold” as a snowman. The “Pillsbury Dough Man” means being made of money

or dough (“doe”). To be like the Pillsbury Dough Man means to be literally made of money. And “stacking chips” is an image of having casino chips stacked high, like all the red and black chips in the children’s board game Connect Four. Hip-hop artists go through great lengths to think of new and creative ways to describe the wealth associated with drug dealing, but the underlying message is the same: crime pays.

On a track celebrating the spoils of murder and drug dealing, Cam’Ron, McGruff, Big L, and Mase Murda describe how crime leads to the “American Dream”:

Crooked corrupted criminal crime boss with cream [money]  
 Cocaine hustler, blowing out the brains of busters  
 Being my mansion, chilling inhalin’ the ganja [marijuana] smoke  
 Counting mad cream [money], weighin’ tons of coke  
 Guarded by thugs and Rottweilers [dogs]  
 I flood the streets with drugs and clock dollars  
 Niggas get plugged when my glock collers  
 Skunk [marijuana] smokers, philly and aisle ripper  
 Cristal [champagne] sipper, I’ve been a willy [successful] for awhile nigga  
 ‘Gruff got hoes, the man with all the nachos [money]  
 Expensive hot clothes, drop top Rolls [Royce]  
 East coast west coast fiends overdose  
 ‘Gruff get the cream [money] with my team and I’m ghost  
 (“American Dream,” *Children of the Corn: American Dream 12*)

This hip-hop version of the American Dream includes lots of money, a big house in the hills, endless drugs, expensive drinks, women, clothes, and cars. The rest of the song provides greater detail into the specific items they have supposedly obtained from drug dealing. They have the best vehicles: Lamborghinis, Jeeps, and Rolls Royces—all equipped with flat screen televisions; they possess exotic women: Argentinean and Asian women who bathe them. If there is any doubt that legal careers would bring more money, Big L rhymes on the track that he has more money than the rock icon Bruce Springsteen. To recall, Cam’Ron’s defense on the O’Reilly Factor is that his music encourages “entrepreneurship.” Verse after verse on this track, indeed song after song in the sample, encourage street “entrepreneurship” by associating crime with symbols of

wealth. It would require an entire manuscript to present the varieties of riches that get associated with drug dealing and illegal crime, but the point that crime is imagined as a lucrative enterprise.

When considering why this folk theory of success might be so seductive to youth, it is important to note that these stories of wealth suggest that little initial investment is needed to get rich. In comparison, entry into professional occupations takes a great deal of time to convert human and cultural capital through educational attainment to gain. Tuition, books and fees, and the opportunity cost of earning little or no money during one's studies requires a large financial commitment, especially for students without college funds or scholarships. Becoming a doctorate level sociology professor, for example, typically requires five years of graduate education. Best case scenario, an aspiring sociology professor would be well into her thirties before earning a substantial amount of money (the median income for a black Ph.D in 2004 is about \$73,000 per year; Blacks In Higher Education, 2005).

As recounted by hip-hop artists who claim to be former or part-time drug dealers, becoming a drug dealer requires little or no start-up capital. More, a savvy youth who drops out of school can allegedly become a millionaire before peers finish high school. The "dropout to shine narratives" discussed in Chapter 1 involve 13 and 14 year olds already owning homes and cars. Similarly, Yukmouth describes high-school age youth being arrested with "hundred G's" [more than \$100,000]...niggas be ballin' [living a lavish lifestyle] like a doctor, or a surgeon" ("City of Dope," *Thugged Out: The Albulation*). Of his own experience Scarface says: "I'm seventeen around millionaire, goin' for mine" ("Geto Boys and Girls," *Resurrection*). Compared to the low pay associated with Mcjobs, drug dealing is often presented as an obvious economic choice. Billy Bathgates makes this point when he scoffs at participating in a job program for

youth, “I’m here to make a mil[lion] off of fifteen bricks [of drugs]/I rob for, can’t see me workin’ for Job Corps” (“Bathgate Freestyle,” *The Professional 2*).

Anyone willing to work hard, risk danger, and master the codes of the streets has the potential to make millions before age 18, at least according to the lyrics. As such, drug dealing is often referred to as the “fast life.” Fast cash, fast cars, and fast women are the benefits of the fast life. However, the fast life is also literal. The lyrics make it clear that the streets are dangerous. The threat of incarceration and/or death is always around the corner in hip-hop narratives involving drug dealing and crime. The artist Abel explains his take on the occupational hazards of street entrepreneurs. After being sentenced to a life sentence for selling drugs, carrying guns, murder, and pimping women, Abel is allowed to give one last address to the judge and court. He calmly states that “life in the fast lane, die quick/No matter where you from, bust ya guns, when niggas ‘bout that real shit” (“Count Your Ones,” *Most Wanted*). In this last defiant statement to the court, Abel says this is the risk he took and expresses a defiant pride in seeking danger as a form of “keeping it real” (staying loyal to the streets).

The cinemagraphic scenes of millionaire drug dealers engaged in high-speed shootouts with the cops and Columbian drug lords also contain a subtext about time-orientation that may be incompatible with educational success. With the fast-life comes a carpe-diem, “live for the moment” attitude that discourages thinking too far in advance. Based on the acceptance that black youth don’t live long lives, there is little need to be overly concerned about death or going to jail. Shyne provides this view when he encourages other blacks to do anything they want:

Burn blocks, bust your guns, rock your minks [fur coats] with flare  
Live for the moment, fuck atonement  
Explain to God when you see him  
Niggaz, we only live once  
 (“Spend Some Cheese,” *Shyne*)

Master P echoes this sentiment when he explains, “I live for today and tonight so nigga fuck tomorrow” (“Assassin,” *The Assassin*), while Tupac exclaims, “I give a fuck about tomorrow” (“Fuck All Y'all,” *R U Still Down*). Delaying gratification, saving money to attend college, or gradually climbing the occupational ladder does not mesh well with this view of life.

### *The Streets and Becoming “Hood Rich”*

These extreme tales of wealth certainly appear to glorify the financial aspect of drug dealing. The risk of jail or death tends to add a spine-tingling air of danger and intrigue to these otherwise rote gangster tales of money, guns, and women. For the most part, these are not warnings against getting involved with the street life.<sup>2</sup> A notch down from millionaire drug dealers with yachts and vacation homes is the concept of being “hood rich.” Hood rich implies having enough money to drive a fancy car, flash wads of cash at the bar, and flaunt jewelry, but nothing more. The cute expression “ghetto-fabulous” possesses an analogous meaning. Hood rich is based on relative status deprivation: rich as compared to those in the “hood,” public housing projects, or the “ghetto.” Kanye West differentiates between being really wealthy, like white folks, and hood rich as compared to poor blacks: “Yeah I've been broke/Now I'm good bitch/I ain't no Kennedy/But I'm hood rich” (“My Way,” *Get Well Soon*). The detailed description of hood rich offered by the Big Tymers captures this level of success:

I got swine on the seats (Oh Yeah)  
 24's on my feets (Oh Yeah) (Lil Ones)  
 Lets thump in my ride (Oh Yeah)  
 And mommy stay fly (Oh Yeah)  
 Boy I'm the neighborhood king (Oh Yeah)  
 Y'all know it I'm a cost your king (Oh Yeah)  
 I mean I say ya love my style (Oh Yeah)  
 I throw parties buck wild (Oh Yeah)  
 Daddy I'm the number 1 stunna (Oh Yeah)  
 And I shine every summa (Oh Yeah)

<sup>2</sup> As I show in Chapter 8, there are morality tales in hip-hop. In what I refer to as “hip-hop parables,” the dangers of the streets are used to warn against dropping out of school and dealing drugs. But these are not the norm and appear to have gone out of style in the early 1990s.

Boy know I have to change my paint (Oh Yeah)  
 Cuz that stock shit stink (Oh Yeah)  
 Ey,Ey, Re-do the inside (Oh Yeah)  
 25 inch rims in tide (Oh Yeah)  
 I keep them strapped and shy (Oh Yeah)  
 New Benz cause mommy so fly (Oh Yeah)  
 ("Oh Yeah," *Hood Rich*)

Enough money to drive a car with custom interior seats, custom paint job, and extremely large 24-25 inch rim tires; enough to buy his women new clothes; and enough to throw wild parties, is an apt description of being hood rich. The Big Tymers say this small amount of wealth is enough to be famous in their neighborhood. Driving around in a pimped out ride in the summer makes one a "stunna" and "neighborhood king," both indications of being popular and admired.

