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

Hip-Hop's Counter-Narrative & Pro-Schooling Messages

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Once upon a time not long ago
When people wore Adidas and lived life slow
When laws were stern and justice stood
And people was behavin' like hip-hop was good
There lived a little boy who was misled
By a little Sha-tan [Satan] and this is what he said:
Me and you kid we gonna make some cash
Jackin' old beats and makin' the dash...

--"Children's Story," *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star*

Introduction

Reworking the classic 1988 Slick Rick song "A Children's Story," Mos Def and Talib Kweli dramatize the alleged corruption of hip-hop music. According to the lyrics, hip-hop began as a peaceful cultural movement. Before the violence, sexism, drugs, and money, hip-hop of the 1970s and 1980s was primarily about free expression, social and political commentary, and unity. However, according to Black Star, money and corporate sponsorship co-opted hip-hop. In exchange for money, cars, and jewelry, hip-hop artists agreed to pander gangster tales of crime, fast money, and death as authentic black culture. Whatever was fresh, positive, fun, and perhaps revolutionary was lost. To use the current rhetoric surrounding the state of hip-hop, "real hip-hop," is "dead." That is, until hip-hop's countermovement arrives on the scene to restore hip-hop to its prior glory.

The song describes how a small contingent of emcees, immune from the lure of corporate money, challenges the dominant direction of hip-hop. Leading the charge, Mos Def yells, "Yo money, Yo, why you sellin' lies to our wives and children?!" After a short battle, inauthentic hip-hop is defeated and our hero warns hip-hop evil-doers against getting wealthy by selling harmful rhymes:

And that is the way I got ta end this story
He was out chasin' cream [money] and the American Dream
Tryin' to pretend the ends justify the means
This ain't funny so don't you dare laugh
It's just what comes to pass when you sell your ass

Life is more than what your hands can grasp

This clever story by Black Star captures the major thrust of hip-hop's self critique. Believing that hip-hop has become a negative force, today's "conscious" artists have joined forces with "old-school" hip-hop artists in an attempt to reform hip-hop from within. Artists including Common, Mos Def and Talib Kweli (Black Star), and The Roots beckon back to a time when the music of Afrika Bambaataa, Public Enemy, Grandmaster Flash, KRS-One, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Salt n' Pepa, and Queen Latifah offered constructive social-political commentary and a vision of success beyond getting rich. These voices of dissent warn that many of their hip-hop peers selling the school of hard knocks and the "don't give a fuck" thug mentality to children. The counter-narrative uses satire, autobiographic examples, parables and morality tales, film, and witty insults to challenge hip-hop's now dominant messages about achievement and authenticity.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how the logic of this small hip-hop counter-narrative operates, when and where it can be located in the historical development of hip-hop, and what pro-schooling messages can be found in this self-critique. I begin by exploring the growing dissent within the hip-hop community. I attempt to reconcile these concerns with the data by exploring how achievement-related judgments have changed in hip-hop. The chapter concludes by examining how these voices of dissent continue to challenge aspects of hip-hop's oppositional "I-R-S" discourse.

Section 1: The “Old School” Versus The “New School”: A Hip-Hop Nation Divided*Hip-Hop Hooray?*

In 2004-2005, hip-hop celebrated its 30th anniversary. What began as poor New York youth cobbling together old records and dancing, block parties, and disco-hall rap competitions, had evolved into a multi-billion dollar culture industry (Chappell, 2005). Nearly a third of all popular music sales was now hip-hop (Goldman & Lin, 2001). Hip-hop evolved from selling other people's apparels (e.g., Run DMC's selling of Adidas footwear) to selling their own products, including premium liquors, clothing lines, and even luxury bedroom linens and kids books (Gallagher, 2003; Harris, 2002a; Samuels, 2005). Artists who managed to not get killed or thrown in jail during the 1990s, like Puff Daddy and Jay-Z, began using their adult names. Sean Combs and Sean Carter, respectively, now mingled with politicians, Hollywood elites, and multi-national corporate sponsors. Hip-hop mogul and co-founder of Def Jam records Russell Simons, the “godfather of hip-hop,” replaced the aging civil rights leadership as a fresh and hip community leader. The late Tupac Shakur was now considered an authentic black American hero (Reese, 2004), a freedom fighter on par with Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X (Leland, Samuels, & Smith, 1997). Universities and colleges were now teaching courses in hip-hop history, culture, and musicology. In sum, after being ignored and underestimated for so long, hip-hop had finally won the hearts and minds of black youth, the allowances of suburban white teens, corporate and media conglomerate sponsorship, and growing political clout.

For most of its existence though, hip-hop has been written off by adults as simply another teenage “fad” (Chang, 2005) destined to fade away like the Hula-Hoop or Rubik's Cube. Sensing that hip-hop could never last, most civil rights blacks chose to ignore hip-hop. This strategy of benign neglect ended in the 1990s when C. Delores Tucker joined with black churches and aging

black celebrities (including Dionne Warwick) to protest violent and degrading gangster rap lyrics. Outside of churches, angry protesters burned albums and bulldozed hip-hop cassette tapes. In 1994, the debate over hip-hop lyrics reached the senate floor. Supported by the likes of Bob Dole, the National Congress of Black Women, and Carol Moseley, the hearings condemned artists and record companies for capitalizing on violence and misogyny. As a result of the negative press, Time Warner Music eventually disinvested from Interscope Records, distributor of Death Row Records, then home of the most successful gangster artists of the 1990s including Snoop Dogg, Tupac Shakur, and Dr. Dre.

The 1990s culture wars against hip-hop did not however spark honest debate about hip-hop, and it certainly did not alter the content of the music. Instead, the unanticipated consequence of these protests was the demonization of anyone willing to speak up against hip-hop. While white critics were simply written off as racist, black critics were accused of “selling out.” Ice Cube and Scarface’s scathing assessment of blacks involved in the protest capture hip-hop’s response to the protesters:

I'm the illest
Wanna kill this house nigga Don Cornelius
Can you feel this?
You punk niggas make me sick
Suckin' on the devil's [white man's] dick
Scared of revolution
Need to start deuchin' [douching]
Houston is the place
I caught a case
Them motherfuckers tried to put a scar on my face
But I bust two times to the gut
To the Reverend Calvin Butts
Gotta pair of nuts?
I started this gangsta shit in 86
Now you dissin' me
For publicity
Isn't he a hoe to the third degree
Who me
I'm a g who like to scrap-a-lot
Down with Rap-A-Lot
And I can't stop, won't stop
So fuck Bill and Hillary [Clinton]

Ice Cube their ain't no killin' me
Ice Cube, Scarface
Droppin' on these sellin' out niggas, doing it like this
("Hand of the Dead Body," *The Diary*)

In no uncertain terms, the duo accuse former Soul Train host Don Cornelius and the Reverend Calvin Butts of being submissive "house niggas" by siding with the white power structure instead of black youth. In the verse, hip-hop is associated with revolution and black uplift, while those criticizing the music are accused of assisting the oppressor. In addition to being othered by race, blacks concerned about hip-hop are placed outside appropriate black masculinity with accusations of homosexual desire. On a similar track, artist W.C takes aim at C. Delores Tucker, "I'm a nigga that's yellin fuck society...So, tell that bitch Delores Tucker to suck a niggaz dick" ("3 Time Felons," *Bow Down*). Or, as Shyne mocks, "Fuck y'all niggaz, hope you die a slow death as I coke-test [sell drugs] and C. Delores Tucker protest" ("Bad Boyz," *Shyne*). Far from abating the gangster rap tide, hardcore artists used the negative press to buttress their outlaw images and sell even more albums.

Hip-hop survived the negative press of the 1990s and currently dominates popular youth culture in the new millennium. However, the debate over hip-hop is once again reaching the forefront of American discourse. Unlike previous criticism though, these voices of dissent are now coming from within the hip-hop community itself, not from outsiders who aren't considered "black enough," "cool enough," or "young enough" to really get it. Greg Tate (2005), who has been championing hip-hop since the 1980s, provides the following appraisal of hip-hop at age 30: "What the heck are we celebrating exactly?...Nothing less, my man, than the marriage of heaven and hell, of New World African ingenuity and that trick of the devil known as global hyper-capitalism. Hooray." Tate sarcastically captures the frustration of many who grew up with hip-hop, as he explains how hip-hop is now a "purple-mountain loony bin" that portrays black

males as “both subhuman and superhuman, as sexy beasts on the order of King Kong.” Echoing Black Star’s sentiment in the verses that open this chapter, Tate suspects that hip-hop’s primary goal is to sell “porn DVDs, Crunk Juice (a heavily caffeinated energy drink marketed by Lil’ Jon), and S. Carter (Jay-Z) signature sneakers.” He is much less hopeful than Mos Def and Talib Kweli about the potential “resurrection” of hip-hop: “It might resurrect itself as a people’s protest music if we were lucky...But I won’t be holding my breath waiting to see.”

Celebrated director Spike Lee, whose hip-hop infused films include *Do The Right Thing* (1989) and *He’s Got Game* (1998), traveled the country in 2005 and 2006 speaking out against hip-hop’s devaluation of education and promotion of the gangster image. Unlike Bill Cosby’s abrasive speeches following the 50th anniversary of Brown celebration, Lee’s public critique came from a self-proclaimed fan of the music. Though he said he still loves some hip-hop, Lee pointed to a major shift since the late 1980s when he used Public Enemy’s “Fight The Power” as the soundscape for *Do The Right Thing*:

“We looked up to those who were smart. These days if you speak one sentence without being profane, then you’re not black. If you’re not in the corner smoking a joint, drinking a 40, holding your privates, you’re not ghetto, you’re not from the streets, you’re not gangsta...Thinking like that, that’s genocide. The infatuation with being a gangsta is madness” (World Entertainment News Network, 2006).

Spike Lee has also been critical of hip-hop’s new political acts. With the help of conscious hip-hop acts Mos Def, The Roots, and Canibus, the controversial movie *Bamboozled* derides the state of political hip-hop.

Bamboozled (2000) is a hard-hitting satire on the representations of blacks in popular culture. The plot follows the development of a new television minstrel show complete with black face tap dancing, watermelon patches, and chicken coops. “The Alabama Porch Monkeys,” a

band portrayed by The Roots, provide the music as Savion Glover (“Mantan/Manray”) and Tommie Davison (“Sleep-N-Eat”) tap dance and portray themselves as “two real coons.” White audience members watching the spectacle wear blackface and proudly call each other “niggers.” In short, the suggestion is that even in the year 2000, blacks continue to be tricked into degrading racial performances.

Mos Def appears in the film as “Big Blak Afrika,” the leader of the pseudo-revolutionary hip-hop group “The Mau Maus.” The Mau Maus realize that the “New Millennium Minstrel Show” is racist, not wholesome family entertainment as the network suggests. However, Spike Lee’s portrayal of the group suggests that the pro-black hip-hop act is part of the same minstrel show. The Mau Maus spend their studio time getting high and drinking bottles of expensive cognac. While they bask in the revolutionary rhetoric, the extent of their political work is refusing to use proper English: The Mau Maus refuse to use the letter “c” in “blak” and “Afrika.” Their lyrics are ridiculously shallow and their stage performance involves simply parading around stage yelling about being really, really “blak.” The racial theatrics of Big Blak Afrika and the Mau Maus’ appear just as inauthentic and contrived as the tap-dancing duo’s coon routine. The Mau Maus are eventually coaxed to action. In the climax of the film they kidnap and kill Savion Glover, after which all but one of the group’s members is caught and killed by the police. Ironically, the lone survivor is the Mau Mau’s white member who claims 1/16th “blak” heritage. He pleads with the police to kill him because dying by the gun seems to be an authentically “blak” way to die. Spike Lee’s treatment of the Mau Mau’s is pointed, as even hip-hop’s most promising acts, those who refuse to act like gangsters or clowns, are portrayed as equally misguided. Overall, Spike Lee’s take on hip-hop echoes the concerns of high profile

blacks including Oprah Winfrey and Bill Cosby, but Lee's credibility with the hip-hop community protects him from claims of not being real.

