

PART ONE

Top Ten Debates in Hip Hop

Hip Hop Causes Violence

I'm giving you my opinion that says he is not an artist, he's a thug. . . . [Y]ou can't draw a line in the sand and say Ludacris, because he is a subversive guy that, number one advocates violence, number two, narcotics selling and all the other things, he's not as bad as Pol Pot [Cambodian communist] so we'll put a Pepsi can in his hand.

—Bill O'Reilly, on the subject of Ludacris as a Pepsi celebrity representative, *The O'Reilly Factor*, August 28, 2002

Ronald Ray Howard was executed Thursday [October 6, 2005] for fatally shooting a state trooper, a slaying his trial attorneys argued was prompted by Howard's listening to anti-police rap music. . . . Howard's trial attorney, Allen Tanner, told a reporter: "He grew up in the ghetto and disliked police, and these were his heroes . . . these rappers . . . telling him if you're pulled over, just blast away. It affected him." Howard didn't say for certain that rap music was responsible for his crime. [But he did say:] "All my experiences with police have never been good, whether I've been doing something bad or not."

—David Carson (www.txexecutions.org/reports/350.asp, October 7, 2005)

I would say to Radio 1, do you realise that some of the stuff you play on Saturday nights encourages people to carry guns and knives?

—David Cameron, British politician, www.BBC.com, June 7, 2006

A KEY ASPECT OF MUCH OF THE CRITICISM that has been leveled at hip hop is the claim that it glorifies, encourages, and thus causes violence. This argument goes as far back as the middle to late 1980s—the so-called golden age of hip hop—when politically radical hip hop artists, such as Public Enemy, who referred to direct and sometimes armed resistance against racism “by any means necessary,” were considered advocates of violence. It is important to zero in on the specific issue of violence because this was the most highly visible criticism of hip hop for over a decade. The concern over hip hop and violence peaked in the early to mid-1990s when groups like N.W.A. from Los Angeles found significant commercial success through a gang-oriented repertoire of stories related especially to anti-police sentiment. N.W.A.’s 1989 song “*uck the Police”—with lyrics boasting that when they are done, “it’s gonna be a bloodbath of cops dyin’ in LA”—was at the epicenter of growing fears that rappers’ tales of aggression and frustration (which many critics mistakenly perceived as simply pro-criminal statements of intent) were stirring up violent behavior among young listeners. The 1992 debut commercial single for Snoop Doggy Dogg, “Deep Cover” (from the film of the same name), garnered attention because of Snoop’s laconic rap style, Dr. Dre’s extra-funky beats, and the chorus phrase “187 on a undercover cop” (“187” is the police code for homicide). As what we now call gangsta rap began to move to the commercial center stage, the worry that increasing portrayals of violence in rap lyrics might encourage fans to imitate them evolved into a belief that the rappers were *themselves* criminals—representing their own violent acts in the form of rhyme. Snoop’s own criminal problems authenticated his lyrics and added to the alarm about gangsta rap. As this shift in commercial hip hop has solidified, many vocal public critics have begun to characterize violence-portraying lyrics as autobiographical thugery to a soundtrack. In turn, this link of violent lyrics in hip hop and behavior has been used in the legal arena by both defense and prosecuting attorneys. As the above epigraphs reveal, hip hop lyrics have indeed been considered strong influences. Increasingly, this connection has been extended into the realm of establishing character in

murder trials. Prosecutors around the country have buttressed their cases with defendants’ penned lyrics as evidence of their criminal-mindedness.

The criticism that hip hop advocates and thus causes violence relies on the unsubstantiated but widely held belief that listening to violent stories or consuming violent images *directly* encourages violent behavior. This concern was raised vis-à-vis violent video games during the 1980s, but also more recently, in relation to heavy metal music. Although the direct link between consumption and action may appear to be commonsensical, studies have been unable to provide evidence that confirms it. Recent challenges to the video game industry’s sale of exceptionally gory and violent video games were stymied by the absence of such data and confirmation. Direct behavioral effect is, of course, a difficult thing to prove in scientific terms, since many recent and past factors—both individual and social—can contribute to a person’s actions at any given time. The absence of direct proof doesn’t mean that such imagery and lyrics are without negative impact. I am not arguing *for* the regular consumption of highly violent images and stories, nor am I saying that what we consume has no impact on us. Clearly, everything around us, past and present, has an impact on us, to one degree or another. Studies do show that violent music lyrics have been documented as increasing aggressive thoughts and feelings. High-saturation levels of violent imagery and action (in our simulated wars and fights in sports, film, music, and television but also, more significantly, in our real wars in the Middle East) clearly do not support patient, peaceful, cooperative actions and responses in our everyday lives.¹

However, the argument for one-to-one causal linking among storytelling, consumption, and individual action should be questioned, given the limited evidence to support this claim. And, even more important, the blatantly selective application of worries about violence in some aspects of popular culture and everyday life should be challenged for its targeting of individuals and groups who are already overly and problematically associated with violence. So, what may appear to be genuine concern over violence in entertainment

winds up stigmatizing some expressions (rap music) and the groups with which they are associated (black youth). A vivid example of this highly selective application took place during the 1992 presidential campaign when George W. Bush said “it was ‘sick’ to produce a record that he said glorified the killing of police officers, but saw no contradiction between this statement and his acceptance of support and endorsement from Arnold Schwarzenegger. As one [*New York Times*] reporter put it: ‘I stand against those who use films or records or television or video games to glorify killing law enforcement officers,’ said Mr. Bush, who counts among his top supporters the actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose character in the movies ‘Terminator’ and ‘Terminator II: Judgment Day’ kills or maims dozens of policemen.”²

We live in a popular cultural world in which violent stories, images, lyrics, and performances occupy a wide cross-section of genres and mediums. Television shows such as *24* and *Law and Order*; Hollywood fare such as gangster, action, suspense, murder-driven, war, and horror films; video games; metal musics; and novels—together, these comprise a diverse and highly accessible palate of violent images attached to compelling characters and bolstered by high-budget realistic sets and backdrops. Although anti-violence groups mention many of these genres and mediums, the bulk of the popular criticism about violence in popular culture is leveled at hip hop, and the fear-driven nature of the commentary is distinct from responses to the many other sources of violent imagery. There are three important differences between the criticisms of hip hop and rappers and those leveled at other music, films, shows, and videos—most of which, unlike rap music, are produced (not just consumed) primarily by whites.

First, hip hop gets extra attention for its violent content, and the *perception* of violence is heightened when it appears in rap music form rather than in some other popular genre of music featuring violent imagery. Rappers such as Lil’ Jon, Ludacris, 50 Cent, and T.I. who claim that there is violence throughout popular culture and that they get overly singled out are right: Some violent imagery and lyrics in popular culture are responded to or perceived differently from oth-

ers. Social psychologist Carrie B. Fried studied this issue and concluded that the perception of violence in rap music lyrics is affected by larger societal perceptions and stereotypes of African-Americans. In her study, she asked participants to respond to lyrics from a folk song about killing a police officer. To some of the participants the song was presented as rap; and to others, as country. Her study supports the hypothesis that lyrics presented as rap music are judged more harshly than the same lyrics presented as country music. She concluded that these identical lyrics seem more violent when featured in rap, perhaps because of the association of rap with the stereotypes of African-Americans.³

Nevertheless, saying that there is violence elsewhere and that one is being unfairly singled out in connection with it isn’t the best argument to make. Rappers’ claims that violence is everywhere isn’t a compelling case for hip hop’s heightened investment in violent storytelling, especially for those of us who are worried about the extra levels of destructive forces working against poor black people. It is important, however, to pay close attention to the issue of unfair targeting, blame, and the compounded effect this perception of blacks as more violent has on black youth.