Getting hood rich through drug dealing is said to bring this high status level, even if it doesn't bring millions of dollars. A person with a car and extra spending money is likened to a "ghetto star." C-Murder offers a blunt description of ghetto stardom:

Two baby mommas, four kids, three mack elevens [guns]  
 Three cars, about thirteen boo's [girlfriends without his children]  
 I'm just a ghetto superstar  
 On parole, convicted felon known for 187's and 211's [various crimes]  
 A young nigga down to do whatever  
 ("Closin Down Shop," *Bossalinie*)

Although he has three cars and is popular in his neighborhood, he still works hard to support his children, their mothers, and his various other girlfriends. To earn "street fame," C-Murder is obligated to spend most of his money on others, especially women, as ghetto stars earn their street fame from lavish spending habits. The artist C-Note describes how much cash he lays out to maintain his reputation:

Put that ice [diamond watch] up on your wrist, nigga snow it  
 Put that bang up in your trunk [loud car stereo speakers], nigga glow it  
 Got that lean nigga, pour it (po' it up) [drink expensive liquor]  
 Cause it ain't everyday a black man free and you know it  
 You gotta ball and get it all, through eternity  
 Stop by your mama house, kick her down a hundred G  
 Yo' that's the type of nigga I be, for realer I be  
 I'm balling with the Clover, cause the Clover's in me  
 I done made a million dollas, off of street fame

So you can never take away, my fucking street name  
 Now-a-day's, it's Playstations in Ferrari's  
 But back then, it was Hoopties and Atari's  
 We still shot calling, got them screens falling  
 Got them screens crawling, to all my niggaz balling  
 ("Keep Ballin," *Street Fame*)

Although he claims to have made a million dollars through crime, a conservative estimate would suggest that he has spent at least this much on protecting his street name. Diamond watches, sports cars with loud car speakers and video game systems, liquor, money for his mother—all of this to prove that he has made it. C-Note also comments that he feels obligated to spend it all while he's out of jail on parole.

The stories told about ghetto stardom, street fame, and hood wealth provide some insight into the lure of the streets despite its obvious risks. Criminals who aren't millionaires still appear to be relatively rich, as evidenced by their lavish spending on consumer goods. The local status benefits for drug dealers appear to buttress the view that the streets are more likely to create success than staying in school and working a regular job.

*Crime as Survival: You Gotta Eat, You Do What You Gotta Do*

On the low end of the glamour spectrum, the street economy is said to provide the basic necessities of life: food, shelter, and clothing. This category of hip-hop songs acknowledges that a life of crime is dangerous, may not pay much, but is necessary because few other viable opportunities exist for black youth. Instead of thrill, the focus is on survival. While this variation on the drug dealing narrative does not "glamorize" crime through fast cars and fast women, it does the work of legitimizing and justifying criminal ways. Snoop Dogg expresses this view when he instructs that it's okay to kill and pimp women in order to survive and escape poverty:

On the real my nig, you got to, got to get the loot  
 And if you got to shoot to get the loot  
 Then I guess you got to do what you gotta do  
 But know this, fa sho [for sure] this, its somethin' for realler

From a fifty cent nigga to a thousand dollar nigga  
Fuck George Bush, the army, and the G.I.  
Nigga this P.I., until I D.I.  
(“Break a Bitch Til I Die,” *Duces 'N Trayz...The Old Fashioned Way*)

To get the “loot” (money) and become rich (“a \$1000 nigga”), he says he’s willing to pimp women (“P.I”) until he dies (“D.I”). Snoop rejects the prospect of joining the armed forces, signaled by the G.I Bill, as a potential alternative to pimping and shooting guns.

To communicate the belief that criminal activity is necessary for survival, the discourse surrounding crime is often cloaked in the language of food, eating, and hunger. Those uninitiated to the simileic and metaphoric language of hip-hop might mistake these conversations to be about cuisine or diet, when in actuality, food is used to frame discussions of crime, social mobility, and financial success. The basic need to fulfill one’s hunger provides a justification for doing anything, no matter how extreme. A person has “to eat.” In hip-hop, the verb to eat signifies getting money: the “cream,” varieties of cheeses (e.g., “cheddar,” “feta”), “nachos,” “cabbage,” “cake,” or “pie,” to name a few. Those who aren’t making money are described as “starving.” The drive, hustler’s ambition, or will to obtain money is referred to as being “hungry.” And those who are hungry are justified in doing anything to satisfy their appetite. A “meal ticket” is a route or mechanism for getting ahead. Making a good living or beginning to amass wealth (e.g., cars, women, and jewelry) is described as getting “fat” (“phat”). Although being hungry is usually thought of as an individual characteristic, hunger and needing to eat is described as a collective trait of black youth represented in hip-hop. The dominant folk theory is that black youth are starving in the streets and crime is one of the only meal tickets.

Hip-hop lyrics explain that youth are starving and are willing to resort to illegal activities to eat. Shabazz the Disciple, for example, discusses how “Brooklyn niggas get down,” that is, what they are like, what motivates them, and most importantly, what they are willing to do get

money (“Brooklyn Bullshit,” *Brooklyn Bullshit/Bail Money 12*”). Shabazz The Disciple warns potential visitors about coming to Brooklyn, “Me and my Brooklyn niggaz, we be robbing to eat/Cause [Mayor] Giuliani will have a nigga starve in the street...A Brooklyn nigga from the streets without a goddamn thing to eat.” As such, The Disciple explains that Brooklynites will do any crime to get paid. The Cocoa Brovas and M.O.P say that residents of Brooklyn, which they refer to as “Bucktown U.S.A.,” will “rape and rob like they want to” because “were dogs, gotta eat” (“Bucktown USA Remix,” *Bucktown USA 12*”). In the Chicago, The Speedknot Mobstaz explain that, “it's kill or be killed, hussle or die/You gotsta take the pie, momma didn't lie” (“Crook County,” *Mobstability*). Because their neighborhood is filled with “crooks, gangbangers, killers, and slangers,” they warn to stay away from “the Chi, it's just risky as hell.” In the south, Big Ed writes about robbing to feed his children: “My pistol is pointed right between your frown/Nigga get down on the fuckin’ ground/With my kids, gotta eat, rob everybody around” (“Uh Oh,” *The Assassin*).

### *Does Drug Dealing Really Pay?*

Hip-hop songs have a lot to say about the copious returns to the streets, especially as compared to the lack of returns from formal education and regular jobs. At minimum, drugs provide enough to eat. But all three descriptions of the economic returns to drug dealing may be unrealistic. At the aggregate level, the United Nations estimates that the global drug trade in 2003 alone was over 323 billion dollars, with 44% of that (142 billion) being spent in North America (Pollard, 2005). It is estimated that 832 million is spent on illegal drugs every year in New York alone (Zill & Bergman, 2005). Overall, illegal drugs are big business. And this says nothing about the millions spent on drug enforcement, prison construction, and prevention programs. However, few data sources exist on the individual profitability of street level drug

dealing that drives the plotlines of many hip-hop songs. Simply put, drug dealers do not usually file taxes.

Economist Steven Levitt (2005) puts a figure on the profitability of drug dealing in his book *Freakonomics*, and his estimates are intriguing. His rhetorical question, “Why do drug dealers still live with their moms?,” is a funny yet succinct statement about the small amounts of money typically earned by street level drug dealers. His calculations are based on detailed records spanning four years of drug deals by the Black Disciples gang in Chicago.<sup>3</sup> During the pinnacle of the crack cocaine trade in Chicago, the records show that the top gang leaders made over \$100,000 per year when not incarcerated. However, those closer to the streets made considerably less. Street officers who manage the street level workers only made \$700 a month, translating to about \$7 per hour. The so-called “foot soldiers,” those involved in hand-to-hand transactions and therefore most at risk of being incarcerated or killed, earned only \$3.30 per hour. Levitt makes the following conclusion about the economics of drug dealing:

The gang’s wages are about as skewed as wages in corporate America. *A foot soldier had plenty in common with a McDonald’s burger flipper or a Wal-Mart shelf stocker.* In fact, most of J.T.’s [the primary informant] foot soldiers also held minimum wage jobs in the legitimate sector to supplement their skimpy illicit earnings....The problem with crack dealing is the same as in every other glamour profession: a lot of people are competing for a very few prizes. *Earning big money in the crack gang wan’t much more likely than...the high school quarter-back playing in the NFL* (Levitt & Dubner, 2005: 103-105; emphasis added).

The finding that the “most dangerous job in America only pays \$3.30” (Levitt & Dubner, 2005: 104), much less than minimum wage, makes hip-hop’s negative talk about working at McDonalds and other regular 9-to-5 job quite ironic. Levitt, an economist, struggles with the seemingly illogical choice risking death for so-little money. He posits that drug dealing is much

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<sup>3</sup> The records of their drug trade were maintained by a gang member who utilized his college degree in business to handle the gang’s finances. One of William Julius Wilson’s sociology students happened to be studying the gang, and received the records from his primary informant.

like the lottery, people still play the lottery despite the astronomical odds: “if the prize is big enough, they will form a line down the block just hoping for a chance” (105).