In the spring of 2004, female college students at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA garnered media attention by refusing to allow hip-hop superstar Nelly to make a guest appearance at the college's charity bone marrow drive due to his hyper-misogynistic music video "Tip Drill." The women were outraged by Nelly sliding a credit card down the backside of a bikini-clad black woman and glibly declaring "it must be her ass, 'cause it ain't her face"—a not-so-subtle form of commodifying the bodies of black women. Black Entertainment Television (BET) pulled the video, and amidst protest, ended the broadcast of its "BET Uncut" video show that specialized in similar types of hip-hop videos. Importantly though, this protest was staged by black women in the hip-hop generation, women on average one-third the age of C. Delores Tucker or Carol Moseley.

Falling Out of Love With Hip-Hop

The theme of falling out of love with hip-hop is memorialized in the 2002 film *Brown Sugar*. While the main characters are Taye Diggs and Sanaa Lathan, the movie also features appearances by Mos Def and Talib Kweli, and old school artists including Queen Latifah, Pete Rock, and De La Soul among others. *Brown Sugar* is a typical Hollywood love story between Diggs and Lathan, but the entire movie is an obvious metaphor about how hip-hop has changed. As childhood sweethearts, they discovered hip-hop music together. They danced to hip-hop and listened to beatboxing and freestyle rhyiming in the park. Back then it was about the love of hip-hop, fun, and companionship.

Fast forwarding twenty years later, the two main characters are now adults. Diggs is a record company executive. He knowingly signs untalented and negative hip-hop artists including an inter-racial act “Ren & Ten,” whose gimmick includes wearing dog/”dogg” costumes. Digg’s concern—the concern of hip-hop—is now selling dreams of money, champagne, and gangster-theatrics. The art of “real hip-hop” has been replaced with pre-fabricated corporate images. The supposedly “real” emcee played by Mos Def continues to focus on lyrics and political commentary. As a result, Mos Def is unable to get a record contract and is forced to work as a taxi-cab driver. Lathan, the young girl, is now an editor of a music magazine. She still waxes poetic about her childhood romance with hip-hop (Diggs), but claims to have fallen out of love. On the eve of both their marriages to someone else, the two realize that they are still in love with each other. That is, they are still in love with hip-hop even though it has changed. In the end, Diggs (hip-hop) finds redemption when he refuses to sign the ridiculous “hip-hop canines,” quits the major record label, and signs Mos Def as an independent artist. Diggs has to give up his lavish lifestyle, but the reward of making authentic music is enough in the end.

Hip-hop listeners who heard Sugar Hill and the Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” on the radio in late 1979 and removed the laces from their black Adidas sneakers (to emulate Run-DMC) in the mid-1980s are no longer defending hip-hop. They are tuning out and turning it off. As comedian Chris Rock jokes about the current state of hip-hop in his last HBO comedy special, “I love hip-hop...but this shit is gettin’ hard to defend!” (“Never Scared,” 2005). After reminiscing about the artistic and political direction of hip-hop in the 1980s, Rock goes on to lampoon lyrics today, including Ludacris’ “Move Bitch” (*Word of Mouf*) and Lil’ Jon’s dance anthem about ejaculating on women (“Get Low,” *King of Crunk*). The story told by author Lonnae O’Neal Parker, entitled simply “Why I Gave Up On Hip-Hop” (2006), seems more and more common as

original members of hip-hop generation jump ship. Parker explains how her 12 year old daughter asked why she turns the radio station every time “a black man’s voice” is on the radio. Was it because she hates black men? Parker uses the language of domestic abuse and divorce to explain why hip-hop is no longer in her life:

That my decision to end our love affair had come only after years of disappointment and punishing abuse. After I could no longer nod my head to the misogyny or keep time to the vapid materialism of another rap song. After I could no longer sacrifice my self-esteem or that of my two daughters on an altar of dope beats and tight rhymes. No, darling, I'm not anti-hip-hop, I told her. And it's true, I still love hip-hop. It's just that our relationship has gotten very complicated.

Telling how she fell out of love with hip-hop, Parker reminisces back to when she was 12 years old, hearing Sugar Hill’s “Rapper’s Delight” for the first time. However, by the early 1990s, she recalls noticing an upward trend in violence, misogyny, and materialism. The warning signs were there all along, but she ignored them. By 2003, Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent were walking black women around on stage with dog collars during the performance of “P.I.M.P” at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards. Parker explains that hip-hop used to be “fun,” but explains why she can’t let her daughter listen to hip-hop: “I can't let you internalize toxic messages, no matter how cool some millionaire black rappers tell you they are....those of us who just love black people have to be a little more discriminating.”

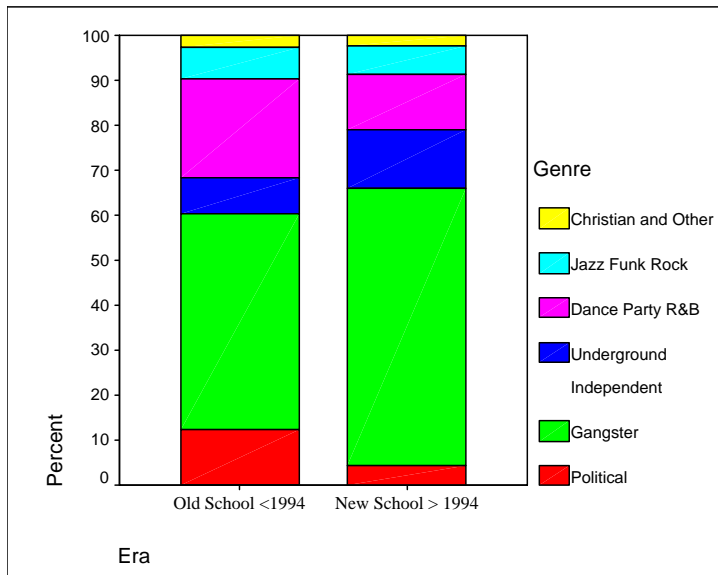
Changes in Achievement-Related Judgments in Hip-Hop Overtime

The current debate reflects a growing fissure between “old school” and “new school” hip-hop music and fans. There have been at least two significant changes in the historical development of hip-hop. The first, the “narrative turn,” marked by Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message” in 1982, involves a shift away from live party music to recorded lyrics intended to provide realistic insight into black life. The second is hip-hop’s “gangster turn” of the 1990s. Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s “Nothin But a G’ (Gangsta) Thang” dominated the hip-hop charts in 1993. In the

following year, The Notorious Big's *Ready to Die* and Tupac Shakur's *T.H.U.G. Life* compilation became the sound of hip-hop. To capture this shift, pre-1994 music can be considered old school hip-hop, while the post-1994 landscape represents a new school of hip-hop music.

Hardcore street lyrists existed well before 1994. However, this sub-genre coexisted under the broad umbrella of hip-hop with other styles including party, dance, and political. After 1994, anyone not performing the soldier-thug act quickly seemed "old school" and increasingly risked becoming irrelevant. This shift is reflected in the changing distribution of songs in the study sample (n=3030). Figure 8.1 shows the relative change in the types of songs before and after 1994.

Figure 8.1 Distribution of Hip-Hop Songs, By Sub-Genre



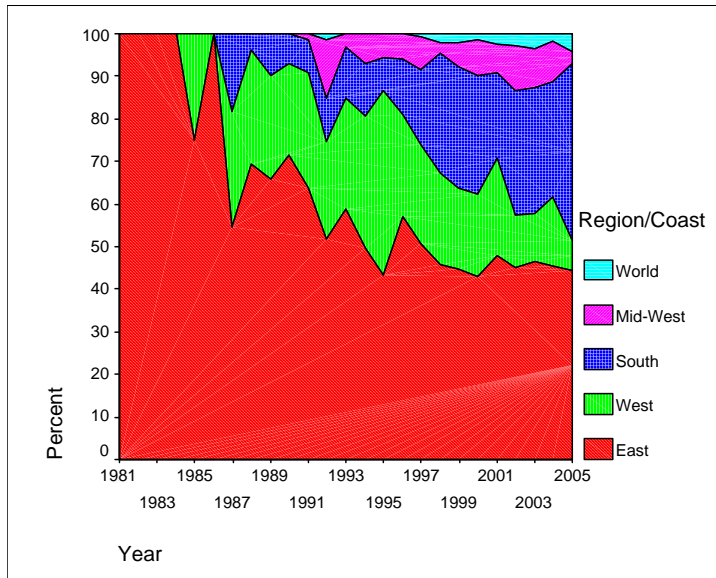
As displayed from the bottom up, the percentage of political songs decreased (12.4% versus 4.3%) while songs by gangster or "hardcore" (i.e., profane, violent) emcees increased (48% to 61.6%). With the increasingly availability of inexpensive recording technology, independent or

so-called “underground” artists have become more common. While the dance, party, or R&B sub-genre comprises 22% of the lyrics before 1994, it is cut in half (12.4%) in the new school era of hip-hop. Overtime, then, hip-hop has become less political, less party orientated, and increasingly concerned with hardcore gangster rhymes.

In 1994, the Chicago emcee Common (Sense) released the track “I Used To Love H.E.R” (*Resurrection*), a metaphoric track lamenting the takeover of hip-hop by commercial interests and thugs. On the track Common personifies hip-hop as a female love interest. In her youth, hip-hop was a virtuous treasure. However, as Common explains, hip-hop moves to the West Coast where she is eventually defiled and pimped out by the “Boys in the Hood,” a stab at gangster acts beginning with N.W.A. The artist Craig G makes the same observation about the gangster-turn in hip-hop when he rhymes, “Hip-hop nowadays seems different to me/Everybody's bustin’ a shot or flippin a ki [selling drugs]” (“I Hate Hip-Hop,” *Process Of Elimination Compilation*). Dispensing with the metaphoric wordplay, he explains that he hates hip-hop because it now praises drug runners and murders as “heroes”: “[it] makes me sick to my stomach.”

The dispersion of hip-hop from its New York roots combined with the ascendancy of the gangster sub-genre in the mid 1990s marks the end the love affair for many early fans. The diffusion of hip-hop from its New York and East Coast origin is depicted in Figure 8.2. As artist Common and the hip-hop literature describes, hip-hop migrated from the East to the West in the mid-to-late 1980s. The sample goes from beginning 100% east coast in the early 1980s to 60% by 1993. The late 1990s have also witnessed an explosion of southern hip-hop artists. Thus, the change between old school and new school hip-hop involves both a change in tone/style and geographical location.

Figure 8.2: Dispersion of Hip-Hop From The East Coast Overtime



These love metaphors of falling out of love with hip-hop may involve nostalgia for the “good ol’ days” of youth. Hip-hop followers of 1980s may simply be getting older, wiser, and more conservative with their musical tastes and social sensibilities. However, my analysis suggests that there are real reasons why so many early adopters seem disenchanted with hip-hop, some to the point divorcing hip-hop. I find that hip-hop pre-1994 contains different messages about mobility, relationships with societal institutions, and authentic race-gender identity. When old school hip-hop artists offer achievement-related judgments, they often speak to the importance of staying in school and staying away from crime and guns. While the drug dealer-slash-rapper-slash-billionaire archetype is now fashionable in hip-hop, blackness, coolness, and street/prison culture weren’t always synonymous in hip-hop.

The distribution of oppositional and “positive” pro-schooling content in hip-hop songs during these two eras is shown in Table 8.1. New school hip-hop songs, those released after 1994, contain more oppositional themes than earlier songs ($X^2 = 10.23$, $p = 0.00$, $df = 1$). About one-third of all new school songs contain at least one dimension of “I-R-S” oppositional culture

beliefs, compared to approximately one-fourth of old school songs. In addition to newer songs being more oppositional, I find that old school songs are more likely to contain pro-schooling themes ($X^2 = 12.31$, $p = 0.00$, $df = 1$). Ten percent of pre-1994 songs contain pro-schooling messages compared to only five percent of songs released after 1994.