Second, many critics of hip hop tend to interpret lyrics literally and as a direct reflection of the artist who performs them. They equate rappers with thugs, see rappers as a threat to the larger society, and then use this “causal analysis” (that hip hop causes violence) to justify a variety of agendas: more police in black communities, more prisons to accommodate larger numbers of black and brown young people, and more censorship of expression. For these critics, hip hop is criminal propaganda. This literal approach, which extends beyond the individual to characterize an entire racial and class group, is rarely applied to violence-oriented mediums produced by whites.

Despite the caricature-like quality of many of hip hop’s cultivated images and the similarity of many of its stories, critics often characterize rappers as speaking entirely autobiographically, implying that their stories of car-jacking, killing witnesses to crimes, hitting women, selling drugs, and beating up and killing opponents are

statements of fact, truthful self-portraits. Thus, for instance, the rhyme in Lil' Wayne's "Damage Is Done" that describes him as running away with a "hammer in my jeans, dead body behind me, cops'll never find me" would be interpreted by many critics as a description of actual events. This assumption—that rappers are creating rhymed autobiographies—is the result of both rappers' own investment in perpetuating the idea that everything they say is true to their life experience (given that the genre has grown out of the African-American tradition of boasting in the first person) and the genre's investment in the pretense of no pretense. That is, the genre's promoters capitalize on the illusion that the artists are not performing but "keeping it real"—telling the truth, wearing outfits on stage that they'd wear in the street (no costumes), remaining exactly as they'd be if they were not famous, except richer. Part of this "keeping it real" ethos is a laudable effort to continue to identify with many of their fans, who don't see their style or life experiences represented anywhere else, from their own points of view; part of it is the result of conformity to the genre's conventions. It makes rappers more accessible, more reflective of some of the lived experiences and conditions that shape the lives of some of their fans. And it gives fans a sense that they themselves have the potential to reach celebrity status, to gain social value and prestige while remaining "true" to street life and culture, turning what traps them into an imagined gateway to success.

But this hyper-investment in the fiction of full-time autobiography in hip hop, especially for those artists who have adopted gangsta personas, has been exaggerated and distorted by a powerful history of racial images of black men as "naturally" violent and criminal. These false and racially motivated stereotypes were promoted throughout the last two centuries to justify both slavery and the violence, containment, and revised disenfranchisement that followed emancipation; and they persisted throughout the twentieth century to justify the development of urban segregation. In the early part of the twentieth century, well-respected scientists pursuing the "genetic" basis of racial and ethnic hierarchy embraced the view that blacks were biologically inferior, labeling them not only less intelligent but also

more prone to crime and violence. These racial associations have been reinforced, directly and indirectly, through a variety of social outlets and institutions and, even today, continue to be circulated in contemporary scientific circles. In 2007, for example, Nobel laureate biologist Jim Watson said that he was "inherently gloomy about the prospects of Africa" because "all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours, whereas all the testing says not really." He went on to say that while he hoped everyone was equal, "people who have to deal with black employees find this is not true." And in the now-infamous, widely challenged 1994 book *The Bell Curve*, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray argued that it is highly likely that genes partly explain racial differences in IQ testing and intelligence and also claimed that intelligence is an important predictor of income, job performance, unwed pregnancy, and crime. Thus the pseudoscientific circle was closed: Blacks are genetically less intelligent, and intelligence level predicts income, performance, criminality, and sexually unsanctioned behavior; therefore, blacks are genetically disposed toward poverty, crime, and unwed motherhood.⁴

This history of association of blacks with ignorance, sexual deviance, violence, and criminality has not only contributed to the believability of hip hop artists' fictitious autobiographical tales among fans from various racial groups but has also helped explain the excessive anxiety about the popularity and allure of these artists. The American public has long feared black criminality and violence as particularly anxiety-producing threats to whites—and the convincing "performance" of black criminality taps into these fears. So, both the voyeuristic pleasure of believing that hip hop artists are criminal minded and the exaggerated fear of them are deeply connected. Hip hop has successfully traded on this history of scientific racism and its imbedded impact on perceptions of poor black people, and has also been significantly criticized because of it.

A third central difference between the criticism of hip hop and rappers and the criticism leveled at other forms of popular culture has to do with the way the artists themselves are perceived in relation

to their audiences and to society. Hip hop's violence is criticized at a heightened level and on different grounds from the vast array of violent images in American culture, and these disparities in perception are very important. While heavy metal and other nonblack musical forms that contain substantial levels of violent imagery are likewise challenged by anti-violence critics, the operative assumption is that this music and its violence-peddling creators will negatively influence otherwise innocent listeners. Therefore (according to these critics), metal, video games, and violent movies influence otherwise nonviolent teenagers, encouraging them to act violently. From this perspective, "our youth" must be protected from these outside negative, aggressive influences.

In the case of rap, the assumption is that the artists and their autobiographically styled lyrics represent an existing and already threatening violent black youth culture that must be prevented from affecting society at large. The quote from Bill O'Reilly at the outset of this chapter reflects this approach. For O'Reilly, Ludacris is advocating violence and selling narcotics. Allowing him to be a representative for Pepsi would, as O'Reilly's logic goes, be similar to giving power to Pol Pot, the Cambodian leader of the brutal Khmer Rouge government, allowing a "subversive" guy access to legitimate power. This difference in interpretation—such that black rappers are viewed as leaders of an invading and destructively violent force that undermines society—has a dramatic effect on both the nature of the criticism and the larger perceptions of black youth that propel the ways in which they are treated. It sets the terms of how we respond, whom we police, and whom we protect.

Tales of violence in hip hop share important similarities with the overall investment in violence as entertainment (and political problem solving) in American culture, but they have more localized origins as well—namely, the damaging and terrible changes in black urban America over the past forty or so years. Although hip hop's penchant for stories with violent elements isn't purely a matter of documentary or autobiography, these stories are deeply connected to real social conditions and their impact on the lives of those who live

them, close up. My point here may be confusing: On the one hand, I am saying that rappers are not the autobiographers they are often believed to be and that seeing them that way has contributed to the attacks they specifically face. But, on the other hand, I am also saying that much of what listeners hear in hip hop stories of violence is reflective of larger real-life social conditions. How can both be true?

This is a crucial yet often improperly made distinction: Hip hop is not pure fiction or fantasy (such as might emerge from the mind of horror writer Stephen King), but neither is it unmediated reality and social advocacy for violence. Nor is rap a product of individual imagination (disconnected from lived experiences and social conditions) or sociological documentation or autobiography (an exact depiction of reality and personal action). Yet conversations about violence in hip hop strategically deploy both of these arguments. Defenders call it fiction, just like other artists' work, whereas critics want to emphasize rappers' own claims to be keeping it real as proof that these stories "advocate violence" or, as British politician David Cameron suggested, "[encourage] people to carry guns and knives."