### Section 3: *Hip-Hop Dreams: The Folk Theory of Hip-Hop*

#### *From Gangster to Gangsta Rapper*

Getting rich like white folks through drug dealing and crime on the streets is not guaranteed, although as some hip-hop lyrics suggest, it provides the possibility of getting rich. Based on Levitt's calculations, getting rich from drugs, then retiring to a tropical island is the stuff street dreams and Hollywood films are made of. The descriptions of becoming hood rich, or making just enough to survive is more likely an accurate assessment of how much money is to be made in the streets. But an extension of the folk theory of drug dealing is notion that the streets are just the first step towards a lucrative hip-hop career.

For those who can't play basketball, crime is presented as the first step in getting rich through hip-hop. As Jay-Z's hard knock life story entails, the path to stardom involves being a petty street dealer, getting a record deal, becoming a platinum selling artist, then maybe even a high-level executive in the music industry. The folk theory of going from the streets to hip-hop has been recently memorialized on the big screen via the Academy Award winning film *Hustle & Flow* (2005). The plot follows the trials and tribulations of a broke, southern pimp and petty drug dealer played by Terrence Howard. The chorus from the movie's score, "It's Hard Out Here For a Pimp," performed by 3 6 Mafia, covers the back-story:

You know it's hard out here for a pimp (You ain't knowin')  
When he tryin' to get this money for the rent (You ain't knowin')  
For the Cadillac's and gas money spent (You ain't knowin')  
Because a whole lot of bitches talkin' shit (You ain't knowin')

As far as pimps go, Howard's character is a pitiful one: no fancy clothes, his car is disrepair, he wears only a thin gold chain, and his women talk back. His life is not ghetto-fabulous. On the edge of a nervous breakdown, the pimp decides to follow his dreams of becoming a hip-hop artist. Howard purchases an old electronic keyboard from a crack addict, a few microphones

from the pawnshop, and uses fast-food Styrofoam beverage cup holders to build a sound studio in his rundown house. With one of his prostitutes singing the hooks, Howard pours his heart and soul into his songs, using his experiences as a pimp as the subject matter for his album. Though he has to “hustle,” work hard and sacrifice to make his dream come true, by the end of the movie, he has a hit record and is well on his way to becoming rich and famous.

Not too surprisingly, many in the black community were outraged by the movie. That the movie attempts to humanize pimps and create sympathy for black men who exploit and abuse black women enraged parents, critics, and some black actors. But as with hip-hop lyrics, the focus on the seeming glorification of pimping came with ignoring the movie’s folk theory that a street education leads to a shining career in the hip-hop industry.

Referred to as “graduating from the streets,” the implication is that street knowledge of crime, learned in the school of hard knocks, is a type of convertible resource recognized by the mainstream music and entertainment industries. That is, the skills, relationships, and dispositions that are learned on the streets are useful for getting into the business of hip-hop. The Roots explain the meaning of graduating from the streets while making fun of it: “Gangster, valid dick-torian, graduate of I dare you” (“Rolling with Heat,” *Phrenology*). Graduating valedictorian from the streets means being acknowledged by all as a real gangster—an authentic masculine guy with sexual ability and a willingness to be violent. At “I Dare You University,” knowing how to physically handle one’s self with a gun (“heat”) is a requirement. Craigy T rhymes, “In order to “graduate from di University of Hard Knocks” you have to know “gun academics” (“Murder,” *Red Star Sounds Presents: Def Jamaica*). Having graduated by selling drugs, shooting guns, and/or pimping women, the graduate supposedly is ready to pursue hip-hop, fashion, and perhaps movies.

In describing the path that brought them from conditions of poverty to a lavish lifestyle of champagne and private planes, hip-hop artists recount beginning as street criminals. Being a street hustler prior to becoming a wealthy hip-hop star is part of the autobiographical story of Jay-Z, whose story is perhaps the best known in hip-hop. The analysis reveals that Jay-Z's story is not unique, as hundreds of artists claim to have studied in the school of hard knocks before becoming hip-hop artists. Jay-Z, 50 Cent, The Notorious B.I.G., T.I, Jadakiss, Memphis Bleek, E-40, Ludacris, to name just a few of the big names, all claim to have earned their street credentials before becoming hip-hop artists. As C-Loc describes, selling crack cocaine and murdering immediately preceded their big break: "we went from slangin' birds, and droppin' bodies on the curb/to sellin' words, platinum, that's how it happened" ("Sickness," *Da Halocaust*). The South Park Mexican claims that he "just got out the county jail two months ago/Now I'm in the studio" ("Boys On Da Cut," *Time is Money*).

Despite their claims of not wanting to be role models for youth, hip-hop artists are implicitly providing a blueprint for upward mobility: drug dealing and street crime, then hip-hop. As Carter (2005) observes, hip-hop artists are often the only visible adults that have achieved success, so the achievement narratives they provide can easily become perceived as the "black way" of making it. Boyd (2002) is blunter when he says hip-hop artists are the new H.N.I.C, the new "head niggas in charge." According to Boyd (2002: 88), hip-hop artists are powerful because they establish the norms of the "come up" in their music, that is, how one achieves upward mobility. For black youth aspiring to make it in the world of hip-hop, following in the footsteps of many of hip-hop's heavyweights involves street crime as the stepping stone for becoming a star.

*Hip-Hop as an Alternative to the Streets?*

While many songs revolve around the belief that crime is the only way, hip-hop careers provide a potential route for escaping a life of crime. The hip-hop industry is imagined self-reflectively as one of the few routes to success besides hustling in the streets. For those who are not talented in sports, the dream of making it as an emcee or DJ is said to be the only thing keeping black youth alive. Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation in the 1970s and early 1980s presented hip-hop as an alternative to the deadly gang violence in Brooklyn, New York. The dance battle or rap battle was created as a replacement for the gun or knife battles (Chang, 2005). Hip-hop appears to also serve as an alternative way to make money.

Hip-hop, like sports, can be the meal ticket for escaping the violence and other dangers of one's neighborhood. Based on the premise that hip-hop or the streets are the only options available, artists often recount that they would be doing crime if they weren't doing hip-hop. In fact, the desire to avoid going back to the streets provides motivation to work especially hard at maintaining their success. King Sun makes this point when he says,

I'm makin' stacks [money] and in one smack I'm breakin backs [working hard]  
That's why I'm slammin like a cell door [working hard]  
Slammin, what the hell for?  
If I couldn't rhyme, then I would sell raw [cocaine]  
("Get Down With Da Get Down," *Strictly Ghetto EP*)

At the same time, the lyrics often give a sense that hip-hop isn't really an alternative to the streets: it is simply an extensions of the streets. The lessons learned from the school of hard knocks, such as preemptive violence, are said to apply in hip-hop as well. Thus, having prior experience with killers, dealers, and hustlers prepared many artists for the challenges of the record industry. Kyleon, for example, comments that working in the hip-hop "game" is "no different" than pushing drugs ("Good Ole Luv," *Boyz-N-Blue*).

Artists also claim to have never given up their previous career as street criminals. Instead of being an alternative to the streets, artists say they that they continue to live the street life while being hip-hop artists. In this representation of hip-hop, making music is simply a part-time job used to supplement the otherwise lucrative returns from the streets. Apparently unconcerned that the Internal Revenue Service and/or the police might be listening, some hip-hop artists claim that they are using hip-hop as a “legit” job only for washing or laundering their drug money. T.I.’s conception of being a “trapper,” that is, a drug dealer and rapper, embodies this idea. Street hustlers are said to engage in several activities. In the trapper paradigm, hip-hop is just another hustle, another way to make money. Cormega explains that he is both:

I don't give a fuck, nigga  
Rapper slash Drug dealer  
Slash I bust my gun, nigga  
Slash your face with a rug [gun], nigga  
What's the meaning  
("Verbal Graffiti," *True Meaning*)

Indeed, his album aptly entitled *Hustler/Rapper* details how he is still a criminal at night while being a hip-hop artist by day. Cormega warns that he is still a killer, thus rival artists and industry executives should think twice before crossing him.

Fashioning one’s self as a gangster and gangsta rapper owes to both financial and social status reasons. Hip-hop artist Chris Ward explains why he works both as a drug dealer and hip-hop artist:

Screens lit, greens lit, in a new BMW  
That's where the topic changes, to uh who's who  
Everybody know I'm Chris Ward playa, but who is you?  
And what's so funny, not only these niggaz these butches hate me  
Mad 'cause they can't date me, make me or break me  
I got street smarts, that's why I use my muscle and mind  
Even though I rap, I still hustle and grind  
Right quick I get a white brick, cold I'm busting it down  
'Cause on the Southside, its a must that we shine nigga  
("Dirty Southside," *Year of the Underdawgs*)

Using his “street smarts” learned in the school of hard knocks, Ward says that he can make even more money if he continues to sell cocaine while doing hip-hop. In addition, continuing to sell drugs also helps maintain his street reputation or street fame. He feels obligated to stay in his old neighborhood of South Houston, Texas, as he drives around smoking marijuana and watching television in a new BMW. Doing so shows that he still loyal to his hometown after becoming a hip-hop superstar.