Decomposing oppositional themes into the three “I-R-S” components reveals significant time differences on all three dimensions of oppositional culture. While distrust and conflict with white institutions appears to be an enduring and pervasive theme throughout hip-hop (see Chapter 3), old-school hip-hop lyrics are significantly more positive than new school lyrics ($X^2 = 8.88$, $p < 0.01$, $df = 1$). 65% ($n = 26$) of the songs depicting or encouraging positive relationships with the criminal justice system, government, or schools found in the sample are before 1994.

Table 8.1 Comparison of Themes By Era

	1981-1993 “Old School”(n=524)	1994-2005 “New School”(n=2506)
Any Oppositional Themes	24.4% (128)	31.5% (789)**
Instrumental	9.2% (48)	15.2% (380)**
Relational	17.2% (90)	14.8% (371)
Symbolic	6.7% (35)	14.0% (352)**
Any Pro-Schooling Themes	9.7% (51)**	5.6% (141)
Instrumental	5.5% (29)**	2.8% (69)
Relational	2.7% (14)**	1.0% (26)
Symbolic	5.5% (29)**	2.8% (69)

** $p < 0.01$ (two-side chi-square)

Important changes have also occurred in the hip-hop discourse involving the instrumental value of education and folk theories of social mobility. Instrumental beliefs in new school hip-hop are significantly more oppositional ($X^2 = 12.87$, $p < 0.01$, $df = 1$). 15.2% ($n = 380$) of songs after 1994 contain oppositional instrumental themes, compared to 9.2% ($n = 48$) songs before 1994. Of the 428 songs involving anti-school messages about mobility and achievement found in the sample,

almost 89% of these were songs released after 1994. Conversely, about 6% of all old school songs contain pro-schooling instrumental beliefs, while only 3% of new school songs involve these themes ($X^2 = 10.07$, $p < 0.01$, $df = 1$).

The oppositional thug-soldier conception of authentic blackness and masculinity is more prevalent after the mid-1990s ($X^2 = 21.11$, $p = 0.00$, $df = 1$). Twice as many symbolic oppositional themes can be found in new school songs as compared to old school ones (14% versus 7%). These statistics support the claim that hip-hop lyrics have become increasingly more negative overtime. When achievement-related judgments are considered, old school songs contain a relatively more positive achievement ideology and fewer oppositional messages than newer hip-hop songs.

Gangster-Rap & Achievement Related Themes

This shift in achievement related themes in hip-hop since the mid-1990s reflects a change in the types of hip-hop being produced. As shown above in Figure 8.1, the sub-genre of gangster or hardcore hip-hop has increased, while political and party/dance music has become less a part of hip-hop. The movement towards street orientated rhyming has increased the amount of oppositional themes in hip-hop, as oppositional themes are especially concentrated in this growing segment of the music. Songs by artists primarily identified with gangster rap are significantly more oppositional than other types of hip-hop (Table 8.2). About 40% of songs by gangster artists contain at least one type of oppositional judgment. Important differences can be seen on both oppositional instrumental and symbolic themes by sub-genre. 20% of gangster rap songs contain oppositional themes dealing with the opportunity structure, versus only 4.5% of political songs. Political hip-hop lyrics tend to contain the most oppositional relational themes

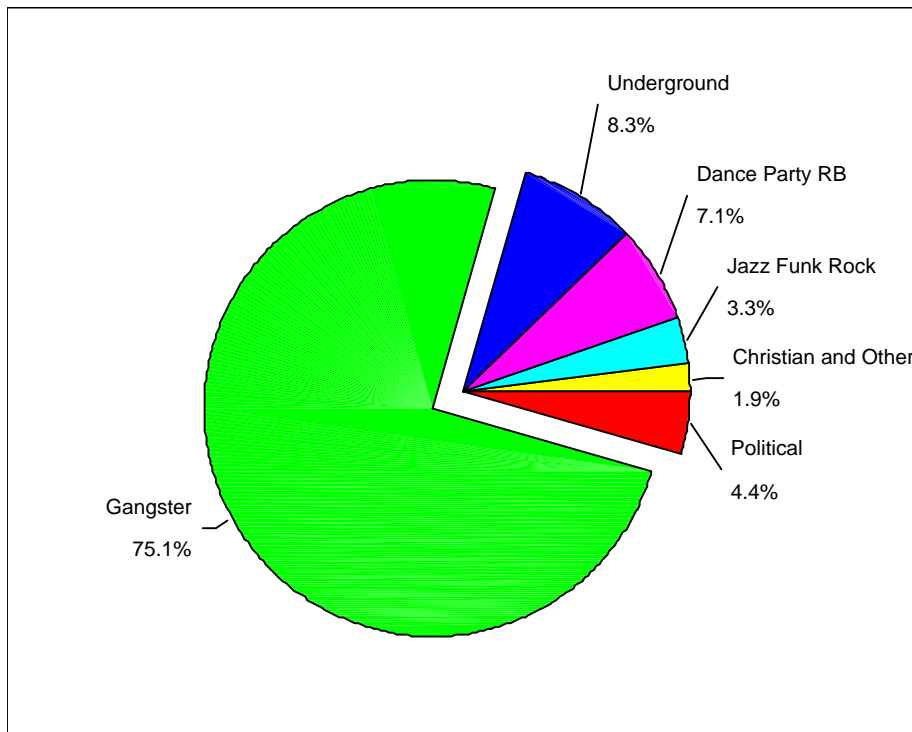
due to the strong levels of distrust of societal institutions and often violent conflict with the police and government officials.

Table 8.2 Comparison of Oppositional and Pro-Schooling Themes By Sub-Genre

	Political/ Conscious	Gangster/ Hardcore	Independent/ Underground	Dance/Party/ R&B	Jazz/Funk/ Rock	Christian/ Other
<i>Any Oppositional Themes</i>	24.0% (37)	39.6% (636)	21.1% (70)	15.8% (60)	16.1% (28)	24.2% (16)
Instrumental	4.5% (7)	20.0% (321)	7.6% (25)	6.3% (24)	4.6% (8)	9.1% (6)
Relational	21.4% (33)	17.3% (278)	15.1% (50)	8.2% (31)	11.5% (20)	16.7% (11)
Symbolic	5.8% (9)	19.1% (307)	3.9% (13)	6.3% (24)	4.6% (8)	9.1% (6)
<i>Any Pro-Schooling Themes</i>	16.2% (25)	4.6% (74)	7.6% (25)	8.2% (31)	10.9% (19)	9.1% (6)
Instrumental	5.8% (9)	2.8% (45)	3.3% (11)	4.5% (17)	5.2% (9)	3.0% (2)
Relational	1.9% (3)	1.1% (18)	0.9% (3)	2.9% (11)	0.6% (1)	3.0% (2)
Symbolic	11.7% (18)	1.9% (31)	6.0% (20)	3.9% (15)	8.6% (15)	4.5% (3)

Overall, hip-hop's oppositional messages tend to come from songs by identified gangster or hardcore artists. Figure 8.3 provides a visual representation of songs containing oppositional beliefs (n= 917) divided by sub-genre. Three out of every 4 songs that contain one or more of the oppositional components are by artists identified as hardcore or gangster.

Figure 8.3: Oppositional Themes, By Sub-Genre



To recall, the Chicago-based hip-hop artist Common (Sense) associates the corruption of hip-hop with west coast artists (“I Used To Love H.E.R.,” *Resurrection*). In terms of oppositional instrumental beliefs, there is some variation based on associated region. East coast lyrics are significantly less oppositional than other regions ($X^2 = 15.02$, $p = 0.00$, $df = 1$). About 12% ($n = 162$) of east coast lyrics contain oppositional content compared to 17% from other locals ($n = 245$). These apparent regional differences can not be attributed to only west coast artists, though about 16% of west coast songs do in fact contain these oppositional lyrics. Instead, southern hip-hop contains the most negative assessments of the opportunity structure. 20% of songs by southern artists contain oppositional themes, while only 10% of songs by mid-west artists fall into this category. That the outlook of southern hip-hop is significantly more bleak than other regions (X^2

=21.13, $p=0.00$, $df=1$) may reflect real differences in socioeconomic opportunities throughout the U.S. Historically, poverty has been more concentrated in the south than in other places.

Old School Hip-Hop Parables

These statistical patterns support the claim that the content of hip-hop has changed, but there is a qualitative difference involved as well that is difficult to capture with numbers. The stories told by hip-hop songs of the past offered straightforward messages about success. In what I call *old school hip-hop parables*, a youth makes the decision to dropout of school, joins the street economy, and meets a disastrous end because of these choices. At the end of the song, the artists reinforce the “moral of the story” by making explicit that this is the wrong decision. The message of these songs is that anyone wishing to avoid poverty, jail, and/or death should resist the temptation of leaving school for the streets. Examples by Ice-T, Kool Moe Dee, Diamond Shell, and the Poison Clan from the late 1980s and early 1990s show how these songs attempt to provide a positive message about education and success.

On the 1988 album *Power*, Ice-T describes how dropping out of school and getting involved in the “Drama” of gang life will lead to prison. The fictional youth in the song chooses a life of crime, carries guns, and steals cars. He is arrested, but is released after providing a fake alias to the police. In the conclusion, the youth is finally caught and is in jail awaiting execution. Ice-T provides the moral of the story:

Now I'm in the penzo [state penitentiary], chillin' like a real pro
I can't move until the [white] man says go
A puppet of the big game, an institutional thing
I wouldn't be here if I fed my brain
Got knowledge from school books, instead of street crooks
Now all I get is penitentiary hard looks
The joint is like an oven of caged heat
You're just a number, another piece of tough meat
Killers and robbers are all you greet
Act soft you will get beat

On death row they got their own hot seat
 For those who feel that they are truly elite
 The last thing you see's a priest
 The lights dim-your life ends
 ("Drama," *Power*)

This tale by Ice-T provides a clear warning against enrolling in the hard knocks university now championed by artists including Jay-Z. According to Ice-T, the desire to learn street knowledge instead of school knowledge will lead to jail. Far from glamorizing or normalizing incarceration in the life course of black youth, the description suggests that prison is a negative experience best to be avoided. Staying in school is a way to avoid becoming a "puppet" of the system.

Kool Moe Dee, in 1986, provides a story of what happens to those who fail to take school seriously. In the story of "Dumb Dick" (*Kool Moe Dee*), a foolish boy named Richard spends his time in high school chasing women instead of doing his school work. Although Kool Moe Dee admits that beautiful "girlies" made high school "fun," Richard focuses entirely on socializing instead of grades:

One thing went wrong, Rick got obsessed
 He wouldn't go to class, always think about ass
 Not if he was gonna pass, if he would just last
 Girls was all he was thinkin' about
 If the school was all boys, he'da been dropped out
 When he did drop out, he felt no shame
 And if you ask me, he had the right name
 Cause he hated to go [to school], but he loved to come [have sex]
 That's why I call him Dick, cause Dick is Dumb

Without an education, Richard is unable to secure a good job and resorted to selling drugs, the only option for a dropout. The story concludes with an update of how Richard's life turned out:

The people on the streets he was workin for
 Cut him off, now he's just plain old poor
 And all his girls left, because they never cared
 The were leeches for a dollar, and they got their share
 Homeboy disappeared like a magic trick
 And everybody wanna know what happened to Dick
 Well, he's still around, but now he's a bum
 Chasin bag ladies, he's the same old Dumb Dick

Richard still hasn't learned his lesson; he is a homeless bum still preoccupied with women. Though the story does seem to imply that women are temptresses and/or "gold diggers," the major theme is the importance of staying in school. Being disengaged from the learning process, dropping out of high school, and becoming a street hustler leads to being poor and womanless.