Neither of these positions moves us toward a more empowering understanding of violent storytelling and imagery in hip hop or toward the fashioning of a productive, pro-youth position that recognizes the impact of these powerfully oppressive images without either accepting or excusing their negative effects. This is the line we must straddle: acknowledging the realities of discrimination and social policies that have created the conditions for the most dangerous and fractured black urban communities and, at the same time, not accepting or excusing the behaviors that are deeply connected to these local, social conditions.

The origins for the depth of investment in hip hop's myriad but context-specific stories involving guns, drugs, street culture, and crime are directly related to a combination of drastic changes in social life, community, and policies of neglect that destroyed neighborhood stability in much of black urban America. These local, social condition-based origins matter because the causal assumption that violent material when consumed increases violent actions

underestimates the environmental forces at work. Although hip hop's violence has been marketed and exaggerated, its origins in violent urban communities and the reasons these communities became so violent must be understood. This context helps explain why hip hop's poorest inner-city fans and artists remain so invested in such stories. Rather than creating violence out of whole cloth, these stories are better understood as a distorted and profitable reflection of the everyday lives of too many poor black youth over the past forty or so years.

While context is crucial for explaining what we hear in a good deal of hip hop, context as justification for rap's constant repetition of violent storytelling is highly problematic. Rapper Tupac, for example, claimed that he was hoping to reveal the conditions in a powerful way to incite change: "I'm gonna show the most graphic details about what I see in my community and hopefully they'll stop it. Quick."⁵ Unfortunately, profits increased with increasingly violent, criminal-oriented rap while conditions remained and worsened. Despite the reality that these real conditions are not being changed because of rappers' stories and, instead, have become fodder for corporate profits, rappers continue to justify the use of black urban community distress and criminal icons along these lines, thus maintaining their value as a revenue stream. 50 Cent defended his lyrics, claiming that "[i]t's a reflection of the environment that I come from," and Jay-Z has confessed that "it's important for rappers to exaggerate 'life in the ghetto' because this is the only way the underclass can make its voice heard."⁶

This context—the destruction of black community in urban America since the mid-1970s—has five central elements, each of which exacerbates the others, causing the serious dismantling of stable communities and resulting in several forms of social breakdown, one of which is increased violence.

High Levels of Chronic Joblessness

The issue of black and brown teen joblessness took on crisis proportions during the first two decades of hip hop's emergence. Unem-

ployment and very low-paying, unstable employment have been concentrated in poor minority urban communities since the early part of the twentieth century, but this lengthy history of how race limits working-class opportunity took an especially pernicious turn in the 1980s and continued through the 1990s and beyond. What many scholars and economists call "permanent unemployment" or "chronic joblessness" began to plague poor black and brown communities, and the younger adults in these communities began to understand that traditional avenues for working-class job stability were becoming closed to them.

The effects of deindustrialization—the swift and extensive loss of unionized, well-paying manufacturing jobs out of urban areas to rural and nonunionized regions and out of the country entirely—hit all workers hard and dramatically undercut working-class economic mobility. This loss was accompanied by a growth in low-wage "service" jobs, which tended to be part-time and to offer limited or no benefits and few opportunities for upward mobility. Owing to both historical and contemporary forms of racial discrimination in the job market, these overall changes have been especially devastating for black communities. Indeed, blacks continued to be last hired and thus first fired when factories closed, and they were disproportionately kept in lower-level positions where upward advancement and skill-building (and thus job rehiring opportunities) are limited. During Ronald Reagan's second term, for example, more than one-third of black families earned incomes below the poverty line. By contrast, poverty rates hovered between 8 and 9 percent among white families. During the same period, black teenagers' already high levels of unemployment increased from 38.9 to 43.6 percent nationally, and in some regions, such as the Midwestern cities in the Great Lakes region, the figures were as high as 50 to 70 percent. By contrast, white teenage unemployment was around 13 percent.⁷

Chronic and very high levels of unemployment and the poverty it creates, especially when magnified by long-standing injustice and discrimination, produce not only economic crisis but deep instabilities within families and across communities. These, in turn, result in

higher levels of homelessness, street crime, and illegal income-generating activities (such as the drug trade), and alienation, rage, and violence.

Dramatic Loss of Affordable Housing/ Urban Renewal

The legacies of thirty years of “urban renewal” began to bear rotten fruit in the middle to late 1970s. Dubbed “negro removal” by James Baldwin, the urban renewal programs designed to “clear slums” because they were considered “eyesores” proved to be terribly ill-conceived forms of neighborhood destruction that had a disproportionately negative impact on poor black urban communities. While the migration of millions of black people to cities in the twentieth century was met with forced urban housing segregation (producing what we now call black ghettos), those neighborhoods were also sources of community strength and general stability. Yes, poverty, discrimination, and other urban problems persisted, but areas like Watts in Los Angeles, Harlem in New York City, East St. Louis, and the Hill District in Pittsburgh became stable, multiclass communities where black people, as scholar Earl Lewis maintained, “turned segregation into congregation.”

Urban renewal, especially during and after the 1960s, destroyed these low-income but highly network-rich and socially stable communities to make room for private development, sports arenas, hotels, trade centers, and high-income luxury buildings. Far from being a plan to create affordable housing, it created the massive housing crisis we still face today. By the summer of 1967, 400,000 residential units in urban renewal areas had been demolished; only 10,760 low-rent public housing units were built on these sites. In 1968, the Kerner Commission report pointed out that

[i]n Detroit a maximum of 758 low-income units have been assisted through (federal) programs since 1956. . . . Yet, since 1960, approximately 8,000 low-income units have been demolished for urban re-

newal. . . . Similarly in Newark, since 1959, a maximum of 3,760 low-income housing units have been assisted through the programs considered. . . . [D]uring the same period, more than 12,000 families, mostly low income, have been displaced by such public uses of urban renewal, public housing and highways.⁸

This pattern of demolishing and not replacing thousands of units of existing affordable housing in poor black communities had a devastating impact in black communities all around the country, creating the constellation of symptoms in many major cities that we see today.

This was not just a housing problem, although the homeless crisis it produced was immense. The physical destruction of so many buildings was accompanied by the demolition of most of the adjacent venues and stores that served as community adhesive. Corner stores, music clubs, social clubs, beauty parlors, and barber shops were also displaced or destroyed, fraying community networks and patterns of connection. Social psychologist Mindy Fullilove refers to the destruction caused by urban renewal as “root shock,” the “traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one’s emotional ecosystem.” She astutely contextualizes this widespread destruction of housing and the social networks around it as one that destroyed communities, resulting in social disarray and increased levels of violence:

Root shock, at the level of the individual, is a profound emotional upheaval. . . . [It] undermines trust, increases anxiety, . . . destabilizes relationships, destroys social, emotional and financial resources, and increases the risk for every kind of stress-related disease, from depression to heart attack. Root shock, at the level of the local community, . . . ruptures bonds, dispersing people to all the directions of the compass. . . . The great epidemics of drug addiction, the collapse of the black family and the rise in incarceration of black men—all of these catastrophes followed the civil rights movement, they did not precede it. Though there are a number of causes of this dysfunction that cannot be disputed—the loss of manufacturing jobs, in particular—

the current situation of Black America cannot be understood without a full and complete accounting of the social, economic, cultural, political and emotional losses that followed the bulldozing of 1,600 neighborhoods.⁹

Drug-Trade Expansion

The emergence of very cheap, addictive, and profitable drugs, such as PCP, but especially crack cocaine, in the mid-1980s made bad matters worse. The bleak economic reality of high levels of chronic joblessness and the loss of community networks produced by the destruction of black communities and massive housing demolition created not only a financial incentive for dealing hard drugs but an emotional one as well. The desire for drugs is directly linked to the longing to numb pain and suffering. Cheap, easily accessible, and highly addictive drugs like crack are especially alluring to the poor and others who face not only their own personal demons but also demons unleashed by society that are largely beyond their control. The affordability and profitability of crack created quick wealth for otherwise chronically unemployed people turned street dealers and fostered violent drug-gang turf wars and a whole generation of people in the clutches of a highly addictive drug.