However, as Chris Ward’s lyrics indicate, staying close to the streets simultaneously preserves reputation while fueling jealousy and anger. The street citizens can become jealous or interpret the display of wealth as an insult against those barely surviving. This situation creates a dilemma for hip-hop artists. Failing to stay close to the streets may result in claims of betraying the streets (and decreasing record sales), while hanging out on the same corners requires still living by the codes of the streets. C-Murder discusses this problem. He says that he used hip-hop as a way out a life of crime, but finds himself still living by the gun:

Already paid my dues for a robbery  
Just cashed a check for 200 G's  
Left them hoes alone to pursue my dreams  
I told them haters don't play no games  
Got a bunch of bout it mother fuckers screamin' my name  
Left the life of crime for the life of rhyme  
With every move I make its bulletproofs with nines  
You don't wanna go to war with me  
(“Making Moves,” *Life or Death*)

Although he has already earned his street credentials through crime, he is drawn back into the street life by “haters” that question his street authenticity. As such, C-Murder says he continues to carry a gun, wear a bulletproof vest, and travel with a large crew in order to protect himself. When C-Murder doesn’t continue to frequent the same corners and clubs, he is accused of “selling out” or being a fraud. In the language of hip-hop, this is considered being a “studio gangsta,” a person who rhymes about the streets but doesn’t live the street life.

The artist D-Shot warns how gangsta artists who give up their street ways are no longer welcomed in their old neighborhoods:

You got ya ghetto pass revoked cause you ain't real  
If you didn't get to steppin' you was gettin' killed  
Rapper, slash street hustler  
They both the same, a buster is a buster  
Ain't got no chance to revive yourself  
Get that buster out ya soul and ask God for help  
("Blowin' Hot Air," *Money & Muscle*)

Having one's "ghetto pass revoked" implies being labeled as inauthentic or othered. Any previous street credentials are taken away, thus the hip-hop artist is vulnerable to physical violence. The fear of being disowned by the streets results in artists saying they still engage in street crime while living in swanky Hollywood mansions or South Hamptons bungalows. But it also appears to contribute to the never-ending legal troubles experienced by hip-hop artists, even those who don't tout the criminal lifestyle. Puff Daddy's gun possession charge is a prime example.

The supposed and sometimes real continuing criminal activities of hip-hop artists are eclipsed by the real criminal connections between hip-hop labels and organized crime. On the West Coast, *DeathRow Records*, the previous home to artists including Dr. Dre, Tupac, and Snoop Doggy Dogg, is alleged to have maintained strong connections to LA's Blood gangs. Founder and former CEO Marion "Suge" Knight accumulated a reputation for "negotiating" recording contracts at gunpoint, dangling artists off of buildings, and perhaps even orchestrating the murders of both Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G (Ro, 1998). In 2006, Knight filed for bankruptcy and resigned from the label after the courts awarded Lydia Harris \$107 million in damages. According to Harris, her husband Michael "Harry-O" Harris, a convicted drug "kingpin," provided the start-up capital for the label, but was cheated out of his part ownership by Suge Knight (Rodriguez , 2006).

On the east-coast, the connection between the streets and the lower tiers of the hip-hop industry is exemplified by the similar troubles of *Murder Incorporated Records*, the home of artists such as Ja Rule and hip-hop songstress Ashanti. Label head Irv “Gotti” Lorenzo and his brother were acquitted money laundering in late 2005, but convictions of low level employees suggest that Murder Inc. served as a shell company for laundering drug money for New York “kingpin” Kenneth “Supreme” McGriff (Ivy, 2005). Also, Gotti has been accused of arranging (failed) attempts on the life of 50 Cent, in retaliation for negative lyrics (“dis records”) about Ja Rule. Interestingly, the prosecution wanted to introduce song lyrics detailing the label’s criminal activities, but this evidence was ruled inadmissible by the courts. The close connection between crime, drugs, and hip-hop suggests that music can be another criminal enterprise, not an alternative to the streets.

### *Does Hip-Hop Really Pay?*

The folk theory of hip-hop as being one of the only viable routes to success for black youth holds that this career path will lead to untold fortunes. The wealth amassed by hip-hop artists like Shawn Carter (“Jay-Z”), Master P, or Sean Combs (“Puffy/Puffy Daddy/ P Diddy”) serve as prominent examples of how a music career can project once poor black youth into the upper echelons of society. The lyrics already described in this study provide a sense that those who leave school to pursue a career in hip-hop supposedly become rich. The constant barrage of lyrics about money, cars, mansions, and jewelry certainly suggest that most, if not all, hip-hop artists are multi-billionaires. The current hip-hop fad of “making it rain” with money, that is, the art of carelessly throwing money in the air to mimic the effect of rain, provides the impression that musicians are literally covered in money. As an extension to the music, hip-hop artists regularly appear on MTV *Cribs*, a television program that claims to provide the viewer with an

intimate look into their lavish lives. As evidence of their fortune, hip-hop artists give private tours of “their” mansions, driveways filled with luxury vehicles, and refrigerators filled to the brim with \$500 bottles of Cristal Champagne.

The images of hyper-wealth constructed by, within, and surrounding hip-hop would seem to indicate that only a sucker would pursue education over hip-hop. However, the empirical data casts doubt on the hip-hop rags-to-riches folk narrative of upward mobility. Despite the view in hip-hop that education doesn’t pay, labor market data shows just the opposite. In the year 2003, the median income for all college graduates with a 4-year college degree was roughly \$50,000. The average college dropout earned around \$35,000, while high school graduates made about \$31,000 (Sahadi, 2004). These numbers indicate significant financial returns for staying in school, but this is only half the story. Blacks earn a premium for staying in school. Current figures indicate that blacks with four year degrees earn *twice* as much as black high school graduates. Across race comparisons show parity between black and white four year degree recipients—black college grads make just as much as white college grads. At the doctoral level, black Ph.D’s typically earn *more* than their white peers, \$73,000 versus \$65,000 per year (Blacks In Higher Education, 2005).

These median figures indicate that more education usually equals more money, but the typical college graduate could never afford to live the hip-hop lifestyle. However, can hip-hop artists even afford to live the hip-hop lifestyle they promote? How much money do hip-hop artists really earn? It is impossible to interrogate the details of individual contracts among artists or their bank accounts, but estimates provided by the hip-hop artist advocacy group The Rap Collation are telling (Day, 2000). Based on their estimates of a *favorable* recording contract, they estimate that a successful hip-hop artist, one that is able to sell 500,000 units (a “gold

record”), only makes \$19,333 on the album after paying taxes, labels, producers, promoters, and scores of others. Assuming that the artist has signed a fair contract and is able to recoup some of the profits on their second album (based on the anticipated success of their second album), the Rap Coalition estimates that the gold selling artist would have made \$75,000 for about three years of total work; this amounts to \$25,000 per year or \$12 per hour.

Another appraisal of the music industry provided by rock star Courtney Love, the widow of Nirvana guitarist Curt Cobain, reinforces the belief that the billionaire image may be a mirage. Using her insider knowledge of the music industry, she estimates that even a platinum selling artist (one million albums sold) who is given a one-million dollar advance would be lucky to clear \$45,000 at the end of the day (Love, 2000). Love explains how the million dollar advance quickly disappears as artists are usually required to pay for their own recording and promotion cost, managers, and lawyers. While the artist only makes \$45,000, according to her estimates, the record industry would have grossed \$11 million dollars even after spending millions on advertising and manufacturing costs. Ms. Love likens the situation to modern-day “sharecropping,” where artists are de-facto slaves trapped in cycles of debt despite having sold millions of records. Her point is illustrated by the bankruptcies of multi-platinum acts like hip-hop/R&B group T.L.C or soul singer Toni Braxton.

Like the Hip-Hop Coalition’s assessment, Love’s estimates are based on high benchmarks of success. But these high levels of success are unlikely. Using the industry’s own data, Love reports that while over 32,000 new albums are released every year, only 250 usually sell more than 10,000, of which 30 albums across *all genres* go platinum. How many of these 30 albums could reasonably be categorized as hip-hop/rap is unclear. But even assuming that all 30

were hip-hop albums, equating to a watershed year for hip-hop, this would at best provide 30 chances in 32,000 to make \$75,000.