A 1991 track by Diamond Shell entitled "Cut School" (*The Grand Imperial Diamond Shell*) warns against skipping school. In many ways, this track contains the opposite message of Lil Flex's 2000 song "Badass" (*Throwed Yung Playa*) discussed in Chapter 2. To recall, Lil Flex's bad boy adaptation to schooling makes him the coolest young "playa" in his neighborhood. He skips class, romances girls, and sells drugs out of his locker. Academic disengagement, according to Lil Flex, leads to becoming a young millionaire with diamonds, clothes, cars, a home, and women. In Diamond Shell's parable about these schooling strategies, this bad boy behavior is not rewarded.

The track uses three vignettes to demonstrate how skipping school will lead to trouble. Each verse ends with the explicit message, "Don't ever cut school!" In the first verse, Diamond Shell appears in math class. He is "bored" and decides to use the restroom pass. However, instead of going to the restroom, he ventures into the lunchroom, where he quickly begins to socialize with a cute girl named Natae. After successfully getting her phone number, he is caught skipping class by his math teacher. Rather than be forced back to class, he decides to run, but is caught by school security. He ends the verse with the following observation about this scenario:

Security grabbed me, man I ain't goin no place
Kids if you think that's funny or cool
The only thing it got me was suspended from school
So don't ya ever cut school
I'm tellin ya, don't ever cut school

Next, Diamond Shell is asleep in bed. It's 6 a.m. and his mother wakes him up for school. He gets out of bed, gets dressed, and leaves for the bus stop. However, before getting on the bus, he

is approached by an older boy named Captial T. Captial T no longer bothers with school; he is getting rich selling drugs on the corner. Captial T offers to become Diamond Shell's street mentor: "Yo, we can both hang together and get paid, knowwhatI'msayin?...We can both hit the spots, sling drugs and be fat." Instead of going to school, Diamond Shell begins selling drugs on the block. The decision to leave school for the streets ends in disaster, as he is caught in a drug raid, chased by the police, and arrested after a deadly shootout. He reflects on the consequences of being "too cool for classes" and selling drugs:

I flee cause I'm free up the stairs and I'm mad
 The cop snatched my gun and beat me down real bad
 First he broke my nose and busted up my glasses
 All of this happened to me cuz I'm too cool for classes?
 Man, don't ever cut school
 Kids I'm tellin ya, don't ever cut school

The last verse takes place at the police station. He is charged with drug possession and attempted murder. In the high drama conclusion, he is given life prison sentence. His dream of being a hip-hop star is destroyed. Moreover, he is unable to go to the prom with Natae, the girl he met in the lunchroom. With his mother crying, he concludes with the overall message of the song one more time: "I shouldn'ta been so cool/Had to try to be bold and get suspended from school/So don't ya ever cut school..."

Lastly, on the 1990 track "Juveniles" (*2 Low Life Muthas*), JT Money and Debonaire tell stories about how *not* to act in school. JT describes his behavior as the typically bad boy:

I'm a menace to society, juvenile delinquent
 Can't stand school 'cause I'm in trouble frequent
 Livin in the office like it's my class
 See, if school's about trouble, maybe then I'll pass

Once expelled he declares, "fuck school, I don't need that shit, I'm the Mack Daddy, y'know I'm sayin, I'm gettin paid, I'm bankin! [making lots of money]." The duo explain how focusing on women and sex (being a "mack daddy"), refusing to obey the school rules, and selling drugs leads to school failure and expulsion. At the end of the song they disparage this type of behavior.

Debonaire tells the listeners, “don't do shit like us, don't try this shit at home.” The message is that if you want to be successful in life, don't emulate this bad boy behavior.

These tales by Ice-T, Kool Moe Dee, Diamond Shell, and the Poison Clan warn against academic disengagement. There is a clear connection between anti-school behavior and negative consequences. It is unlikely that even the most casual listener would interpret the song as promoting anti-school behavior, as the message or moral of the story is repeated throughout the song. These hip-hop parables don't appear after hip-hop's gangster-turn in the mid-1990s. New school song lyrics contain ample opportunities for artists to provide a positive message, but often fall short of providing a clear one. When many contemporary artists are not promoting the school of hard knocks, the meaning and consequences of negative school behavior is often ambiguous. Some new school songs do fall into the broad category of “pro-schooling,” however, the message to stay in school and avoid the streets is not as powerful.

This ambiguity about the consequences of negative school behaviors can be found on tracks by Kasino and Mase & Loon. On “Life is a Gamble” (*Life is a Gamble*) appearing in 1999, Kasino discusses dropping out of school, pursuing a life of crime, then eventual achieving success in hip-hop. While he came from a decidedly middle-class background—his father was a minister and mother was on the board of education—he says “peer pressure” was a major factor in his decision to dropout. He is arrested and spends five years in jail. Once released from jail, Kasino begins a lucrative hip-hop career. The end of the song concludes with the following observation:

God decided he didn't have to die for his mistakes
Just suffer a bit, to get his mind straight
I guess some gambles are worth it if in the end
The big picture comes into focus, so you can win

Thus, the decision to drop out of school and commit crimes is a “gamble”: some times it pays off with a lucrative hip-hop career, other times it doesn't. While he says this path was a mistake, ultimately Kasino wins in the end. Unlike the old school parables provided by Ice-T or Diamond Shell, the conclusion is missing a clear statement of “don't do this” or any indication that gambling on crime and/or hip-hop in the first place isn't “worth it.” Though the lyrics speak to the issues of redemption and the importance of spiritual belief, it also reinforces the mobility tale that dropping out to the streets eventually leads to hip-hop superstardom. As Blackstar criticizes in the verse opening this chapter, the end seems to justify the means in today's hip-hop.

Dropping out and selling drugs seems acceptable if and when it eventually leads to getting rich.

A 1999 track featuring Mase and Loon also lacks a clear statement about the value of staying away from the streets. Mase presents the following hypothetical question to Loon: “think if you could rewind time/And start your life all over again/What would you give and what would you keep?” Loon replies that he regrets dropping out of school to sell crack cocaine and shoot guns (“From Scratch,” *Double Up*). However, he provides no further explanation as to why this was a bad choice, what negative consequence results from this decision, or how his life would be different by staying in school. In fact, Loon seems to be quite successful without school, as he rhymes about his “[Mercedes] Benz with the rims that stop but continue to spin” (“Let's Get It Remix,” *Bad Boy For Life 12*”).

This isn't to imply that old-school hip-hop acts spent the bulk of their time preaching to listeners. But even artists who were primarily concerned about dancing and partying took the time to provide positive messages. For example, the music of Kid N' Play, the lighthearted dancing duo the late 1980s whose *House Party* films pioneered the crossover of hip-hop into cinema, regularly included pro-schooling themes. Their tunes revolve around partying, out-

dancing others, and courting women. Still, in the following verse, they explain why it is better to work a regular 9-to-5 job than risk the street life:

I used to break my back everyday, totin boxes in a factory
 Overworked, underpaid, was a fact for me
 But I had to get the money right [way]
 'Cause the money was tighter than a skirt on a hooker
 Then I took a look around
 Seen my friends drivin [Mercedes]Benzes, gettin paid
 Alright, everybody, get your hands up over your head and nobody move!
 ...Until the drug raid
 Oh well, I rather be broke, that was a easy decision
 My mission was to make dough, not end up in prison
 ("Bill's at the Door," *Face the Nation*)

In no way attempting to be "conscious" or "political," songs by artists including Special Ed ("I Got It Made," *Youngest in Charge*), Biz Markie ("I'm An Ugly Nigga, So What?," *All Samples Cleared*), or Rob Base & DJ E-Z Rock, ("Times Are Gettin' Ill," *It Takes Two*) used their very public personas to speak against self-destructive behavior.

Remaking the Past

Another way to see how achievement-related themes in hip-hop have changed is to consider remakes or "covers" of early hip-hop songs that contain pro-schooling messages. When today's hip-hop artists update old school hip-hop songs, they often diverge from the original messages. Consider how the following two hip-hop classics from the 1980s, Boogie Down Productions' "Love's Gonna Get Ya" and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" have been changed to fit contemporary hip-hop standards.

The original 1989 Boogie Down Productions song "Love's Gonna Get Ya" (*Edutainment*) is a pro-schooling parable about the dangers of dropping out of school to pursue the fast money of the streets. The song begins with a primer:

Ya know that's why man I be telling you all the time man, you know LOVE
 That word love is a very serious thing, and if you don't watch out I tell ya
 That (Love's gonna get you) because a lot of people out here say

"I love my car" or "I love my chain" or or "I'm I'm just in love with that girl over there"
So for all the people out there that fall in love with material items
We gonna bump the beat a lil' something like this

To demonstrate how the pursuit of fancy cars, jewelry, and women lead to trouble, the song tells a story of a boy and his brother who turn to drug dealing. The main character is a high achieving junior high school student (a "B+ student"). While he works hard in school, he is teased for being poor:

My moms goes to work cold busting her ass [working really hard]
My sisters cute but she got no gear [clothes]
I got three pairs of pants and with my brother I share
See there in school see I'm made a fool
With one and a half pair of pants you ain't cool
But there's no dollars for nothing else
I got beans, rice, and bread on my shelf

Frustrated with being poor, he is drawn into the street life. Able to make \$1000 a week, he decides to leave school: "business is boomin' everything is cool, I pull about a G a week, fuck school!" He uses the drug money to outfit his sister with nice clothes, buy his mother a 55 inch television, and replace the family's bland menu with steak. However, this path proves fatal as his brother is shot in a drive-by shooting. The story ends with the main character about to be killed in a shootout with the police. In the original Boogie Down Productions song the moral of the story is crystal clear: saying "fuck school" and hustling in the streets will lead to disastrous consequences. As the song concludes, this path is "gonna get'cha."

Snoop Doggy Dogg's 1998 remake, "Doggz Gonna Get Ya" (*Da Game Is To Be Sold, Not To Be Told*) is broadly similar, though the song is no longer about the dangers of dropping out of school to sell drugs. As the title suggests, it is now about how Snoop Dogg is "gonna get ya." There is no longer an opening verse warning about the obsession of cars, jewelry, and women. The character is now a "C+ student." The moral of the story is now not to "play" with a real gangster like Snoop:

Ya see the moral of the story is this:
 Love is a motherfucka
 And Dogg's is a motherfucka
 You mix the two up you bound to get some drama
 Loves gonna get ya?
 Naw nigga Doggz gonna get ya!
 You ever try to play me and that's real
 That's real
 That's real

Rather than providing a hip-hop “stay in school” message, it’s now about Snoop being a bad boy and the wrong “motherfucka” to offend. Wanting to be rich is fine, but interfering with Snoop’s accumulation of wealth will cause trouble (“drama”).

I have discussed the 1982 track “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five in Chapter 6. Faced with deteriorating neighborhood conditions, Melle Mel wonders how he is going to survive urban decay. To recall, the song opens with, “Broken glass everywhere/People pissin’ on the stairs, you know they just don’t care.” Urban poverty, according to the lyrics, provides the conditions for black youth to make the wrong life decisions. Melle Mel is stressed by his son’s desire to drop out of school and “run with the creeps” on the street. He laments that students are smoking marijuana at school while teachers seem unwilling to teach black youth. The last verse of the song explains what will happen to these black youth:

You say I’m cool, I’m no fool
 But then you wind up dropping out of high school
 Now you’re unemployed, all null void
 Walking around like you’re “Pretty Boy Floyd”
 Turned stickup kid [became a robber], look what you done did
 Got sent up [to prison] for a eight year bid
 Now your manhood took and you’re a name tag
 Spend the next two years as an undercover fag
 Being used and abused, and served like hell
 Till one day you was find hung dead in a cell

Thus, in the original “message,” Melle Mel critiques both the structural barriers and the cultural norms of idolizing hustlers, dropping out of school, and crime that are beginning to hold back black progress.