This was at once a new phenomenon and part of a long history of black communities' serving as commercial shopping zones for all drug users from all class positions and racial backgrounds; crack's notoriously addictive qualities and low price—coupled with inattention to attacking drug distribution at higher levels—created a flourishing local and violent drug trade that spurred, expanded, and intensified gang activities in poor black and brown communities. The impact of drug addiction on the social public sphere was dramatic. The street sex trades became more linked to drugs; women especially, but also men who needed only a small amount of cash to get high, began selling themselves to support their crack habit. Drug addiction, which also fueled the spread of HIV/AIDS, was both a symptom and a cause of the extraordinary breakdown of poor black urban communities

nationwide. Many rappers such as Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and T.I. are known for transforming themselves from drug dealers to rap moguls. Lyrics that reflect their history as drug dealers abound. Consider, for example, the chorus for 50 Cent's "Bloodhound": "I love to pump crack, I love to stay strapped."

But the crisis was so widespread that a whole generation of black comedians such as Chris Rock, David Chapelle, and others who grew up in and around this very dark period in black urban America came out with popular, biting, powerful routines and dark jokes about crack addiction and its impact on black communities. In a sense, the ground-level impact of crack, unemployment, and community destruction became a generational experience for many black youth. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, Chris Rock talked about the deep effects that crack had on the economic, social, and gender relations in black communities. The interviewer asked him: "How about crack? So many of your jokes and characters revolve around crack." Rock replies: "Basically, whatever was going on when you started getting laid will stick with you for the rest of your life. So crack was just a big part of my life, between my friends selling it or girls I use to like getting hooked on it. White people had the Internet; the ghetto had crack. . . . I have never been to war, but I survived that shit. I lost friends and family members. The whole neighborhood was kinda on crack. Especially living in Bed-Stuy [in Brooklyn], man." And in one of many David Chapelle skits featuring the memorable crack-head Tyrone Biggums, Biggums says: "Why do you think I car-jacked you, Rhonda?" Rhonda replies, "'Cause the cops found you in it three hours later asleep, high on crack!" Biggums responds: "That's impossible, Rhonda. How can you sleep when you're high on crack? Chinese riddle for you."¹⁰

AK-47: Automatic Weapons and the Drug Economy

If this highly profitable illegal drug trade had been protected just by fists and knives, it would have been violent but not nearly as deadly.

Instead, this always violent young men's drug trade was fueled by easy access to guns, especially high-powered automatic weaponry. Given the financial incentives of crack, drug dealers used the most powerful weapons available to protect their businesses. And, increasingly, those not involved in selling drugs, especially young black men who were considered part of the same age and gender demographic, felt they had to carry guns to protect themselves.

Neighborhood turf wars have a long bloody history in immigrant and working-class communities; tales of street peril among white male immigrant youth over 100 years ago bear a striking resemblance to descriptions of today's invisible neighborhood boundaries and the dangerous street conflict they give rise to. But what really escalated this situation was the emergence of the highly lucrative crack trade and the flooding of poor urban communities with guns, especially semiautomatic ones. (Geoffrey Canada's book *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* chronicles the impact of the availability of this increasingly deadly weaponry and its impact on adolescent male violence.) Few young men fifty years ago lost their lives in street skirmishes, bloody and frequent though they were, as access to deadly weapons was extremely limited then and the reasons for such turf battles were personal rather than wedded to the extremely lucrative high-stakes drug trade. Greedy high-level drug dealers and gun dealers, enabled both by the gun lobby and by terribly misguided and neglectful public policy, turned a long-standing problem into a life-threatening crisis of extraordinary proportions.

Government/Police Response: Incarceration over Rehabilitation

The 1980s "war on drugs" was really a war on the communities that bore the brunt of the drug crisis. The police and federal resource emphasis on low-level street dealers and the criminalization (rather than rehabilitation) of drug users resulted in the treatment of ravaged communities as war zones. The LAPD, for example, is considered legendary for its use of military strategies, developed during the war

in Vietnam, on U.S. citizens in South Central Los Angeles. This slash-and-burn approach, one that failed to address the roots of the problem and barely distinguished between the drug dealers and the communities as a whole, turned poor black communities into occupied territories. Helicopter surveillance and small tanks equipped with battering rams were hallmarks of the LAPD policing in South Central LA in the middle to late 1980s. Housing projects were equipped with police substations, and young black males were routinely picked up for "potential gang activity." Their names were placed in a database; many were intimidated and brutalized. And yet the government failed to enact effective community-building responses such as rehabilitation, meaningful and stable jobs, well-supervised recreational outlets, and social services to enhance the support networks around children.

The criminal justice system reinforced this warlike strategy by defining crack offenses as more criminal than other drug offenses, applying and effectively justifying longer sentences (especially those dubbed "maximum minimum" sentences) for crack users and dealers, who were poor and predominantly black, than for users of cocaine, a drug more often consumed by middle-class and white drug users. In fact, although crack and cocaine possess the same active ingredient, crack cocaine is the only drug whereby the first offense of simple possession can initiate a federal mandatory minimum sentence. Possession of five grams of crack will trigger a five-year mandatory minimum sentence. By contrast, according to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, "simple possession of any quantity of any other substance by a first-time offender—including powder cocaine—is a misdemeanor offense punishable by a maximum of one year in prison." Owing to the designation of drug users as criminals rather than as people in need of rehabilitation (and given the special targeting of crack users and dealers over all other drug users), the black prison population skyrocketed and so did the parolee population. In 1986, before mandatory minimums for crack offenses went into effect, the average federal drug offense sentence for blacks was 11 percent higher than for whites; four years later—after these harsher and

targeted laws were implemented, the average federal drug offense sentence was 49 percent higher for blacks. In 1997, the U.S. Sentencing Commission report found that “nearly 90 percent of the offenders convicted in federal court for crack cocaine distribution are African-American while the majority of crack cocaine users are white. Thus, sentences appear to be harsher and more severe for racial minorities than others as a result of this law.” The extensive denial of the ways that race and racism shaped and consolidated violence, instability, and poverty continued to fuel misguided and mean-spirited policies that focused far more on emphasizing personal behavioral responsibility and punishment than on community support and collective responsibility.¹¹