These are rough estimates and averages, but these numbers provide a very different take on reality than what is typically provided for in the billionaire hip-hop image. There is much money to be made in the music business, but the vast majority of this wealth appears to be concentrated in the hands of those away from the cameras—lawyers, advertising executives, and production managers. These are all jobs requiring education. Hip-hop lyrics tend to channel the hopes and aspirations of black youth into the relatively few, relatively low paying jobs on the microphone while ignoring and/or shunning the very education that could help propel more youth into well-paid entertainment positions.

*Section 4: Hoop Dreams: The Folk Theory of Sports*

The folk theory that sports is a probable route for upward mobility completes the trio of options said to be available to black youth. The role of sports in the educational trajectories of black students, especially black males, is an important aspect in the oppositional culture literature. In both the low-income Capital High School and affluent schools of Shaker Heights, Ogbu writes that the low effort syndrome does not extend to athletic participation (Ogbu, 2003; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In these studies, black males are heavily invested in sports and envision themselves as making a living playing professional basketball or football. For Ogbu, participation in sports is not necessarily a bad thing. Ogbu and Fordham (1986) observe that high achieving black youth often use sports to protect themselves from negative peer sanctions. At the same time, the focus on sports can evolve into a youth or community culture that degrades educational achievement while promoting that the belief that athletics are the only way for blacks to be successful in life.

Of the folk theories of success, hip-hop has the least to say about sports. This can be attributed to the fact that artists are actively engaged in hip-hop while rhyming, and regularly rhyme about their past or continued participation in the drug economy. But when hip-hop lyrics talk about sports, they involve the view that athletic achievement is one of the only ways for black youth to make to become successful in life. Hip-hop lyrics indicate that when sports careers do not materialize, the streets or hip-hop are the only viable options available for black youth. Reflecting on why black youth “must” hustle and grind in the streets, Black Menace and Threat invoke the drugs, basketball, and hip-hop paradigm of opportunity. “Ghetto kids” resort to crime because “everybody can't be Michael Jordan and Shaq/that's why these ghetto kids stuck/.../Gotta do what I know how/and grind to get mine, hustle to live” (“Hustlin' 4 Nothin',”

*Mo Drama*). Black Menace and Threat see no other option once sports are taken out of the equation. Threat explains that he did have a regular job, but quit because it didn't pay enough money. As such, Threat says that black youth are "stuck" and will most likely end up in jail. In his words, ghetto kids are leaving the "school yards" for "the yards of Angola (a Louisiana prison)."

The ability to play basketball or football is described as natural talent or ability: either you "got skills" or you don't. Thus, the sports option is not available to everyone. Others contend that they are just too tough to play professional sports for a living. Akinyele, for example, portrays himself as too much of a bad boy to play sports. "Runnin' around for a scholarship ain't even my style man" ("Exercise," *Vagina Dinner*). Instead, he makes a living through a combination of hip-hop and crime. According to Akinyele, crime and murder is his "sport" of choice. Therefore, if you see him with a baseball bat, he is about to assault someone, not on his way to the ballpark: "The only time I slide and run, is after a murder's done/I get ghost [run] before the homicide [police] come!" Likewise, Memphis Bleek says that only the toughest ex-street hustlers make it in hip-hop. Those who did not graduate from the school of hard knocks, by selling drugs and murder, should stick to pursuing less tough, less masculine careers in sports: "Niggas keep runnin' to this rap shit, You kna' mean?/Like y'all built like that, Ya'll niggas betta pick up a basketball, or somethin'/Ya'll niggas ain't ready for this shit" ("Hustlers," *The Understanding*).

The sentiment that professional sports are one of the few routes available mirrors what is found in research examining the occupational beliefs of black youth. Survey research supports the observation that black youth, particularly black males, possess an honest belief that professional sports is a viable occupation choice. The Northwestern University Center for the

Study of Sport in Society finds that two-thirds of black teenagers (ages 13-18) believe that they will become professional athletes. For comparison, only about one-third of white teenage boys believe they will make it big in the professional leagues. Similarly, in a survey of young black males (age 13-19) in Los Angeles and Atlanta, Reese (2004) finds that 43% wanted to be either professional athletes or entertainers. In a recent study of oppositional culture among black high school students in a California, Conchas' (2006) finds that while low-income black boys are somewhat engaged in school, they place a higher emphasis on working hard in sports than in school. According to Conchas (2006: 56), these black boys believe that professional sports and entertainment is the "appropriate" route to success. While they aspire to go to college, post-secondary education is simply a way to the professional leagues. For the boys in his study, a college degree is only something to "fall back on."

Professional black athletes are highly visible symbols of success in post-Civil Rights America. Black male athletes dominate the ranks of two sports in particular. More than 80 percent of players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and 70 percent of the National Football League (NFL) are black (Ryan, 1998). Professional sports can be the stepping stone into the nation's political and business elite, as many black success stories have begun through college and professional sports (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1998).

However, the fact that professional sport is often presented as the only other legal means besides hip-hop constructs an extremely narrow range of opportunities. Many black youth appear to be gambling on professional sports as the route to upward mobility, but the actual chance of playing in the big leagues is quite slim. It is estimated that only 1 in 10,000 high school athlete will participate in *any* professional league, while the numbers for basketball are more astronomical. The odds of playing along side Kobe Bryan or Latrell Sprewell in the NBA is 1 in

50,000 (Ryan, 1998). With the rising cost of post-secondary education, excellence in sports is often imagined as a way for disadvantaged students to finance a college degree. However, making the transition from high school to post-secondary sports is also unlikely, as a 2005 NCAA study shows that only 5.8% of all high school seniors end up playing in college (Zirin, 2006). This estimate includes “walk ons,” athletes who just show up and audition for the team, so the number of athletes that are recruited through scholarships is likely to be much smaller.

Gaston (1986: 377) provides a sharp appraisal of the view that sports is a realistic goal for young black males:

The realities projected by the media make the young black male's dream of becoming a professional athlete seem far more feasible than envisioning himself as a member of a surgical team at a major hospital. Therefore, rather than perceive himself as an M.D., the young black male sets his sights on the NBA and the NFL. *Ironically, if the hours spent preparing to get into the NBA or NFL were spent preparing to get into medical school, the odds of the young black male becoming an M.D. would be significantly greater than of his becoming a professional athlete.* (Emphasis added).

Although Gaston challenges the influence of the “media” in general, his sharp critique of the sports dream instead of educational investments for professional occupations extends to hip-hop's predominant view of the opportunity structure.

The stories told by hip-hop artists do not present athletic success as a way to pursue academics. Rather, playing ball is another way to get rich besides crime. In real life, it is unclear whether or not anyone *really* expects black athleticism to be accompanied with black academic success. Despite the praise of “scholar-athletes,” colleges and universities have been accused of promoting anti-intellectualism and preparing black athletes to fail academically. Poor graduation rates for black athletes are one indication that athletic programs may be emphasizing the “athlete” role over the “scholar.” Tracking the incoming class of college athletes from 1997 to 2003, Eitzen (2006: 142) reports that after six years, female and white athletes have higher graduation rates than their non-athlete peers. In stark contrast, black males, who are concentrated

in basketball and football programs, are not leaving college with degrees. Only 48 percent of black male football players and 42 percent of black male basketball graduated within six years. The numbers were 61 and 48 percent for white male football and basketball players respectively. These are overall estimates. Isolating the analysis to the most successful teams (those that won national tournaments) suggests a trade-off between winning and academics. For example, three of the four schools that made the “Final Four” men’s basketball team in 2004 had graduation rates below 33%. Several teams in the larger playoffs failed to graduate *any* players during this timeframe. For disadvantaged black males, sports can be a way out of the neighborhood, but as these numbers suggest, whether athletics are being used to foster a sincere commitment to scholastic excellence is suspect. The phenomenon of “going straight to the pros,” skipping college altogether to play in the professional leagues, further short circuits the already tenuous connection between athletics and education.

The opinion that young black males invested in pursuing professional sports to the point of disregarding the pursuit of education excellence has been a reoccurring concern in the debate over black achievement. “Black conservative” Shelby Steele (2006) notes how excellence in athletics (and music) is treated differently in the black community than academic success. He argues that the post-Civil rights era is marked by a black identity that holds white racism and a lack of opportunities responsible for black academic failure. At the same time, though, black athletes (and musicians) are expected to succeed despite white racism. According to Steele (2006: 66-67), the most disadvantaged black boy is expected to meet “standards of excellence in dribbling” on a “pockmarked basketball court with the netless and bent hoop.” Although black males are channeled into athletic success and taunted for failure on the court, Steele claims that

no such expectation exists that the same disadvantaged black boy can or should strive for scholastic excellence.