In 1997, Puff Daddy and protégé Mase remake this hip-hop classic. Mase rhymes:

Broken glass everywhere [glass shatters]
If it ain't about the money, Puff, I just don't care (that's right)
I'm that Goodfella fly guy, sometimes wiseguys
Spend time in H-A-W-A-I-I
Mase can you please stop smoking lah lah [marijuana]?
Puff why try? I'm a thug, I'ma die high!
("Can't Nobody Hold Me Down," *No Way Out*)

No longer worried about the conditions of the black community, Mase says he just a thug whose only concern is money and smoking marijuana—he is a thug and a bad boy. Bragging about cars, champagne, and expensive clothes, Mase is only distressed by being hated by poor blacks with non-academic Ph.D's ("player hater degrees"). The "message" is that Mase will not be held back by jealous peers unable to afford luxury vacations and expensive consumer goods. On the same Bad Boy Record's album, Puff Daddy declares succinctly that "it's all about the benjamins," that is, the money. Or as Memphis Bleek recites: "Its all about the benjamins: money, cash, hoes/ livin through this shit, I'm a nigga, stack doe [money]/Street scholar, eight figure nigga [black millionaire]..." ("Murda 4 Life," *Venni Vetti Vecci*). Echoing the oppositional themes already explored throughout this dissertation, these once powerful anthems when remade now reflect a very different understanding of race-gender authenticity, education, and success. The intention may be to pay tribute to old school hip-hop by remaking these songs, but it may have the effect of rewriting hip-hop history. Listeners too young to remember the originals may believe that hip-hop has always been "about the benjamins."

Abstract Storytelling Versus Autobiographical Truth

Still, it is important to avoid romanticizing the past. Hip-hop before the mid-1990s was not exclusively positive messages about staying in school, obeying the law, and being a responsible citizen. Profanity, violence, sex, and materialism are certainly nothing new in hip-hop or the broader American value system. In the 1980s, The 2 Live Crew was as "Nasty As They Wanna

Be.” So “nasty,” in fact, that the group was arrested for reciting their sexual lyrics in public. Schooly D, who is perhaps the inventor of gangster rap, rhymed about guns, girls, and money in the mid-1980s. His 1986 groundbreaking track “P.S.K” (*Schooly D*), short for “Park Side Killers,” thematically explores money, smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol while driving, and having sex with women. However, 1980s gangster rap still contained redeeming messages. On “P.S.K,” Schooly D contemplates shooting someone with a gun, but his “educated mind” tells him that going to jail is stupid. Instead, he picks up a microphone and lyrically kills his opponent. Ice-T, one of the founders of West-Coast gangster rap, regularly rhymed about guns, the drug trade, and promiscuous women. Still, his songs detailing the hustler lifestyle always ended with the street life leading to death and destruction. Rhyme, instead of crime, is explicitly how Ice-T advocated making money (i.e., *Rhyme Pays*).

Though a subtle difference, the late 1980s stories of crime and drug dealing were first-person narratives, but these songs were not autobiographical. Instead, Schooly D, Ice-T, or NWA resembled urban storytellers. Their songs guide the listeners through fictionalized scenes intended to represent what was “really” happening in inner-city America. While the artists claimed to be portraying real events, the artists were not saying they were killers in everyday life, they were rappers. By the mid-1990s, however, the line between vivid storytelling for social or political awareness (or simply entertainment) and real life began to blur. Hip-hop lyrics have moved from first-person role playing to autobiographical tales of the streets. That is, the stories currently being told are presented as actual events lived and experienced by the artists themselves. In no way are the lyrics intended to be entertainment. Disciples of this autobiographical format, such as Jay-Z, Snoop Dogg, 50 Cent, and The Notorious B.I.G. base their lyrics on real life criminal activity. To use the language of hip-hop, these are real life

“graduates” of the streets, not actors, “wanksters,” or “studio gangsters.” Living the street life, or having lived it in the past, is now a requisite for rhyming about the streets.

The autobiographic aspect of hip-hop has changed the tone and ascetics of music, and potentially the strength of hip-hop's achievement-related judgments. When old school artists told stories about the downfall of crime, these were abstract statements about race-gender identity and achievement. In the story, a person skips school, sells drugs, and dies. In today's “trapper” formulation of hip-hop, there is little or no separation between real life, the hip-hop artist's lyrical persona, and the drug-dealer. The widely visible financial success (real or imagined) of hip-hop artists who apparently graduated from the school of hard knocks adds another layer of complexity beyond simply the lyrics. When artists recount that “I” dropped out of school, sold drugs, and then made 100 billion dollars in hip-hop, this is a concrete example, living proof beyond what is said on a record, that crime pays.

Section 2: Challenging Hip-Hop's Oppositional "I-R-S" Themes

That's What the White Man Wants Us To Do

The dominant folk theory of social mobility in hip-hop holds that street crime, sports, and/or hip-hop are the only ways in which black youth are likely to be successful in life. Given the prominence of these stories of achievement, artists wishing to present a different message face an uphill battle. During the earlier days of hip-hop, artists relied primarily on the parable format, offering relatively simplistic stories demonstrating the merits of staying on the right path. More recently, songs emphasize the negative effect these activities have on the overall health of black community.

Wanting to justify drug dealing, songs maintain that the US government, typically the Central Intelligence Agency, is involved in the transcontinental trade of drugs. Rather than serve as motivation not to get involved in the drug economy, this story is typically used to shift culpability away from black drug dealers. Lyrics attempting to speak against drug dealing use the same information to argue against blacks selling drugs. The message is that blacks selling drugs to other blacks is part of the "white man's plan" of self-genocide. On "Hoodlum Poetry" (*Unlady Like*), for example, No Limit female artist Mia X warns that the drug trade is a conspiracy to exploit blacks. Rhyming as the personification of heroin, she says:

The so-called big ballin' brothers are obsessed with me
They kill, rob, and plot on one another to possess me
They see me as a goddess
The financial path that will lead them out the ghetto
But don't they know, have a clue
That I and my mother were sent here to destroy them
To entice, baffle, and trap them
Conscious people call the conspiracy genocide
Well, what do you think?
I mean you make money off me, while they pile up evidence on you
Then get you to spend all the money you're stackin'
On lawyers and bail bondsmen
They seize your property and worldly items

Instead of getting rich, black drug dealers are described as being exploited in this conspiracy. According to Mia X, lawyers and bail bondsmen and eventually the state are the real beneficiaries of the drug trade. Similarly, Laquan, while rhyming about the “false education system,” makes the same observation about drugs. The “truth,” he says, is that the crack trade is the “devil's trap,” part of a white plan to destroy brotherhood among blacks (“Brother to Brother,” *Notes of a Native Son*). Thus, he advises against getting involved in these criminal activities.

Drug dealing, and the wealth that is allegedly earned from it, tends to get construed as part of the black struggle against white oppression. By gaining success through an alternative route that doesn't depend on white schools or white employers, drug dealing is a symbolic way to buck the system. Hip-hop's counter-narrative takes issue with this aspect of the soldier's war, emphasizing the destruction and violence caused by this resistance strategy. Perhaps the most well-known song using this strategy is the title track to the movie *Dangerous Minds* (1995), wherein white teacher Michelle Phiffer reforms a failing inner-city classroom. Coolio suggests that drug dealing only hurts the black and poor. Rhyming as a struggling black student contemplating dropout, Coolio asks the following question:

Power and the money, money and the power
Minute after minute, hour after hour
Everybody's runnin, but half of them ain't lookin
It's goin on in the kitchen, but I don't know what's cookin
They say I got ta learn, but nobody's here to teach me
If they cain't understand it, how can they reach me?
 (“Gangsta's Paradise,” *Gangsta's Paradise*)

Challenging the “dropout to shine” narrative of power and fast money, the vocalist L.V responds that even though teachers may not be able to empathize with the obstacles facing black youth, dropping out to sell drugs only hurts other blacks. He harmonizes, “Tell me why are we so blind to see /That the ones we hurt are you and me?” One.Be.Lo wonders aloud whether black hustlers

are more dangerous than white racists who supposedly control schools and the media, “With brothers like these tell me, who needs the Ku Klux?!” (“Axis,” *S.O.N.O.G.R.A.M.*). While he believes that racist schools are brainwashing black youth and placing poison in the crayons of school children (see Chapter 2), he is also critical of drug dealers who seem to be part of the same axis of evil.

Don't Be Stupid

These anti-drug dealing messages warn against being tricked into the streets. Lyrics also offer empathic yet harsh words for those who choose the hustle. While artists say they understand the struggle based on first-hand experience with growing up black and poor, they also say that those who take the street route are simply stupid. As Mr. Bigg says to youth who want to emulate the street life of hip-hop and become “gangstas, ballaz, hustlaz, and playas”:

So you think [you] want to be like Mr. Mother fuckin Biggs, huh?
You want your head full of gray hair?
You want to shoot niggas and get shot up?
Then take your stupid ass right there and do it then!
 (“Gangstas, Ballaz, Hustlaz, Playas,” *The Mask is Off*)

Telling his life story, Mr. Bigg recalls how he tried to live the street life and spent 12 years in prison because of it. He lost all the cars, houses, and was shot several times. Now out of jail, he attempts to use hip-hop songs to warn youth about staying away from the thug life. The streets aren't a gamble or a game, according to Mr. Bigg, but a big mistake.

Similarly, Lil' Flip refers to those who choose the fast cash of the streets over education as “dumb asses” (“Haters Still Mad Remix,” *Sucka Free & Undaground Legend*). Based on his life experience of being close to the streets, he reasons that crime simply doesn't make financial sense. Lil' Flip brags about all the money and nice things he has, “I got a big house, I got a big

car/I got a lot of shit, I even got a club with a bar,” but attributes this to being an intelligent, legal entrepreneur. He provides the following assessment of street hustlers:

It seems like niggaz get dumber and dumber
How you trade in a Benz, just to get you a Hummer?
You went to jail, now you on probation
For real, should of went and got a education
But your dumb ass, couldn't be patient
You wanted to smoke weed, now time you're facing
Three years, behind three blunts [marijuana laced cigars]
Three freaks, damn nigga three sweets
And that wasn't even endo [high quality marijuana]
You went to jail, for some regular weed?
And you saying, that you better than me?
You smarter than me, how the fuck you harder than me?

Lil' Flip critiques the “ghetto superstar” lifestyle that is concerned with impressing others with flashy cars, drugs, and women. He says that these characters should have invested in education. In the long run, Lil' Flip is wealthy and free while others are just now getting out of jail. Wyclef Jean, formerly of The Fugees, chides street gangsters for not being very smart. He instructs them to “learn your history before you start buss slugs [shooting guns]” (“Gangsta Cause,” *Greensleeves Rhythm Album #18*). He says that if they knew about the struggles of Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X, or Farrakhan they would know that killing on the streets is the wrong thing to do.

Too Short, the Oakland artist known for pioneering hip-hop's pimp persona and the use of the word “bitch,” warns about using crime to survive the inner-city. To be sure, Too Short's lyrics are certainly racy and tend to perpetuate the pimp-prostitute gender dynamics discussed earlier. However, like Ice-T, Too Short uses his street credibility to provide a realistic assessment of crime. Speaking from first-hand experience on the streets, he says he was tempted to sell drugs to escape poverty, but that “crime don't pay” (“The Ghetto,” *Short Dog's In the House*). Addressing youth facing the same challenges he went through, he says that poor educational and labor market opportunities are partly responsible for crime. However, Too Short asks rhetorically

where the streets will lead in ten years—the answer of course is dead or in jail. The last verse is telling, as Too Short says that black youth don't have to sell out or act like whites to be successful:

So much game [useful knowledge] in a Too Short rap
Blacks can't be white and whites can't be black
Why you wanna act like someone else?
All you gotta do is just be yourself
We're all the same color underneath
Short Dog's in the house you'd better listen to me
Never be ashamed of what you are
Proud to be black stand tall at heart
Even though some people give you no respect
Be intelligent, when you put em in check
Cause when you're ignorant, you get treated that way
And when they throw you in jail you got nothing to say
So if you don't listen it's not my fault
I'll be getting paid while you'll be paying the cost
Sitting in the jailhouse running your mouth
While me and my peoples try to get out

Instead, acting “intelligent” is the way to achieve success. The message to challenge the system through intelligence is the opposite of what is typically advocated in hip-hop. Too Short speaks to the contrary, warning that those who respond to societal disrespect with disrespect will be in jail or stuck in the ghetto. Acting “ignorant,” part of the soldier’s authenticity script of “acting a fool” and “not giving a fuck,” only gives the system a reason to throw more blacks in jail.