The “war on drugs” policy that favored punishment over other social responses was singularly responsible for the incredible expansion of the prison industrial complex and the heavy impact this had on poor black communities. Between 1970 and 1982 the U.S. prison population doubled in size; between 1982 and 1999, it increased again threefold. Within the United States today are only 5 percent of the world’s inhabitants but 25 percent of the world’s prisoners. Of the 2 million Americans currently behind bars, black men and women, who comprise around 12 percent of the national population, are profoundly overrepresented. Currently, black men make up 40 percent of prisoners in federal, state, and local prisons. Researchers anticipate that this trend will continue; based on current policies and conditions, they say that 30 percent of black men born today can expect to spend some time in prison. Among current black male prisoners, a disproportionately high number come from a small number of predominantly or entirely minority neighborhoods in big cities where aggressive street-level policing and profiling are heavily practiced. Over half of the adult male inmates from New York City come from fourteen districts in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn, even though men in those areas make up just 17 percent of the city’s total population. Numbers like these inspired the Justice Mapping Center to examine prison spending by neighborhood and by city block. Center founders Eric Cadora and Charles Swartz discovered what they dubbed “million-dollar blocks,” neighborhoods

where “so many residents were sent to state prison that the total cost of their incarceration will be more than \$1 million dollars.” In Brooklyn alone, there were thirty-five such blocks. Rates of incarceration among black women have also risen dramatically and disproportionately. Almost half of the female prison population are black, and many of these women are locked up for nonviolent offenses (theft, forgery, prostitution, and drugs) that are directly linked to the forces of community destruction addressed in this chapter. The community-wide impact of these disproportionate and racially specific levels of policing and incarceration is staggering.¹²

These are the architectural signposts of today’s ghettos. The violence that takes place within them has been created not only by racial discrimination long ago but also by assaults on poor black communities since the 1960s. The high levels of crime, police brutality, violence, drugs, and instability that define poor black urban communities are the direct result of chronic and high levels of concentrated joblessness, loss of affordable housing, community demolition, the crack explosion, the impact of easily accessible and highly deadly weapons used to defend the lucrative drug trade, and incarceration strategies that have criminalized large swaths of the African-American population. While not all of these factors were unique to poor black urban America, some were, and others were highly concentrated there. These recent conditions, along with compounding factors such as the long-term effects of economic, social, and political forms of racial discrimination, intensified the dramatic demise of working-class and poor black urban communities.

Hip hop emerged in this context, and thus the tales of drug dealing, pimping, petty crime, dropping out of school, and joining a gang are more aptly seen as reflections of the violence experienced in these areas than as origins of the violence. The drive to point out and criticize violence in rappers’ stories as the cause of violence in poor black communities is often a disgraceful extension of the overemphasis on individual (decontextualized) personal behavior and the deep denial of larger social responsibility for creating and fostering these contexts.

The violent stories that characterize many hip hop lyrics are tales from this landscape, told from the ground-level perspective of circumstances as lived experience, not historical or sociological analysis. When we understand the depths of this reality, the actual destruction and violence that these societally manufactured conditions have fostered, then the violent lyrics take on a different character.

Why is it so difficult to understand that this highly vulnerable and dismantled community of chronically poor and racially-discriminated-against young people is in need of protection and advocacy? Why are we turning youth (through attacks on rap) into the agents of their own demise, seeing black kids as the source of violence in America while denying the extraordinary violence done to them?

My foregoing summary of the five causes of destruction of black communities—*chronic joblessness, loss of affordable housing, drug-trade expansion, automatic weapons and the drug economy, and incarceration instead of rehabilitation*—is not meant to encourage a blithe reaction to violent stories in hip hop, nor to cause readers to say, “Well, this is their reality.” The prevalence of such stories in hip hop and the fact that they too often valorize violence (sometimes even serving as seductive tales of predatory action against other poor black people) are signs of a crisis for which the nation as a whole is responsible; the stories and rhymes themselves are not the primary source of the crisis. Attacking the rappers individually—calling them thugs and criminals while studiously avoiding the state of poor black urban America, or, worse, blaming these conditions entirely or even primarily on black people themselves—is a disturbing aspect of the hip hop wars. This stance reflects a long-term drive to deny the continued power and influence of institutional racism, sustains a racialized “us” versus “them” philosophy that enables the maintenance of racial and class inequality, and, in effect, extends the very logic that drove many of these mean-spirited and disempowering urban policies in the first place.

Culture is a means by which we learn how to engage with the world, and thus constant depictions of violence can have a normative effect. While this effect is not direct and absolute, there is ample evi-

dence that people are deeply influenced by their surroundings and the social conditions impinging on them. Compared to children growing up in secure and stable environments, those who live in violence- or crime-ridden communities are at greater risk for exhibiting criminal and violent behavior.¹³ Our visually mediated culture is a large part of the surroundings and social conditions that shape us. If we are treated in violent ways, if we are forced by circumstance to survive in places where violent conflict is a matter of everyday life, and if we consume many violent images, we are more at risk—not only for exhibiting higher levels of violent behavior but, more important, for experiencing less trust and intimacy, increased fear, and a greater need for self-protection.

So, hip hop’s extensive repertoire of stories about violence, guns, drugs, crime, and prison is compounded by everyday life for those who have little or no option but to reside in the poorest and most troubled neighborhoods and communities. Such stories become more powerful in this context, providing an image of everyday realities that can overemphasize the worst of what young people in these places face. On behalf of these kids, not the ones who listen vicariously from afar, we should be concerned about how and how often street crime and the drug trade are depicted—not because they represent the infusion of violence in American culture but because they sound an alarm about the levels of violence and social decay created by policies, public opinion, and neglect.

We must pay close attention to violence in hip hop, but we should not treat the tales of violence in hip hop in dangerous isolation from the many crucial contexts for its existence. Decontextualization—taking the violence expressed in hip hop lyrics and storytelling and examining them out of context—has a number of problematic effects both for the art form and for black people in general. Not only are the larger nonblack cultural reasons for these violent themes ignored but, worse, these reasons are attributed to black people themselves. So, the issue, once decontextualized, becomes violence as a black cultural problem, not violence as a larger social problem with tragic consequences for the most vulnerable. This approach does nothing

to help us think through and reduce violence in black communities or in American society more broadly, nor to reduce our collective appetite for violent entertainment or our use of violence as a means to achieve success and secure opportunity. It does, however, contribute to the further targeting and criminalization of poor black youth; it helps us imagine that this is “their problem,” which only “they” can fix by acting right.

Another negative effect of taking hip hop’s lyrical tales of violence out of social context is that their distinctive style of expression overshadows all similarities between them and other styles of violent storytelling. Because the particular *brand* of poor urban black and Latino male street culture that many rappers detail in their rhymes is unfamiliar to many whites (who because of continued patterns of residential segregation do not live in these overwhelmingly black and brown neighborhoods), these unfamiliar listeners often equate black style of expression with content. Although tales of violent street culture have various ethnic and racial origins, the fascination with black versions of such street culture creates the illusion that violent street culture is itself a black cultural thing.

Poor white ethnic neighborhoods have long had their own forms of violent street culture, but the fact that their slang, style, and rhetoric are not generally perceived as racially distinctive contributes to the misreading of black street crime and street culture as a cultural matter rather than as an outgrowth of larger social patterns. This lack of local familiarity with black style among white fans adds to the allure of its expression in hip hop. It also encourages a false sense of black ownership of street culture and crime among blacks. Thus, black language, clothing, and other distinctions in style override the deep similarities between black and other ethnic (white and nonwhite) forms of violent street culture. The lack of regular day-to-day contact between races (facilitated by sustained housing and school segregation) enhances this miscue. Many white fans come to “know” these neighborhoods and their residents through mass media portraits (Hollywood film, television programming, news coverage, rap music lyrics,

and videos), which only reinforce the fixation and reduce the recognition of cross-racial examples of violent male street cultures.