*The Connections Between Basketball, Hip-Hop, & The Streets*

The career paths of the drug dealer, pro-athlete, and hip-hop artist converge in interesting ways. I have already explored the connection between the streets and hip-hop. The permeable boundaries between hip-hop and sports can be seen in the large number of professional athletes that moonlight as hip-hop artists, and hip-hop artists attempting to enter sports. As MC J-Zone observes of this inner-occupational mobility: “Every ball player wanna rap and every rapper wanna ball” (“A Friendly Game of Basketball,” *A Friendly Game of Basketball 12*). NBA stars including Shaquille O’Neil, Ron Artest, and Allen Iverson have all released hip-hop albums. San Francisco 49er wide-receiver Brandon Lloyd (“MC B-Lloyd”) is a hip-hop artist in the off-season. James Allen, the former Houston Texan running back, shocked fans when he retired in 2003 to focus on his hip-hop career under the alias “MC Mersilis.” Indiana Pacers star Ron Artest angered NBA owners and fans alike when he asked for time off during the regular session to promote his debut album in 2004.

Full-time hip-hop artists take offense when professional athletes attempt to become hip-hop artists. For example, Kool Keith has less than kind words for NBA basketball players crossing over into the world of hip-hop (“N.B.A.,” *Spankmaster*). Using the chorus of “P.I.S.S. on the N.B.A.,” Kool Keith tells “six-foot-three guards on the microphone” to go back to playing sports. Music fans seem to agree with Kool Keith’s assessment. With the exception of Shaquille O’Neil, who has released five albums, few ballplayers have been able to reach the same level of success in hip-hop that they find in professional sports.

Hip-hop artists are attempting to enter professional sports. In 1998 Master P, the founder of No Limit Records unsuccessfully auditioned for a position on the Charlotte Hornets, and in 1999, also failed to make the Toronto Raptors basketball team. Of course, as one of the richest men in America under age 40, and the *world's* richest entertainer according to the Guinness Book of World Records, Master P might buy his own sports team. Jay-Z, as part owner of the New Jersey Nets has used his money to get into basketball.

The close relationship between hip-hop and professional sports is also symbolized by influx of hip-hop's hardcore, gangster persona in the NBA. NBA stars such as Latrell Sprewell and Ron Artest exhibit the hip-hop style of baggy clothes, jewelry, and an overall thug attitude on the court. Sports columnist Michael Wilbon (2004) observes that what might have been a clever marketing ploy by the NBA to cash in on the success of the gangsta hip-hop image may have backfired with an upsurge of violence that frightens wealthy season ticket holders:

NBA marketing people thought they were getting Will Smith and LL Cool J. But now they've discovered the dark side of hip-hop has also infiltrated their game, with its 'bling-bling' ostentation, its unrepentant I-gotta-get-paid ruthlessness, its unregulated culture of possessions, and the constant underlying threat of violence.

Whether or not bench-clearing fights can be attributed to the influx of hip-hop “thuggery” is debatable. But the supposed link has been criticized by the previous generation of basketball stars including Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley, Magic Johnson, and David Robinson. NBA Commissioner Mark Stern's attempt to enforce a “business casual” dress code in basketball is part of the backlash to the blurring the lines between hip-hop and professional sports. Outside of the NBA, the “AND-1” professional street basketball league and product line provides an alternative sports arena. The And-1 league is best described as hip-hop music and fashion with dash of basketball. While it is endorsed by professional ball players, the street hoops league barely resembles formal basketball. The rules of formal basketball don't apply (e.g., traveling or

shot clock violations) and the norms of team work are notably absent. Instead, trash talk, outlandish individual feats, and roughhousing are the focus of the game.

These concerns that professional sports are becoming extensions of hip-hop, and at times the streets, are no surprise to John Hobberman. In *How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved The Myth of Race*, Hobberman (1997) writes that all three roles are based on racist folklores of black mental inferiority and the myth of the violent, superhuman black male. According to Hobberman, athletic achievement, music and entertainment, and crime have become the symbol of black male success. He links the fixation on sports and music as career goals to “academic failure that [has] come to symbolize the black male for most Americans” (xxxiv). Schools and the black community, Hobberman argues, have bought into the stereotype that blacks are “natural” athletes and workers, while whites are “natural” thinkers and owners. That black youth aspire to obtain jobs that reproduce this division of labor—black ballplayers and (mostly) white owners, black hip-hop artists and (mostly) white record executives, black inmates and (mostly) white correctional officers—may very well flow from this larger construction of race.

***Section 5: The Hip-Hop Work Ethic: Hustle, Grind, Can't Stop/ Won't Stop!***

In a self-review of his school-related findings on oppositional culture, Ogbu (2004) notes that outright resistance, such as cursing out teachers, is only one manifestation of resistance. Another gradation of resistance is disengagement or detachment characterized by a lack of effort. This foot dragging or lackadaisical approach to schooling is what Ogbu (2003) refers to as a “low effort syndrome.” In this expression of oppositional culture, students are said to focus the majority of their energies towards non-school activities and fixate on success through routes unrelated to education. This assessment of some black youth is also echoed by John McWhorter (2000) when he suggests that black students attending the nation’s most prestigious universities avoid working “too hard” in their academic careers.

The descriptions of black youth provided by Ogbu and McWhorter can easily be construed as black youth lacking a strong work ethic. Or conversely, that white or Asian youth value hard work more than black youth. The worst of black stereotypes, the lazy simpleton, may be activated by this interpretation. Indeed, it is short leap in logic to assert that oppositional culture is based in laziness, not cultural distrust of white institutions or attempts to resist white oppression (Chapters 2 & 3), the perceived lack of returns from education (Chapter 4), or the view that drugs, sports, and hip-hop are the only openings in an otherwise closed opportunity structure (the current chapter). Maybe black youth simply don’t value hard work, thus the source and solution to opposition culture is that “black kids just need to work harder.”

Based on my consideration of oppositional culture and hip-hop music, I find that such an interpretation would be misguided. To be sure, hard work, dedication, and perseverance are not adjectives typically employed in hip-hop to describe experienced or appropriate responses to formal education and the world of regular work. As already covered, hip-hop narratives

involving school and work often express disinterest, discontent, and disengagement to the point of refusing to attend classes or quitting work. However, the observation that a “low-effort” approach to schooling and regular work may be a passive expression of oppositional culture should not be interpreted as “laziness” or an aversion to hard work. More, my finding that hip-hop lyrics often eschew the long-term and limited returns of education for the “fast” money of the streets (all according to the artists) should not be conceived as a total cultural aversion to delaying gratification.

Rather, a glaring component in most hip-hop narratives involving social mobility is that hard work, sacrifice, and long-term commitment are necessary virtues for success. In what might be called the *hip-hop work ethic*, relentless effort in the daytime followed by sleepless nights, combined with a stubborn-against-all-odds fortitude, are bedrock norms in these three folk theories of social mobility without education. Of course, a temperament for hard work and stick-to-it-ness are important traits needed to complete one’s doctorate, for example, or to obtain that next promotion at the office. The rub is that the hip-hop work ethic only applies to a particular vision of upward mobility, one that is intended to circumvent the perceived oppression of formal education and the 9-to-5 work world. The importance of *hustle, grind, and can’t stop/won’t stop*, suggests that oppositional culture is about challenging or avoiding white dominance in the spheres of formal education or labor market, not about subverting learning or hard work per se.

### *Hustle*

Folk theories of social mobility are discussed in hip-hop through the lens of “hustle.” Under the auspices of hustle, upward mobility through crime and/or music is said to require hard work. In its most general form, hustle denotes the complete focus of both physical and mental effort to achieve. Thus, when a person is hustling, typically shortened to hustlin’ (pronounced “hus-lin”),

an individual is honing all of their skills and abilities to realize their aspirations. “*The hustle*,” in the proper, encompasses the sum of effort, challenges, and strategies involved in the quest for social mobility. As such, the hustle is often envisioned as a collective attempt by black youth to make it out of poverty and undesirable neighborhood conditions. For black youth of the hip-hop generation, the notion of hustle helps stitch together the Jay-Z school of hard knocks, gangsta-to-gangsta rapper, street narrative on how “people like us” “make it in the world.”

Hustle, in these abstract terms, signals the major contours of the hip-hop work ethic, but hustle is most often employed in discussions of criminal street activities. The idea of hustle maintains a close association with the street hustler, a crafty individual that manipulates, cheats, and exploits anyone and everyone for their personal benefit. Like a confidence artist (con artist), the hustler will resort to manipulation and deceit to tilt the odds in their favor. The hustler is imagined as a jack-of-all-trade character—drug dealer, trafficker of women and sex, fencer stolen goods, and aspiring hip-hop artist.