The Need To Wake Up From The Sports & Hip-Hop Dream

The regular 9-to-5 job in the labor market is usually associated with degrading experiences that arouse collective memories of slavery. In sharp contrast to the jobs connected to formal education, entertainment careers are portrayed in hip-hop as more fulfilling and more feasible options for black youth. Spearhead, though, challenges the view that professional athletes can or should be role models for black success. Watching the NBA “Dream Team” compete in the Olympics, Spearhead rhymes how it is ironic that black basketball players are praised as heroes, while non-athletes are feared and loathed (“Dream Team,” *Home*), a complaint about black

athleticism made by both Resse (2004) and Hoberman (1997). Instead of idolizing athletes, Spearhead argues that blacks working to uplift the black community should be emulated. As a kind of ultimate “dream team,” he drafts Huey Newton, Marcus Garvey, Nat Turner, Angela Davis, and Malcolm X, while Shaquille O’Neil simply provides the half-time entertainment. According to the song, these historic black figures might provide something more than dreams of basketball and money for aspiring black youth.

Relying on the dream of professional sports is risky, as the Afrocentric group the Jungle Brothers explain. Band member Afrika cautions that “jump shots get blocked and dreams get shattered” (“Brain,” *Raw Deluxe*). Erick Sermon, formally known as “E” from EPMD, urges black youth to rethink their plans for success. The track “Do You Know” (*Chilltown, New York*) begins with a sample of a person yelling “WAKE UP!,” a powerful motif utilized by movie director Spike Lee. In Spike Lee films, “Wake up” is a signal for blacks to realize their flaws and work towards resolving them. A second layer of meaning is added to the song by sampling the theme song to the 1976 Diana Ross movie *Mahogany*, “Do you know, where you’re going to/ Do you like the things that life is showing you?” The title song and movie follows a poor black woman who becomes a wealthy fashion designer, but in the end, realizes that she has given up happiness for a lucrative career. Those around her are not really her friends, but are faithful only as long as they benefit from her success. The combination of the Spike Lee “Wake Up” motif and the melancholy Dianna Ross sample signals that Erick Sermon has a serious message for his listeners.

In the song, Erick Sermon says that those who aspire to become future NBA stars, hip-hop artists, and entertainers must have a backup plan, as becoming a star is unlikely to happen. In addition, those who seem to be on cusp of making it through these routes should resist

spending their money on expensive shoes or car rims because any success in these fields will be short-lived. Addressing the basketball dream, Erick Sermon asks:

What happen when the clock stops (uh?)
Injury and no more wicked jump shots (two!)
ESPN ends...
There goes your 2 million fans and there goes your friends (uh-huh)
They don't care who you are and what you did

The streets don't qualify as a backup plan, as he explains that drug dealing, crime, and gun play eventually leads to jail or death. "Every real gangsters dies/Tony, Al Capone, Gotti, Bonnie & Clyde/It's almost done for you, it's about to end."

Hip-hop mogul seems to be the career of choice for many black youth; even those who have made it in professional sports still aspire to become rappers (see Chapter 5). However, some artists provide a grave and sober assessment of the hip-hop career track. Instead of a non-stop party with champagne and large stacks of money, they describe the music industry as simply another site of black exploitation. Similar to dealing with pimps, dealers, and robbers on the street, the hip-hop career involves being victimized by managers, promoters, and record executives. While hip-hop is often envisioned as an escape from the violence of the streets, Chubb Rock recounts how record executives purposely spark conflict ("beef") among artists to boost record sells. Chubb Rock speculates that the violent shootouts, including "The East Coast vs. West Coast" wars of the 1990s, may be record company ploys. In speaking against divisions in hip-hop, he says that intelligent artists should avoid falling into this trap, "So, I should diss my brother and let the white man pay me? Nah!!!" ("East vs. West Remix," *The Mind*).

The Independent & Underground Hip-Hop Movement

In an attempt to avoid exploitation by major record companies, hip-hop artists say they have chosen to remain independent or "underground." As the owners of their own recording studios

and printing/distribution systems, these emcees say they are in complete control of the creative process, unlike mainstream artists signed to the four multinational music conglomerates.

Currently, Sony-BMG, EMI, Universal and Warner are estimated to control more than 80% of the music industry. About 11 percent of the study sample songs are by artists identified as underground or independent. Interestingly, white artists are over-represented among the independents. About one-quarter of independent songs appear from white artists, compared to one-eighth of song by black artists.

These independent acts accuse major label hip-hop of “dumbing down” in order to sell more records. For example, independent Texas artist Bavu Blakes explains the difference between independent and industry hip-hop:

Livin' not solemnly but scholarly on that level my father be, comfy
 What if I never do that 'cause of how some of you act
 You can't classify something spiritual
 My shit ain't underground, my shit is just lyrical
 I ain't gon' act dumb as hell to get a hit
 But I will have record sales in a little bit
 If you read and write I got somethin' you gon' like
 Broadcastin' live, new non-white [Walter] Cronkite
 (“Bah-Voo,” *Create & Hustle*)

In this pointed verse, Bavu Blakes suggests that independent hip-hop tends to be more “scholarly”: it appeals to literate fans, those able to read and write. He calls himself the new black Walter Cronkite, the renowned news reporter, while accusing popular hip-hop artists of acting “dumb.” KRS-One, the self-proclaimed teacher and spiritual leader of hip-hop, defines the difference between underground and most hip-hop. Rather than rely on the distinction between record labels and ownership, he conceptualizes underground as hip-hop that is motivated by the uplift of all oppressed people. He explains:

To be underground simply means that you're down
 For the struggle, get 'em up, that's UNDERGROUND
 You could be a classy lady or a whore
 But if you protest the war, for sure, you UNDERGROUND
 If the government can't see you, or deceive you

You love your people, believe you UNDERGROUND
If you refuse to play the game, you go against the grain
You ridin' the train, you UNDERGROUND - get it!
("Underground," *Kristyles*)

Taking aim at gangster artist 50 Cent, he says that being underground "ain't about jewels, bitches and cars." More generally, he scolds the image of the hustler-slash-rapper, the "trapper," who uses hip-hop as simply another money-making hustle. Staying true to hip-hop, being underground, according to KRS-One, doesn't involve hustling young listeners for financial gain.

Independent or underground artists are not against making money. In fact, they often emphasize that they are financially independent. Using a baseball metaphor, Natural Resource League suggests that artist-industry relationships contain the same essence of exploitation that exists between blacks and the government, and professional black athletes and white management ("Negro League Baseball," *Negro League Baseball 12*"). The managers, label, A&R executives (artist and repertoire staff that handle contracts and marketing) get rich while artists do all the work. According to Grand Puba, "this business ain't nothin' but corrupt." Artists, like athletes, are being "exploited" for hit songs ("homeruns") then replaced when the newest star comes along. Taking a stab at gangster rap, the National Resource League says that labels "bench" anyone refusing to "put on a screwface [angry face] and scream lyrics that's hardcore [profane, violent]." Instead of rhyming for white owners and playing into racial stereotypes, The Natural Resource League encourages hip-hop artists to start their own independent labels ("leagues").

In addition to maintaining creative integrity, independent artists proudly exclaim that they are wealthy in real life, not just in their music videos and MTV Cribs appearances. The horror-core emcee Necro, for example, says remaining independent is a smart financial decision: "When you buy Necro stuff, Necro gets 10 dollars from it/You buy major label stuff they get a dollar!"

(“WNYU 89.1 Freestyle,” *I Need Drugs*). B.G rhymes that he “make[s] more money independent than a major nigga done went gold” (“Get Your Shine On,” *It's All On U Volume 1*). While independent artists may not receive the most fame, television time, or sell the most albums, the idea is that they are not exploited by music executives.

The radical artist Ras Kass declares war against the mainstream hip-hop labels. According to Ras Kass, the music industry is sucking the “blood of the black community,” and black artists are simply puppets. Much less nostalgic of the past than other artists, he accuses hip-hop of “sleeping with the enemy” since the late 1970s:

Now niggaz always reminisce about the old school days in the park
 You have to realize hip-hop was fucked from the start
 When Sugar Hill got major distribution threatened existence
 We didn't control our shit once rap became a music business
 Music: the art of expression, combinations of tones
 Business: the exploitation for profit of an artform
 Conflict of interest, two separate entities
 Niggaz pretend to be real but still sleeping with the enemy
 And not to diss Rick Rubin but who let the Jews in?
 (“Core Audience,” *Soul On Ice*)

As a non-dominant cultural and social space, white involvement in hip-hop at any level tends to be suspect. Ras Kass questions the role of Jewish management in hip-hop. Jewish involvement complicates the black-white dynamic by activating historical tensions between blacks and so-called “middle-man minorities,” Jews and Koreans for example, who are often accused of exploitation by proxy. Ras Kass suggests that blacks have never been in control of their cultural expression since the days of the Sugar Hill Gang. The claim that blacks aren't “really” in control of the music is sometimes used to release hip-hop artists from culpability. However, Ras Kass still holds black artists responsible for promoting destructive lyrics:

Violence is a new platinum gimmick
 Call it the double cross crossover
 A rose by any other name is “Seal”
 You claimin' that you “represent the real niggaz life”
 But only represent it for a price
 Cuz if next week the new fad was hip-hop fags

You'd find a lot of hardcore niggaz in DRAG
 Shit is bad and we acknowledge this but at a certain point you only perpetuate it
 So NEXT TIME you rhyme about physically buckin' [shooting] somebody
 [POW!] instead of "nigga" say "whiteboy"
 And see how quick the devil PROTEST it
 Wanna see yo' ass ARRESTED, your label wouldn't SUGGEST it
 They say it's BEST if you stick to killin' niggaz

As puppets of the white music industry, Ras Kass plainly accuses artists of betraying (“double crossing”) the black community for money. Beyond simply informing listeners of the bad conditions of urban life, he argues that hip-hop is now perpetuating these social problems. He explains the effect mainstream hip-hop is having on children:

Oh, some 10-year old can claim he pimps ho's
 Find his daddy's glock 9 [gun] and give his sister a 2 inch hole
 Between the eyes -- the influence is obvious
 Music ain't supposed to be raisin' your kids but in 1995 it is

The importance of being “in control” of hip-hop reflects what Shelby (2005) refers to as “black cultural nationalism.” Often a key component of black political nationalism of the past, cultural nationalism mandates that a distinct and autonomous black culture is the basis for black solidarity. In this view, blacks must be “the primary producers, purveyors, and beneficiaries (financial and otherwise) of their culture” (Shelby, 2005: 166). Referencing the debate over who controls hip-hop, Shelby notes that there is a belief that blacks “must be the ones to decide if and how their culture is to be used for commercial ends, and they should be the ones to gain and profit and recognition from this use.” Ras Kass’ song echoes what might be called hip-hop’s “reverse one-drop rule of black culture”: “a cultural trait is black if and only if blacks *alone* invented it and it is *white* if *any* whites had a hand in its creation” (italics in the original). This logic underlies the belief that if whites are buying hip-hop or making money from it then the content of hip-hop must be dictated by white executives and white listeners.