These factors, when taken together, create a web that looks something like this: We support policies that destroy black communities, and communities with great instability often experience more violence. Then, we rely on long-standing racist perceptions of black men as more violent, fear them more, and then treat them with more violence in response, which results in both more violence and more incarceration. Next, because we associate these men with violence, the stories they tell about violence are perceived as “authentic black expression,” which activates a familiar kind of racial voyeurism and expands the market for their particular stories of crime and violence, which, in turn, confirms the perception that black men are more violent. This creates economic opportunity for performing and celebrating violent storytelling. Round and round we go.

But what is the actual role of violence in lyrics written by young people who live in communities that are struggling to stem the tide of real violence? Are these lyrics celebrations of the violence that shapes their lives—statements in support of the gangs, drugs, and crime about which they rap and rhyme? Or do they reflect a process of emotional and social management—a means by which these young people manage the lived reality of violence by telling their stories (a well-known process of healing in therapeutic and psychological circles)? Do these stories contribute to the violence these young people experience? Or are their stories about violence an outgrowth of the day-to-day threats they face, and do such stories relieve or reduce actual violence by responding to real violence with metaphor?

Or can *both* be true? Can violent lyrics and imagery reflect a real condition and at the same time contribute to creating it? The nub of the problem is this: At what point do stories that emanate from an overly violent day-to-day life begin to encourage and support that aspect of everyday life and undercut the communities’ anti-violent efforts?

The question remains as to how we should examine and respond to the images and stories about violence that emanate from people who live in communities plagued by violence. We must continue to discuss whether we should attack the lyrics and the lyricists as causing violence or the conditions that foster violence. Clearly, we should challenge artists who have profited handsomely by constantly reinforcing the worst forms of predatory behavior against poor black communities. But to do so while denying the reality of their circumstances is mean-spirited and ineffectual.

In the song “Trouble” on the CD *Kingdom Come* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2006), Jay-Z raps about his desire to stop hustling, but says he’s only “pretending to be different,” praying to god, in the chorus, because he’ll never change. Both his longing to change and the bravado that accompanies his return to the game heighten the impact of the song. Jay-Z, a consummate braggadocio-style rapper, reestablishes his dominance over all around him. At one point he raps: “The meek shall perish.” He goes on to say, “I’ll roof you little nigga, I’m a project terrorist.” His unrepentant character (self?) brags about being a person who rules with violent disregard and terrorizes people who live in the projects, an already terrorizing place to be. How should black poor people respond to this character? With pride? Affirmatively? Supportively? Since the song does not offer a critique of this “project terrorist,” and given the charisma that Jay-Z imparts through his rhymes, one could perceive it as a glorification of a person terrorizing the most vulnerable members of black American society and demanding that we support his creative rights to profit from it. Why aren’t street-level rappers like Jay-Z fashioning countless tales of youthful outrage at such a predator? This is a powerful example of how the art of bragging wedded to the icon of the violent street hustler—in communities where street hustling is a vibrant and destructive force—ends up having the power to celebrate predatory behavior.

In a 2007 *Rolling Stone* interview, Jay-Z acknowledged that the drug wars of which he was a part are hostile to black people and black communities: “When dealers are in the middle of it, they don’t

realize what they’re doing, they don’t humanize the people that’s using the drugs, they don’t humanize the neighborhood. It’s not until you mature, and then you look back on it like, ‘I was causing a lot of destruction around the neighborhood.’”¹⁴ But where are all the highly commercially successful lyrics that make this crucial point, that de-glamorize the drug trade, that reject gangsta worldviews, that humanize black people? This is the central problem with the expressions of violence and drug-dealer-turned-rapper stories in hip hop: They do not publicly reinforce the transition from “project terrorist” to “project humanist.” Far too much pleasure, fame, style, and celebration go to the game, to the hustle, to the dehumanizing rhetoric of taking advantage of black people.

Without making overly blanket, ill-informed generalizations about the creativity in hip hop, we need to be alarmed about storytelling that offers little critique of violence against black people. There are brilliant stories in hip hop that capture the day-to-day reality of dealing with violence but do not seem to glorify it. Consider, for example, the lyrics for Nas’s “Gangsta Tears,” which tap into the pain, loss, and seemingly permanent cycle of retribution. But such sorrowful tales are a decreasing proportion of what sells records in hip hop, serving instead as “alternative” fare on corporate radio. Far too many of the most financially successful lyricists in hip hop—Jay-Z, 50 Cent, T.I., and Lil’ Wayne, among others—overemphasize and glorify violent tales and gang personas because these are profitable. They no longer tell tales from the darkside, with the hopes of contributing to a devaluing of “the life” and producing radical, empowered youth. Instead, there is too much getting rich from the exploitation of black suffering.

Despite the wrong-headed, decontextualized, and unfairly targeted claims about hip hop causing violence, there is some truth to them. It is silly to claim that what we consume, witness, and participate in has no impact on us as individuals and as a society. When a society turns a blind eye to violent behavior and allows its culture and politics to be saturated in violence, it will normalize violence among its citizenry and perhaps also indirectly contribute to violent behavior

among some of its citizens. And if we are going to rail about violence in hip hop, we should rail twice as hard about the depths of violence young black people experience, seeing them as the recipients and inheritors of violence rather than solely as its perpetrators. Where is all the media-supported outrage about this?

The combination of denial of the larger forces and the self-congratulatory story of hyper-individual responsibility most readily expressed by white middle-class leaders is more than dishonest; it is itself a form of social violence against the young people who are most vulnerable and who need all of us to make a real and serious commitment to restoring the kinds of institutions and opportunities that keep chaos, violence, and social root shock at bay. The refusal to acknowledge our national culpability for these conditions continues not only the legacy of denying the deep injuries done to African-Americans but also the long-standing use of the expression of black pain from these injuries as “evidence” of black people’s own responsibility for these larger circumstances. The depths of the commercial success associated with violent, gang, and street culture as “authentic” hip hop has given violent black masculinity a seal of approval, thus encouraging these behaviors among the kids who are most at risk, and who “need” to embrace this model if manhood is to survive. What began as a form of releasing and healing has become yet another lucrative but destructive economy for young poor black men.

The day-to-day violence that plagues poor communities must be taken into account both as a crucial context for explaining some of what we hear in hip hop and as a reality that compounds the power of violent storytelling. The allure of celebrities whose cachet depends partly on their relationship to a criminal/drug underworld is surely a form of social idolization that might encourage already-vulnerable kids to participate in the lucrative drug trade in neighborhoods where good-paying jobs are nearly nonexistent. A good deal of 50 Cent’s initial promotional campaign relied on the fact that he sold crack, that his mother was a crack user, that he was shot nine times and wore a bulletproof vest to protect him against enemies. We can’t constantly make violence sexy for young people who find themselves mired in

violent social spaces that are mostly not of their making and then expect them not to valorize violent action.

Some of this impact is going to be behavioral, and the behaviors in question should be vociferously challenged and rejected. Black people do not need “project terrorists”! The projects and “million-dollar blocks” are bad enough. Of course, the drive to pathologize black people (and to make pathologized blackness the only “true” and profitable blackness) makes such criticism of black behavior very tricky. But we must confront this dilemma with courage and honesty. Our efforts to support, sustain, and rebuild black communities must permanently join the five major causes of destruction I’ve listed above to their individual and collective consequences. Neither social responsibility nor individual responsibility should be talked about in isolation. Focusing on hip hop as a cause of violence is just as irresponsible as defending it by pointing to social conditions as a justification for perpetuating gang, gun, and drug slang, iconography, and lifestyles in the music. Despite the finger pointing, both positions in the hip hop wars propagate the myth that black people are themselves violent, and both downplay the violence done to them. Both seem to accept the larger social context as it is; neither challenges American society to change the playing field.