While the hustler may conjure up negative images of a ruthless cheat, hip-hop inverts this persona to communicate a high level of intelligence, a solid work ethic, and unrelenting willingness to succeed. Implicitly, this includes a willingness to participate in less-than-honest/legal means to do it. The artists Lil’ O, Mack Biggers, and Scrilla describe just how dedicated hustlers are to succeeding in the drug trade. Lil’ O says that hustling requires working all the time: “Bleed the block nonstop, till I bust my safe [get rich]/All I do is gangsta shit/Go to work grab the four [gun], spank the brick [sell drugs]/All I do is hit stangs and licks, push cocaine and whip” (“If I Could Then I Would,” *Food on Tha Table*). Next on the track, Mack Biggers says that he regularly hustles in the streets at 4 o’clock in the morning, leaving him little time to enjoy his girlfriend’s company. Scrilla concludes by explaining that this much work

requires having the “heart of a hustler,” being completely dedicated to the streets above all else. The “heart of a hustler,” a disposition for complete dedication to the streets, is borne out of necessity according to the trio. They express a desire to spend less time working, but echo the theme that street hustling is the only way black youth like themselves can make money.

Likewise, Cypress Hill proposes that a willingness to hustle all day and night is required to “ball” in America, that is, to become rich. In a theatrical question and answer session, unsuccessful hustlers look toward Cypress Hill for advice on how to get rich. They respond: “Where can I choose to get my hustle on?/In the alleyway, lighting up all night long/Fuck working at McD's (McDonalds), I'm rolling with the O.Z's (ounces of drugs)” (“Killafornia,” *Temple of Boom*). The decision to not work a 9-to-5 at McDonalds avoids the demeaning experience of working for whites, “I can work for myself, don't have to work for nobody, I'll be my own hustler,” but not work in and of itself. The lyrics indicate that street entrepreneurs are always at work.

DMX notes that he often goes hungry because he is so busy selling drugs, “It's two o'clock and I'm just about to hit the street/'Til I knock off this rock [crack cocaine] I don't get to eat” (“Make a Move,” ...*And Then There Was X*). While others are sleeping from midnight to 6 A.M., DMX explains a typical nightshift on the streets:

I send two niggaz back up top, and come back  
We chop up rock [crack cocaine], by midnight, we open up shop  
It's four in the mornin', we on the block creepin' [working]  
Killin' [for] the cash, while yo' ass is sleepin'  
Look here, I'm what they call a true hustler

Through a rather clever word play on being “hungry,” DMX explains that in order to hustle in the streets one has to be mentally “hungry” to possess a strong self-motivation for success. The willingness to forgo breakfast, lunch, and dinner breaks in order to maximize profits is a common example of being mentally hungry. In hip-hop, to be hungry often invokes this dual

meaning of mental dedication and toughness, and a willingness to do resort to crime to fulfill one's physical needs. The casting of hard work and dedication as being hungry abounds in descriptions of what it takes to be success in the streets:

Hell Razah: "Hungry comrads get they guns from A-Rabs/With the loot [money] that they had, they rob more victims on the ave[nue]" ("Cold," *The Last Shall Be First*)

Wild Son: "fuck with Black and get done/Pack guns, gat-lers, Rockin all the latest fashions/You gotta love me, for being young, black, and hungry" ("Drama," *Brace 4 Impak*)

In hip-hop:

Cormega: "Hungry like my ribs are showing, as if you didn't notice/I spit the potent, uncut raw my mind is pure ferocious" ("I'm Built For This," *The True Meaning*)

Crypt the Warchild: "I came in the game hungry, young buck new jack/Stated my name, and now I abuse raps" ("Blades of Glory," *Blood & Ashes*)

And occasionally sports:

Clipse: "Ain't about the fame, but the love for the sport/Blood sweat and tears, seen their hunger on the court/Ain't nothin' stoppin' the "D", like ain't nothin' stoppin' me" ("Game Time," *NBA Live 2004 Soundtrack*),

though athleticism is generally thought of as a "natural" talent. Hustling in both hip-hop and the streets, according to Kyleon, requires physically working "24/7-365" while staying mentally focused ("Listen," *Boyz-N-Blue*). Xzibit says the streets and hip-hop success require the ability to stay mentally engaged for long periods of time: "Fast 5 days straight to meditate, build hunger/and focus (focus) on the days and times (focus) that approach us" ("Focus," *40 Dayz & 40 Nightz*). To express the idea of being mentally focused on success, artists commonly say they have "money on their mind," a metaphor conveying a high level of focus to succeed and the ultimate goal of their hard work.

*Grind*

Associated with hustling is the process of "grinding." Derived from the idiom for hard, painful work—"nose to the grind stone"—grinding denotes extreme hard work and dedication. Like

hustling, grinding is also shorthand for selling drugs and other criminal activities. Grinding is a painstaking process that requires giving 100% of one's efforts. As Mike Jones calculates, success in hip-hop involves "90% grinding, 10% sleep," though advises to stay "on your game" even while asleep ("Don't Work U Don't Eat," *1st Round Draft Picks*). L-Burner says that grinding requires being a "workaholic" ("Deadly Musicals," *Thug By Nature*), while Lil says that "living the life of hard knocks" takes place "24/7, all around the clock" (Lil B, "Slabs on the Rise," *Volume 3*).

In common use, hustling tends to involve a little glamour and time to celebrate. Grinding, on the other hand, is described as an exhausting, painful attempt at succeeding in the streets and/or hip-hop. As Freeway puts it, "The grind...takes everything you work with/Everything you got quick" ("You Don't Know In the Ghetto," *Philadelphia Freeway*). Grinding requires so much time that E-40 rhymes that "When I'm grindin' I don't brush my teeth or comb my hair" ("Mouthpiece," *Charlie Hustle: Blueprint of a Self-Made Millionaire*). Neglecting personal hygiene and sleep in order to sell drugs while selling records out of his car trunk is how E-40 says he made his first million dollars. The grind wears a person down, as Llyod Banks warns, "I'm on my grind, so if you thought I chill I'm not/[I] Won't stop letting the steering wheel peel the block" ("When the Chips are Down," *The Hunger for More*). Bank's metaphor for his life being a set of tires peeling on the street due to fast driving provides a vivid image of the pressure involved in the grind. Keeping with the car metaphors, Xzibit comments that "I'm on the grind like a clutch, bust ya, they never had this much" ("Xzibit and Tash Freestyle," *Power Cypha 3: The Grand Finale*). Screeching tires or a poorly adjusted manual transmission of car make the point that the grind involves serious business filled with struggle, conflict and friction.

There is a sense of pride and accomplishment for those who are hustling and grinding, both in the streets and hip-hop. The ability to withstand the daily pressures of the grind is portrayed as sign strength. Dealing with the death of close friends and family is a common topic when lyrics deal with street crime. Lifty Stokes explains how he dealt with pain of losing his best friend and business partner in the grind:

I had to grieve for awhile  
Cause a nigga fell off hard but I got my ass back on the grind  
And hit the streets like a mad man, goin' against the grain  
With dried tears on my face from the pain of this dirty game  
("Dirty Game," *Legit Ballin' Vol. 2*)

Potentially, the death of his partner could have served as a wake-up call about the dangerous and probable outcomes of the streets. However, Lifty Stokes describes it as a temporary setback. In fact, the death of his friend only increases his motivation, as he quickly returns to the streets "like a mad man," grinding harder than before. Lil' Keke explains that a true grinder only stops working at the time of death, "We hustling, we grinding/We shining, never gonna give up" ("Never Gone Give Up," *Changin' Lanes*).

The ability to endure this kind of pressure is discussed with admiration in hip-hop. "Making it out on the grind," according to Gangsta Dre, deserves respect: "Respect for every young black man, cuz us black men been through hard times/.../man it's a, cold world up on these streets of mine/If these youngsters aint out jackin[robbing], they made out on the grind" ("Highway Music," *The Best of Sacramento*). Hustling and grinding is respected partly because it is a way to symbolically resist and disrespect white institutions and white authority. I will describe the symbolic aspect of this (being a "soldier" or "warrior" as it is called), and how it connected to notions of race-gender authenticity in the next chapter. But suffice it to say for now that hustling and grinding in hip-hop and the streets, as alternative routes of social mobility that do not require any investment in education, is held in high esteem.

While hustling and grinding describes the use of crime and/or hip-hop to make a living, these are also general terms for arriving at success. Hip-hop folk theories of success without education are so tightly connected with the illegal street trades that few artists are able to describe “success” without indirectly referring to criminal ways. For example, C-Murder describe his success in hip-hop by saying he’s “living like a hustler,” which in this case involves being “iced out...with million dollar rings” and sleeping “with a new freak [woman] every week” (“Livin' Like a Hustler,” *Da Crime Family*). Clipse and Pharrel perform a call-and-response skit to demonstrate they have made it big in the hip-hop business. “What's the size of them [car] rims on that car nigga huh? Grindin!/Can they see that chain [diamond necklace] from a far nigga huh? Grindin!” (“Grinding,” *Lord Willin'*). Their description of success in hip-hop is identical to the image of a success through drug dealing. The song is filled with so many references to grinding cocaine rocks that it difficult to tell if they made their money through rhyming or drug dealing.