The lyrical exchanges that take place between independent and major artists have the tendency to devolve into yet another identity contest of real and fake. Independent artists accuse

mainstream (typically thug-soldier) artists for being “fake” and industry creations, while major label artists taunt independents for being jealous haters who lack the talent to land a record contract. The Nova Scotian, independent artist Classified is critical of the dispute between the two factions, suggesting that both sides are partially correct. First, he criticizes popular artists for being unoriginal, unintelligent, and sending the wrong message to youth:

Let me put it to ya plain and simple, I hate this shit for real
There ain't no skill, ain't no wordplay, just mimics and clones
They all say they're keepin it real, but won't admit that they're wrong
 (“The Final Time,” *Boy Cott-in the Industry*)

Next, he mocks underground artists for their typically low-budget, boring songs with uninspiring beats:

And we got underground cats who are trying to be different... That's respectable
But it's a fine line between being different and good and different and pitiful
Your beats are made with pots'n pans and they don't hit

Instead of instigating the dispute, he advises that hip-hop needs to refocus on making good music, the boundaries of which include simply being true to one's self and putting the fans first. Overall, the independent movement provides another source of critique within hip-hop by questioning the motivation and usefulness of negative hip-hop lyrics.

There's More To Life Than Drugs, Basketball, & Hip-Hop

Independent hip-hop may or may not provide more intelligent discourse and less regulated expression, but hip-hop careers generally are part of an extremely narrow portion of the opportunity structure. Hip-hop's counter-movement condemns the message that a life of crime, shooting hoops, and/or writing rhymes is the only viable options for black American youth. For example, the black power inspired group The Coup lampoons the view that black youth can only be drug dealers, athletes, entertainers, and hip-hop artists. They parody the children's nursery rhyme “What Are Little Boys Made Of.” The original:

What are little boys made of?
 Snips and snails, and puppy dogs tails
 That's what little boys are made of !
 What are little girls made of?
 Sugar and spice and all things nice
 That's what little girls are made of!

Adapting this nursery rhyme to the folk theories of success that are pervasive in hip-hop, The Coup rebuff:

Niggaz, thugs, dope dealers and pimps?
 Basketball players, rap stars, and simps [buffoons]
 That's what little black boys... are made of!
 Sluts, hoes, and press the naps around your neck?
 Broads pop that coochie [dance like a stripper], bitches stay in check [remain submissive]
 That's what little black girls... are made of!
 ("Not Yet Free," *Kill My Landlord*)

According to this satirical verse, the belief that drugs, basketball, and hip-hop are the only options available for black males, while black females must become submissive prostitutes, strippers, and hairdressers is part of a myth designed to destroy blacks. In retaliation for brainwashing blacks into believing these things, The Coup dedicates the remainder of the song to killing "the oppressor." The cocking of guns and loud gunshots ring out on the track as they pretend to kill Bill Clinton, Al Gore, George Bush, and the police.

Lyrics countering that black youth can achieve the American Dream without resorting to crime stress the importance of working hard and developing long-term goals. Through planning and hard work, KRS-One says that "things will change":

I suggest you start to speak up
 A lawyer, a doctor, a rapper...you wanna be what?!
 Whatever it is, you gotta visualize
 You need to focus for real, and stop livin' them lies
 The time you givin' them guys
 You could be workin' upon the goal you hold
 Yo, you must realize
 Yo, you need to be wise
 Yo, you need to be alive, there could be no revenge or deceit in your eyes
 Rise!
 ("Things Will Change," *Kristyles*)

Instead of trouble making and working the streets, KRS-One suggests that the same energy could be used to accomplish other goals. While he questions whether aspiring to be a rapper is the best choice (“you wanna be what?!”), the tone is that the chances of success in any field will be increased by staying out of trouble. Talib Kweli, while rhyming about the “beautiful struggle” facing blacks, envisions a brighter future for the next generation of black youth (“Around My Way,” *The Beautiful Struggle*). He says that blacks have to begin creating opportunities for themselves and their children, beginning with investing their money wisely:

These conditions make us strong
And we create our own businesses so later on
Our children have things in their name that they can say they own
...
Be a doctor or a lawyer or make your momma a promise that
You'll finish school, when you got a dream you gotta follow that

Songs like these describe a much more open opportunity structure beyond the street, basketball, and hip-hop.

Towards a More Pragmatic Oppositional Culture: A Better Way to Fight the System

The hardcore, thug, “don’t give a fuck” conception of authentic black masculinity tends to dominate hip-hop’s discourse on race-gender identity. Those who stray from these norms are often accused of being fake and not quite masculine. With the exception of the fetishized educated black woman, realness is claimed by unabashedly rejecting the system. Hip-hop’s militant, pro-black acts are not immune from associating black authenticity with school resistance and negative beliefs about formal education.

There are those in hip-hop who refuse to perform the thug, soldier script and challenge the hegemonic conception of black masculinity *without* advocating anti-school norms or destructive behavior. According to the Poor Righteous Teachers, refusing to sell drugs and

standing up against oppression is a really black, masculine thing to do. As they put it, “Can you stop selling crack ‘cause Negro *that* takes balls” (“Conscious Style,” *The New World Order*).

Challenging the drug dealing narratives of gangster artists and street characters, the teachers instruct black youth to reject this negative achievement ideology and image of realness:

Some niggas is dying over here, and niggas is dying over there
 Black youth don't follow them, because they don't know shit
 They selling you death on that pursuit for [Mercedes]Benz and Lexus
 We gots to talk about, cause I'll reveal your ass

Instead of portraying blacks as thugs, killers, and gangsters, they associate an authentic black persona with standing up against oppression:

I be schooling your ass, cause being truth is a task
 And I am nothing but, I'm God-blessed nigga, what?
 Take your hands off your nuts, and your lips off that blunt [marijuana laced cigar]
 Stand for something, stand erect, stand for this
 You'll fall for anything ‘cause you don't stand for shit

Pharoahe Monch concurs that resisting the street thug image is a way to stand up. Portraying a black boy whose father has abandoned the family, sister is turning tricks on the corner, and mother is stressed to the point of mental breakdown, Pharoahe Monche says that refusing to follow the street path despite these obstacles is a way to fight the system:

Fuck the star spangled [banner], the makers of fallen angels
 Danglin from moon crescents, I persevere, breathe the air
 Inhale the effervescence of life
 This street game is stiflin' I'm triflin' upholdin' a rifle
 Peerin from behind the eyes of God, we at odds with ourselves
 What is it worth when this barren metropolis prevail?
 (“God Send,” *Internal Affairs*)

Opposing the “street games,” as Pharoahe Monche calls drug dealing and crime, is a way to fight America, the ultimate designer of these social problems. He warns that blacks have been “brainwashed” into killing each other, as black youth are now an “endangered species” because of this self-destructive behavior. Staying alive or simply breathing is a form of black resistance given these circumstances.

Hip-hop's soldier thug image of black masculinity tends to equate poor academic achievement, violence and guns, and drug dealing with being real. As I've discussed, these bad boys are portrayed as being highly desired by women. Salt, of the pioneer female group Salt N' Pepa, though, provides one of the few challenges to this image in the study sample. According to Salt:

In your own neighborhood, it ain't all good
 Guns don't make you bad, you've been had [tricked]
 You've been dissed, got it twisted [confused], senses shifted
 Brainwashed by an image and you was gifted
 "Beautiful and black" when you comin' back?
 Sellin' crack in the land, stand up and be a man!
 Better get an education
 ("Imagine," *Brand New*)

Instead of praising these thugs or wanting to be their "gangsta bitch," Salt says that black men have been tricked into believing that guns and drugs is the only way to be an authentic black man. She encourages them to "stand up and be a man," and associates black pride in the past with education. Similarly, Queen Latifah scolds black men shooting guns on the block as "fake," noting that they often kill innocent children. Instead, she says "show me a real nigga wit a brain" ("Just Another Day," *Black Reign*).

The oppositional black male identity conceptualized in the "real nigga" soldier identity uses cultural inversion to neutralize or place a positive spin on negative stereotypes. However, the Goodie Mob attacks the utility of black men calling themselves and each other by the n-word. They explain how being a "nigger" means being uneducated, thus unable to realize that embracing this identity is part of a white plan to destroy blacks:

A nigger done read history but yet his eyes didn't see
 The only reason you a nigger is because somebody else wants you to be
 Well a nigger uneducated, intergrated, singin' "We shall overcome"
 A nigger trying to be white is what a nigger seem like have become
 And when they [white people] call me a nigger to my face'
 Can't do nothin' but walk away
 But here it is niggers call other niggers niggers each and every day
 Dividing and conquering

(“The Experience,” *Still Standing*)

The situation described by the Goodie Mob associates the “real nigga” identity to what can be thought of as a self-regulating stratification system. That is, thinking and acting like “niggers” according to the Goodie Mob maintains black oppression without the need of white action. Simply, blacks kill each other trying to “keep it real”: “So many black men out here trying to be niggers/keeping it real to the point that they dying to be niggers.” Far from being a form of empowerment, the verse describes how blacks call each other by these names and remain powerless. Because blacks do it themselves, they are in no position to complain when whites demean blacks. In addition, the group criticizes the achievement threat created when other blacks attempt to become successful as part of the problem:

You know how a nigger get when he see another nigger outfit
 Don't want nobody to have what he ain't got
 Somebody get drunk, get mad, and get shot
 That why the property value ain't no good in a nigger neighborhood!

Based on their assessment, the Goodie Mob declare that it is time to stop being “niggers” and begin acting and thinking like black men: “I'm sick of lyin' I'm sick of glorifyin' dyin'/I'm sick of not trying, shit I'm sick of being a nigger.” Chiding the notion that “nigga” is a powerful inversion of “nigger,” Boots of The Coup rhymes that changing the “er” to “a” is still “ignorant bizull-shizzit [bullshit]” (“I Ain't the Nigga,” *Kill My Landlord*). Instead of being “Niggas With Attitudes,” he advocates that black men start calling each other “brother.”

On the track “Church” (*The Grind Date*), De La Soul preaches against the current direction of black male identity in hip-hop. Using director Spike Lee's motif of “Wake Up!,” the song calls for black people to wake up and refocus efforts on formal education. According to the group, the dominant view of success and black identity found in hip-hop has lulled blacks to sleep, detaching them from “reality.” “Aiiyo, wake up! Wipe the sleep from ya eyecracks/It's

time to focus y'all, fix ya I-MAX [change your overall worldview].” They argue that blacks are now basing their self-esteem on material goods instead of education and intelligence:

You're cha-sin', cars, clothes and rocks [diamonds]
 Identify with the goods you got [your brain]
 ...
 I really don't care to see ya tattoos there
 I'd rather see you graduate the school year
 Black folk, go put a book in ya face!

The comment about tattoos reveals that they are associating this false representation of black life with hip-hop's gangster contingent. In the second verse, they attempt to “heal” black youth by encouraging them to stop emulating the thug image. The group says that following the street life will only lead to death:

You need to make your own choice, be your own voice
 Set ya soap-box up, let your talk fight
 Pull ya socks up, get ya walk right
 Or the chalk might outline ya one day

Instead of causing violence on the streets or emulating pimps, they advocate that being able to speak intelligently is more important. In the third verse, the song attacks not only the thug image, but also the value of rebelling against the system by being a menace to society. As I've already reviewed, hip-hop's soldier archetype presents acting crazy and screaming “fuck the world” as a way to fight the system. De La Soul questions the utility of this oppositional strategy and advises potential gangsters to “relax”:

Replace rebelling with rebirth
 Face new dwelling, that's your turf
 Lean back and put your feet up on the sofa
 Relax! (Relax! *echoes*) learn how to punch back
 And do your work to the max
 The payoff's much sweeter than the payback

Their distinction between “rebelling” and “rebirth,” and “payoff” and “payback” is interesting. Simply rebelling and lashing out against the system seems foolish to the group. Instead, useful opposition requires a new, long-term, and thoughtful strategy. Their portrayal of the thug soldier

image paints hip-hop's main characters as simply rebels without a cause who revel in bucking the system and getting rich ("the payback") rather changing the structure of the system ("the payoff").