Unbiased, socially just forms of concern about violence will and do focus on directly helping communities reduce violence rather than pointing the finger at and railing about lyrics and images as the cause. Working as many local leaders and community groups do in the communities most directly affected by street crime and other acts of daily violence, activists don’t advocate more force, violence, and policing but, on the contrary, strongly advocate for nonviolent conflict resolution in schools, at home, and in other places where children spend a great deal of their time. They also call for access to resources for families to help resolve conflict. Indeed, our response to youth crimes should result in extensive conflict resolution counseling and other highly supervised programs designed to reverse their direction, not placement in ever more violent adult incarceration facilities.

The most effective way to enact concern over violence is to (1) express this concern for black youth, and the real violence they face, in the form of activist social change; and (2) stop being hypocritical about violence. In other words, we must avoid the duplicity involved in expressing outrage at hip hop's violence while remaining virtually silent about the ways that our society condones violence and uses it both as social policy (internationally and at home) and as entertainment. This effort would have to address head-on the social worlds this nation has formed by creating, maintaining, and exacerbating the conditions in ghettos. It would have to confront violence against black youth—direct and indirect—that is part of everyday life but all too often goes unchallenged as a crisis for *our* society unless it spills out of the ghetto. Until this happens, those who rail about hip hop's violence but refuse to take into account the forces working against these communities do so not on behalf of the thousands of kids and young adults who have been left to fend for themselves but, rather, against them.

2

Hip Hop Reflects Black Dysfunctional Ghetto Culture

What is unique about this country's civilization? Its economy? Its pornography? The social welfare system that has created an African-American subculture that embraces poor English, illiteracy, sexual conquest, violence and drugs? (Lest I be accused of generalization and racism, I am just more or less describing rap music and hip-hop, or put another way, paraphrasing the comedian-actor turned outspoken social critic, Bill Cosby.)

—David Yerushalmi, president of the Society of Americans for National Existence, *The American Spectator*, April 27, 2006 (*The American Spectator* is an established conservative magazine, and the Society of Americans for National Existence [SANE] is considered a radical anti-Islamic organization.)

The solution to poverty, therefore, doesn't lie in a collective movement. It lies in the will and discipline of the individual people who dedicate themselves to living moral lives, striving to improve their circumstances, and providing greater opportunities for their children. By that measure, the great betrayer of African-Americans is not their government but their groins.

—Mark Goldblatt, *The American Spectator*,
October 17, 2005

I ain't saying Jesse [Jackson], Al [Sharpton] and Vivian [Stringer] are gold-diggas, but they don't have the heart to mount a legitimate campaign against the real black-folk killas.

It is us. At this time, we are our own worst enemies. We have allowed our youth to buy into a culture (hip hop) that has been perverted, corrupted and overtaken by prison culture. The music, attitude and behavior expressed in this culture is anti-black, anti-education, pro-drug dealing and violent.

—Jason Whitlock, FOX sports journalist, in response to the Imus incident, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 16, 2007

HIP HOP HAS BEEN ROUNDLY CRITICIZED for representing and celebrating what many critics, scholars, and media talking heads consider a black underclass urban “culture of dysfunction.” Although hip hop is not always considered the origin of this “dysfunction,” it is often perceived to be its greatest contemporary promoter. For some pundits and scholars, the crisis of dysfunction must be addressed because it negatively impacts black people (Comedian Bill Cosby and journalist Jason Whitlock, both black men, are examples of this approach); and for others (including many whites), the issue is that this black cultural problem is infecting larger society through the popularity of hip hop.

Criticism of this so-called culture of dysfunction revolves around the notion that poor urban black people have themselves created and perpetuated a “culture” of violence (which includes crime and prison culture), sexual deviance/excess, and illiteracy. Around these three pillars, the critics of hip hop dump many other cultural insults such as the kinds of names black people give their children, their everyday behavior and what they wear, their so-called fixation on conspicuous consumption, their slang phrases, their attitudes, and so on. The once-isolated issue of violence in hip hop has been folded into the larger idea that hip hop reflects a generally dysfunctional black urban underclass culture, and thus the moderate brush stroke of violence in hip hop became a paint-bucket dump of hip hop as “proof” of black urban underclass dysfunction.

This disturbing claim—especially its now wide-brush cultural basis—is class and racially motivated. It is also a powerful means by which to silence hip hop supporters, since it is hard to defend some of the specific behaviors identified in lyrics that can be lumped under this gross claim. The inability to “defend” the prevalence of lyrics like Lil’ Wayne’s “Shut up Bitch, Swallow” or David Banner’s song “Like a Pimp” in which he says “Fuck it, show your pussy lips, you go to Tougaloo, but I know you still flip, bitch don’t trip” becomes, for some observers, “proof” of the larger claim that hip hop is a reflection of and booster for black urban dysfunctional culture.

There are four troubling problems with the grossly simplistic idea of poor black people as culturally dysfunctional: (1) Contemporary claims about black cultural dysfunction are not new; they represent an old and oft-used argument against black people. (2) Newly created black cultural expressions have always been seen as a threat to larger American culture. (3) The cultural dysfunction argument collapses behavioral responses to structural conditions into fictitiously self-generating cultural patterns. (4) This argument also distorts and undermines decades of research efforts to prove the distinctive value of black cultural expressions and practices.

In the next four sections, let us consider each of these in turn.

Black Cultural Dysfunction as an Argument Against Black People

Many of those who claim that black people are culturally deficient suggest that this deficiency is based on relatively new circumstances. Some critics assert that so-called black dysfunctional culture has its origins in programs (affirmative action, granting of black Americans access to existing welfare programs) that emerged out of civil rights movement efforts and centuries of racial and class-based discrimination. The idea is this: When what many conservatives call “the welfare state”—but what I would call an income aid program to assist the very poor—was extended to poor black

people (whites were recipients for decades before blacks were deemed eligible), a culture of entitlement, a victim status consciousness, and cultural dysfunction among black people were the results, marked especially by the so-called black matriarchal family structure.

This false point of origin for the belief that poor black people have a debased and dysfunctional culture that emerged from civil rights efforts and programs (and that black women's family leadership was a key reason for such dysfunction) hides the fact that the very same argument not only was a cornerstone of the means by which African-Americans were deemed suitable for enslavement but also formed the basis for maintaining slavery. Myths of black cultural dysfunction have served as a key explanation for racial inequality throughout most of the twentieth century.

Many contemporary black critics of hip hop want to recall a glory period when black culture was generally perceived as both noble and decent. However, even the imagined "good old days" of black cultural expression and everyday life were discussed in much the same way we talk about the black ghetto today. Forms of cultural expression such as jazz, blues, and black youth style, slang, and attitude have all been considered major threats to society and evidence of black cultural dysfunction, sexual excess, and violence.