As part of the limited vision of the opportunity structure typically constructed in hip-hop lyrics, hustling and grinding are often proposed as the only ways to be successful in life. “The only way to get doe [money] is if you grind” (AZ, “It’s a Boy Thing,” *Pieces of Man*). The point that anyone who isn’t hustling or grinding will be poor is made clear by Domingo, when he divides the social stratification system into two groups, “want to be’s” and “going to be’s.” Those who fall into the latter category are “hardcore hustlers,” those who have money, women, and the other symbols of success. (“Hustlers & Hardcore,” *Behind the Doors of the 13th Floor*). Slim Thug similarly proposes, “It's like cause and effect, if you grind you shine/And if you don't you won't, keep that on your mind/ I'm getting mine nigga” (“Big Banka Man,” *Tha Boss*). Apparently referring only to hip-hop, not his days as a street dealer, Mike Jones explains how to

become successful in life: “So the next time you come up to me and ask how I blew [became successful] put that on yo' mind [understand that if]/ you don't grind, you don't shine” (“Cuttin' Remix,” *Who is Mike Jones?*).

The hustler or grinder tends to be the male persona of drug dealer-pimp-rapper. But successful, intelligent, and studious women also describe themselves as hustlers. The female artist Trina, the self-proclaimed “baddest bitch” in hip-hop, uses the image of a hustler to communicate how her drive and intelligence made her rich:

Hustla I'm the queen of this south shit  
 Tight with a cute face that's what I'm bout bitch  
 Sexy, specialize in filet show [maybe an allusion to drugs]  
 All about my pesos [money]  
 Never was a fake hoe  
 Shot shore throw throw the cock like a flame thrower  
 In the mouth of a cock blower  
 Just a diva  
 Mack momma looking for them ends [money]  
 Traded in the Lex [Lexus] for a G-5 Benz [Mercedes]  
 Touring on the road getting stacks [money]  
 20 grand karats for the show no tax  
 Bell-V [Belvedere Vodka] is what I'm pourin' on them hatas'  
 Blinding with the lock no imitators  
 Broke ass niggas getting on my nerves  
 Get sliced, diced, chopped, and served  
 Ask am I off the chain  
 I won't lie  
 But I don't want your man boo fuck that guy Uh  
 (“Hustling,” *Diamond Princess*)

Trina’s description of herself as a female hustler is telling, as it mirrors the male image of the hustler, yet simultaneously challenges and inverts stereotypes about black women. She says she’s a “bitch,” but she’s an elegant princess, queen, and diva. She claims to possess extraordinary sexual abilities, but she’s not a “hoe”: Trina says she’s “tight,” both gynecologically and lyrically. Black women often appear in hip-hop as “gold-diggers” or “groupies,” promiscuous women who prey on men for cars and jewelry. As a female hustler, she describes herself as a savvy business woman and hip-hop artist on the rise, as evidenced by buying her own expensive car and purchasing her own \$20,000 ring (tax free). Trina’s financial independence inverts this

power relationship, she decides when and with whom she has sex. Trina verbalizes this symbolic appropriation of the masculine hustler image when she threatens that she'll, "Open up the door, walk straight in the house/Put your man down and put *my* cock in his mouth (emphasis added)." Female artists like Lil' Kim, Trina, Khia, Peaches, and others use the hustler motif to communicate that they are independent, intelligent, and wealthy women on the rise. But despite attempts by female artists to disrupt stereotypes by becoming hustlers, they do not appear to drastically alter the underlying narrative about social mobility.

*Can't Stop/Won't Stop!*

Intermixed with the notion of hustle and grind as a paradigm for expressing and understanding the importance of hard work and dedication for upward mobility is the slogan of "can't stop, won't stop." The notion of never being stopped and/or refusing to stop pursuing success is such a common phrase that historian Jeff Chang (2006) uses this cliché to understand the social-cultural direction of the entire hip-hop generation. As the saying and book title suggests, this hip-hop achievement ideology holds that failure is a non-sequitur. A willingness to stay the course, despite overwhelming odds and near impenetrable roadblocks, is the meaning of the mantra. Simply: can't stop, won't stop. Grand statements of refusing to be stopped, held back, or kept down mark some of hip-hop's most powerful statements. Afrika Bambaata's "Renegades of Funk" ("No matter how hard you try, you can't stop us now") or Public Enemy's *Nation's of Millions* ("It takes a nation of millions to hold us back") are prime examples. The inter-genre collaboration between Lil Kim and pop singer Christina Aguilera adds female voice to this slogan that often gets marginalized or excluded from mainstream hip-hop. According to the lyrics, this generation of women will no longer live as second class citizens. The protest chorus

encourages young women to shout, “Nobody can hold us down, nobody can hold us down/Nobody gonna hold us down, never can, never will” (“Can't Hold Us Down,” *Stripped*).

At its best, can't stop/won't stop is used to create a collective sense that being on the margins of society—poor, targeted by the police, ignored by the government—will not prevent the hip-hop generation from finding a way to persevere. Edi of the Outlaws uses a variation of this phrase as a rallying cry when he observes that black youth continue to defy low societal expectations: “Man, we still here/Despite be hated on (huh)/ We still clear/Until the end of time, you can't stop destiny” (“Our Life,” *Novakane*). The “can't stop us” idea gained traction in the late 1990s following a rash of violent deaths linked to the East-Coast-West Coast feuds. Facing growing resentment from black parents, aging celebrities, and opportunistic politicians, several songs in the sample propose that the hip-hop movement will not be stopped. For example, in response to public demonstrations organized by former Soul Train host Don Cornelius and the Reverend Calvin Butts, in which bulldozers were used to destroy hundreds of hip-hop cassette tapes and compact disks, Scarface and Ice Cube respond that hip-hop “won't stop, can't stop” (“Hand of the Dead Body,” *The Diary*). Mood Ruff, dedicated to the “art of hip-hop,” exclaims that “Despite, a system trying to hold us down/But Imma keep banging, can't stop this sound” (“No Hooks,” *Night.Life.Types*).

Commonly though, the phrase gets applied to the drive for individual wealth and status through drugs and/or hip-hop careers. That the law, government, or competing drug dealers will not stop me from selling drugs and getting rich is often the associated message. The Lox, for example, say that their illegal quest for “money, power, and respect...can't stop, won't stop” (“Can't Stop, Won't Stop,” *Money, Power, & Respect*). The artist Lucky, though, expands this message of fortitude to all crack cocaine dealers when he rhymes, “This for the dealers in the

kitchen, weighing up the damn [baking] soda/Making boulders [crack rocks] with the baking soda, slanging on the corner/.../Can't Stop, won't stop, not for shit" ("No Stopping This," *You Already Kno*). Tupac, whose lyrics are often draped in an "against all odds" mentality, provides a vivid example of how black criminals are said to be unstoppable:

Born in the ghetto as a hustler, told ya  
A straight soldier, buckin' at the bustaz  
No matter how you try, niggaz never die  
We just retaliate with hate, then we multiply  
You see me strikin' down the block, hittin corners  
Mobbin' like a motherfucker, livin' like I - wanna  
And ain't no stoppin' at the red lights, I'm sideways  
Thug Life motherfucker crime pays!  
("Live Freestyle 95," *Best of B.I.G.*)

Traffic laws, the police, and even death, according to Tupac, will not stop a true hustler from pursuing his or her criminal aspirations.

The "can't stop, won't stop" posture that nothing will stand in the way of success is notably absent in discussions of formal education. The idea that black youth will aspire for academic excellence, even when forced to attend schools with high levels of concentrated poverty and less qualified teachers, is not part of the dominant narrative. Having teachers that hold racist beliefs about black ability, lower quality facilities and supplies, and a dearth of black history (all according to the artists but confirmed by social science) is typically presented in hip-hop as an impenetrable roadblock, or at least a reason to not try too hard. "Can't stop studying algebra" or "won't stop saving for college" are not part of the normal hip-hop lexicon. Likewise, the notion that low wages or undesirable jobs in the service industry will not stop the hip-hop generation from obtaining high status positions in the formal labor market is not what is usually expressed in the lyrics. Working the day-shift in the mailroom of an office, cleaning the floors at night, attending college on-line or on the weekends (or completing a GED program first), all while organizing parents to start a black history reading club at the local elementary school

would be endemic of hustle and grind on par to what is typically advocated in the areas of drugs, basketball, and hip-hop. However, the hip-hop work ethic is rarely applied to the worlds of school and regular work in the lyrics. Instead, the tendency is to advocate or pursue routes to success that do not involve education or working for a traditional employer. The dominant folk theory of success that is constructed by hip-hop holds that the work ethic of hustling, grinding, and never giving up are only applicable in spheres that are perceived as appropriate and probable for black youth: drugs, basketball, and hip-hop.

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