On the track "I Got Ta" (*Take A Look Around*), Master Ace provides a rare anthem that challenges all three components of hip-hop's oppositional narrative. In his attempt to "uplift rap" and "teach the youth that they [are] capable," Master Ace rhymes about the individual and community returns to formal education, the importance of being a law abiding citizen, and the negative consequences of drug dealing and conspicuous consumption. According to Master Ace, formal education is both a way for black youth to escape poverty and a way to oppose white oppression. In stark contrast to dead prez's "they schools" (*Let's Get Free*) or Laquan's "Brother to Brother" (*Notes of a Native Son*) that equate a pro-black identity with negative school resistance, Master Ace combines his black power fist with academic success. As part of the black struggle, he says that:

(I got ta) Learn a lot about the whitey
...
(I got ta) Go to school with the other man
(I got ta) Get as close as I can
(I got ta) Know what he knows to know him
And then my chance to survive is less grim
(I got ta) Also have knowledge of self, though
(I got ta) Learn that, plus achieve wealth, yo
(I got ta) Get that wealth for my family
And community and still live happily

To recall, the dominant hip-hop discourse holds that the formal curriculum is really "his-story," a set of lies that denigrates blacks and envisions whites as superior. Because schools don't teach about black history or culture, these songs suggest that disengagement or dropout is a legitimate response. Master Ace inverts this view by arguing that learning as much as possible about whites will empower blacks to fight the system. The saying "know your enemy" seems to capture what

Master Ace is suggesting. Even if school is about whites, Master Ace portrays schooling as part of survival and the first step to securing resources for the black community.

This school adaptation strategy reflects what I call *pragmatic oppositional culture*.

Master Ace is highly skeptical of the content of white schools and white people (“whitey”) more generally, but seeks to affect black uplift through educational excellence and active participation within societal institutions, not through rejecting formal education. He recognizes the practical value of educational credentials for personal and group mobility. This understanding of education is similar to what Akom (2003) finds in her ethnographic study of high school students in the radical Nation of Islam. Instead of rejecting school, the students in this study appear to develop a black achievement ideology that equates intelligence with real blackness. More, educational success is used to fight race-gender stereotypes and oppression from the dominant society. Master Ace’s take on schools echoes this empowering interpretation of formal education.

In addition, his willingness to learn about the “other man” and black cultural pride are not presented as mutually exclusive. To recall, “knowledge of self” in the streets/hip-hop is typically presented as an alternative to formal education. Master Ace discusses earning what Fisher (2006) calls a “dual degree,” achieving in formal school to obtain skills and labor market success while continuing to learn about black history, culture, and spiritually elsewhere. There is no trade-off or dilemma between school success and maintaining an authentic, black cultural ascetic in this song.

Master Ace suggests that formal education will lead to personal wealth and aid in the struggle of black Americans. He also takes a hard stance against drug dealing and streets. Telling

the story of his close friend, he warns that attempts to be a ghetto superstar with drugs and expensive cars will end in death. He provides the following example:

(I got ta) Remember the [Mercedes] Benz that my man drove
Now it's all smashed up in a grove
(I got ta) Recall the first day he bought it, though
And as he boasted and posted I said "So?"
(I got ta) Say he was the man a month back
Ten workers on the ave selling smack [drugs/heroin]
On Saturday, he made his last mistake, so now
(I got ta) Buy a suit for his wake

Instead of living the fast life of crime, drugs, and flashy cars, Master Ace promotes long term investment in education and progressive accumulation of wealth. "Buy a house with all my riches/ Invest the rest, avoid the ditches [the streets]... I got to avoid surrounding myself with too many materialistic things." Hip-hop's "stunting" and "shinning," the display of diamonds and cars to anger black peers and white society, is not part of the struggle according to Master Ace: "I got to understand the pain and strife of the next man/So I got avoid flaunting, showing off, and high posting [acting better than others] if I can." While yelling "fuck the police" and showing a complete disregard for the law is part of the bad-boy, soldier conception of black masculinity in hip-hop, Master Ace says obeying the laws (other than the code of the streets or "g-code") is the highest actualization of being a "black king": "But I got to enjoy the life of the law-abiding black kings/I gotta motivate others to achieve and become a part of this elite group/And that's what the struggle for equality is really about, troop." He is the leader of a troop of soldiers, but says that the war with white America is won by succeeding within the formal labor market, not in the street economy. The goal, according to Master Ace, is to "convert the color of your shirt from blue to white collars." Working to obtain middle-class, white-collar jobs are part of the struggle.

Finally, he brags about his lyrical skills and places a great deal of importance on his rhyme style, but says that education is needed to be successful in hip-hop: "Then I got to use my

knowledge of the English language to write songs that teach.” On another track on the same album, Master Ace taunts gangster rappers for not being smart enough to rhyme about anything more than money, women, and violence. He questions the authenticity of hip-hop’s thug:

Mr. Gangster, who you trying to kid?
Fake, flam, and fess and dress the way you did
This is a microphone war
You say you're well-known, but what are you known for?
A porno flick and a hard dick
And always bragging about the girls you stick [have sex with]
 (“Ace iz Wild,” *Take A Look Around*)

Unimpressed with the gangster image, Master Ace encourages these unnamed gangsters to “take some classes” to increase their intellectual ability instead of focusing on being tough guys.

You Don't Hear Us Though...

Hip-hop’s countermovement is sounding the alarm against the dominant themes found in the music. They, like many parents, educators, and researchers are concerned about the impact these messages seem to have on black youth in particular. As Blackalicious observes, hip-hop artists who fail to “teach” youth a positive message are part of the reason “younger people done accepted defeat” (“Sky is Falling,” *Blazing Arrow*). These voices of dissent speak to the ability of hip-hop artists to empower, rather than exploit, America’s disadvantaged youth. As Carter (2005) notes, hip-hop artists often provide the only connection to other blacks who appear to have made it in life. While many hip-hop artists tend to shy away from taking the formal position as role models, the relatively small but vocal group of artists explored in this chapter attempt to use their rhymes to affect positive social change. The Unknown Prophets, for example, challenge other hip-hop artists to provide positive messages in their rhymes: “Yo, I feel that kids look up to us as role-models/So we gotta give them somethin’ positive to follow” (“4 the Kids,”

World Premier). To this end, they remind youth that skipping class “ain’t right” and to stay in school even when it’s “boring.” The Unknown Prophets offer the following words of inspiration:

Chase all your dreams till you make them reality
 Respect yourself, your peers and your family
 For all the kids strugglin'
 Keep your head up
 Brighter days are ahead
 The rain will soon let up
 And when your fed up, ready to call it quits
 Remember we all go through rough times
 Even the Prophets
 So this if for them kids at New Vision School, Bottnem Park yo in Harlem too

These types of rhymes should be lauded, and those emcees that use their music as a platform to offer a different message deserve recognition.

Yet, there are reasons to believe that youth most at-risk are not listening to these types of lyrics. Kane & Abel, for example, say they are stressed by the current situation in the “ghetto,” but believe that rhymes without drugs, guns, and money are being ignored:

I try to tell these young kids
 ‘Go to school’
 They want smoke weed, gang bang, and act a fool
 They don't hear me though
 (“Stress,” *Am I My Brother's Keeper*)

The North Carolina artists Little Brother voice the concern that “conscious” or politically relevant hip-hop fails to reach black youth:

This is a message for our people chasing benjamins [money]
 With real rhymes and skills they believing in
 Keeping them bad tapes rolling like Michellin [tires]
 It don't matter, cause niggaz ain't listening
 They ain't listening, they thinkin' bout they Timbalands [expensive boots]
 They say the shit we talk about ain't interestin'
 We got a better chance of blowing up in Switzerland!
 Holla if you hear it 'cause niggaz ain't listening
 (“Listening,” *The Listening*)

In this candid statement about conscious hip-hop's lack of success, Little Brother pointedly remark that they have a better chance of selling positive records in Switzerland than inner-city America. While this might be an elaborate reverse psychology tactic—saying that no one is

listening in order to get more people to listen—hip-hop acts like Little Brother appear to face much difficulty reaching black audiences. It is widely reported that Black Entertainment Television refused to play videos by Little Brother due to concerns that their music was “too intelligent” for viewers (). Kitwana (2005), the author of *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop*, makes the following observation after studying “conscious” hip-hop:

Armed with messages of Black political resistance, Black pride, and opposition to militarization and corporatization, designed in part to counter the commercial hip-hop party-and-bullshit madness dumbing down the nation's youth, hip-hop's lyrical descendants of the “fight the power” golden era today are booking concerts in record numbers—far beyond anything imaginable by their predecessors. Problem is, they can hardly find a Black face in the audience.

Although there is no representative data on the race of album buyers or concert attendees, interviews with so-called conscious artists suggest that they are appealing only to white audiences. Boots, a member of the political group The Coup, tells Kitwana that his audience went from 95% black to 95% white after the band retorted Snoop Dogg's “Gin & Juice” record with “Genocide & Juice,” a political satire meant to undermine hip-hop's thug mentality and glorification of alcohol. Zion I explains that the only blacks at politically conscious shows are the blacks performing on stage. He is quoted as stating, “So many Black people don't want to hear it...They want that thug shit.”

These hip-hop artists are challenging what is mostly a destructive black identity, what Bynoe (2004: 149) refers to as the “real nigga who has ducked bullets, worked a triple beam [gun], and done at least one bid in prison.” Bynoe demands that hip-hop “stand and deliver” their unfulfilled promise of political commentary and activism. It is easy to criticize hip-hop artists and their corporate sponsors for promoting the lowest denominator of the street life for profit (e.g., Reese, 2004; Tucker, 2006; Kane, 2005; McWhorter, 2003; Williams, 2006). But if artists who attempt to provide an alternative message are not receiving the support of black listeners, it is unlikely that the current direction of hip-hop will change. Why lyrics offering something more

than street dreams of fast money, women, and cars fail to resonate with black listeners is unclear. Artists like Common, The Roots, Talib Kweli, The Coup, Little Brother, Wyclef Jean, Mos Def, Public Enemy, Blackalicious, De La Soul, Masta Ace, Pharoahe Monche, KRS-One, The Natural Resource League and the others covered in this chapter are contributing to hip-hop's countermovement. Whether they will ultimately change the current direction of hip-hop, as Blackstar imagines in the opening verse of this chapter, seems unlikely without support from the people they claim to represent.

Conclusion

While previous chapters have focused primarily on hip-hop's destructive oppositional discourse, I examined hip-hop's counter-narrative and pro-schooling messages in this chapter. Following the widely held claim that the content of hip-hop has changed, I began the chapter by focusing on songs appearing before 1994. I found that these earlier lyrics contain a different message about the importance of education and the consequences of dropout. In what I call hip-hop's pro-schooling parables, these now "old-school" lyrics warn against leaving school to pursue fame and fortune on the streets. The diverging content of these songs suggest that hip-hop has in fact changed.

In addition to exploring these old school parables, I examined hip-hop's recent countermovement. Armed with autobiographic examples, witty insults, and logic, these voices of dissent warn about the destructive ideas about achievement and authenticity that are now commonplace in hip-hop. Diverging from pack, these artists warn that eschewing education, selling drugs, and acting like a thug is unwise. Calling themselves "underground" or "real" hip-hop, these lyricists warn that hip-hop has been hijacked by major label artists and music

executives willing to ignore the consequences of selling “lies” to young listeners, as long as it makes money. Making independent records, according to some, is a way to avoid the pitfalls of mainstream hip-hop. While some artists are vocally opposing the oppositional themes in hip-hop, I ended the chapter by raising concerns that these relatively positive messengers are not resonating with black listeners.

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