For most of the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries, black people were considered devoid of any cultural traditions, and thus their "inferiority" was said to be based on presumed racially determined biological differences in intelligence. The overall idea was that slavery wiped out African approaches to sound, language, movement, food, space, time, and so on, and that black Americans were not as evolved as whites and therefore represented a culturally clean slate. Hallmarks of black culture were considered to be deficient attempts at mimicking Western cultural traditions rather than proof of existing traditions. Of course, today, most serious scholars of culture agree that African-American cultural traditions such as black religious practices, dance, and music—the blues, jazz, gospel, R&B, and

even hip hop—are fusions, hybrids, and cultural combinations of African and European influences.¹

Nevertheless, during all of the nineteenth and well over half of the twentieth centuries, the general belief among Western intellectuals was that African societies and cultures were inferior to Western culture; thus, black Americans' retention and revision of African cultural traditions was not considered valuable. In fact, it was often perceived as an impediment for black Americans' developing civilization. African cultures were considered primitive, deviant. The key proof of this was the imputation of sexual deviancy and violence onto enslaved African-Americans. To some sociologists and anthropologists, the idea that black Americans might have been made "cultureless" because of slavery was considered an opportunity for black Americans, over time, to fully absorb Western, European-derived values and such cultural approaches as modesty and civility. Thus, slavery was often perceived as a blessing, as a benevolent institution.

Few would defend slavery today, nor would many serious observers claim that slavery created a cultural clean slate for the enslaved. The issue of black culture and its relationship to American culture remains central to our public conversation and grows out of this deep historical legacy. The claim that black people have a sexually excessive and violent culture and that they lack proper values has remained a fundamental vehicle for the denial of centuries of compounded structural discrimination and institutional racism as the real sources of self-destructive behaviors. To overly identify specific kinds of so-called deviance within black people, even though these behaviors exist throughout society, is a long-standing factor in the process by which racism is reproduced. Denying the roots of this process misses the bigger and much more important image of black deviance as a function of the apparent excesses of hip hop. We can't say, on the one hand, that those who made virtually the same argument about poor black people sixty or seventy years ago were racist and then, on the other, claim that "we are right" when we make this

argument today because, now, poor black people *really are* dysfunctional. Racist reasoning is a shape-shifter; the previous manifestations are always highly visible, while the current ones are often invisible to us.

Black Culture Seen as a Threat

Black cultural expressions such as dance, art, style, poetry, and, especially, its recent musical developments were considered constant threats to larger American society during their early years, even as many whites appreciated and participated in them. In nearly every case, once these highly popular and visible musical forms ceased to be the sound of the current youthful generation, they were accepted, celebrated, and tamed, no longer considered threats. Blues music, for example, was considered the “devil’s music” during its heyday in the 1920s. In the parlance of early-twentieth-century language this phrase referred to the way the blues lured people into unacceptable behavior and explored risqué and taboo subjects, especially about sexuality, poverty, injustice, and violence. But now, of course, it is perceived as a quaint, charming artifact of a golden black age and embraced nearly universally as a valuable American musical form. It is credited for being the point of origin for jazz, rock and roll, and rhythm and blues.

Similarly, throughout its first several decades jazz music was considered musically debased and dangerous. As jazz historian Kathy Ogren notes, critics in the 1920s “exhorted listeners to resist the evil or wicked powers that jazz could exert over human behavior, especially the young.”² Fears that the music would lure middle-class whites into unsanctioned sexual and other behaviors deemed a threat to acceptable society helped justify many efforts to limit, contain, and police “jungle music,” as it was called since it was thought to be a primitive, dangerous African-based influence on American society. Its black performers and black fans were considered criminals, drug addicts, and representatives of black cultural inferiority and vice. Eventually, jazz was tamed and its brilliance discovered,

and today it is considered by many to be the greatest American music of all. It no longer represents a threatening cultural influence, and it isn’t associated with black cultural dysfunctionality, sexual excess, and violence. The pattern of responding to new black expressive cultures as dangerous invasions while venerating older ones is a pillar of contemporary racism even as it appears to be evidence of racial tolerance.

Fictitiously Self-Generating Cultural Patterns

All culture is both created and reinforced by environmental and social contexts. When we think of society’s structures, too often we consider only political and economic systems, neglecting to include culture. Culture is not an independent, self-generating set of transitory behaviors and values. It is part and parcel of our society’s structures. As Cornel West has rightly argued, culture is “as much a structure as the economy or politics; it is rooted in institutions such as families, schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, and communication industries (television, radio, video, music). Similarly, the economy and politics are not only influenced by values but also promote particular cultural ideals of the good life and good society.”³ Because culture is so rooted in the institutions that shape our society as a whole, it is absurd to talk about black cultural dysfunction as if black people reside in total cultural and social isolation from all the main institutions in American society.

Yet this approach has dominated some of the most celebrated forms of sociological inquiry into black life and the problem of black poverty. Examples include the work of early-twentieth-century sociologists of race such as Robert Park and of sociologists associated with the 1960s War on Poverty such as Daniel P. Moynihan, whose 1965 U.S. Department of Labor-sponsored “Moynihan Report” is now infamous. This approach is perpetuated by today’s social scientists, who, under the rubric of terms like “the underclass,” continue to attribute a presumed pathology and dysfunctionality to black urban culture.

The black dysfunctional culture argument identifies widespread cross-racial behaviors such as violence, nonmarital sexual activities, reproductive choices, and conditions like illiteracy—which are direct results of individual responses to highly complex and difficult social contexts (including sustained racial, gender, and economic oppression as well as high rates of black male incarceration)—as independent, self-propelling black cultural traits and traditions. As this argument goes, poor urban black people are violent and sexually deviant, and they choose illiteracy; no matter what we do, that's their culture. This confusion of behavior and culture and the isolation of specific negative behaviors above all other kinds of behaviors that are also regularly exhibited by the vast majority of black people—social support of others, hard work for little reward—paint a lopsided, distorted portrait of people who have few legitimate spokespeople.

A key element of this so-called black cultural dysfunction is the interpretation of black female-led families as pathological. In fact, the Moynihan Report referred to the problems facing poor black people as a “tangle of pathology” and cited black female-led families as the central cause. The pathology is alleged to be marked both by the patriarchal status of these families (in a patriarchal society, men are supposed to be in charge of the family while women are supposed to be subordinate—and this is considered “normal”) and by the assumption that unwed mothers, because they have had children outside of the institution of marriage, reveal their sexual deviance (women are supposed to have sex only within the confines of heterosexual marriage). This piece of the presumed black cultural dysfunction puzzle contributes to the association of black women with sexual deviance and has helped make popular the hypersexualized images of black women in hip hop.

Beyond this, black women's role as lead parent in single-female-headed households is considered a mutation of the larger patriarchal idea that women, in their role as childcare givers, are responsible for the moral development of their children. Since this moral education is understood as a key element of mothering in a two-parent and male-led family, then black mothers who parent outside of traditional

patriarchal families are imparting immoral values, thus perpetuating black dysfunctional culture.

Undermining of the Value of Black Cultural Expressions

Calling black culture “dysfunctional” overshadows a vibrant tradition of revealing the cultural contributions of African-Americans. These creative energies have been a powerful antidote to the systematic denial, devaluing, and disregard of black people and their contributions. It took immense political, social, and intellectual effort in the face of daunting resistance to produce the current belief that black American people have many distinct and valuable cultural traditions that are both part of the U.S. cultural fabric and yet based partly on African and African-Diasporic cultural traditions.

Black cultural expressions such as blues, jazz, gospel, dance, language, style, and religious and visual culture that emerged from new-world transformations of African-based traditions are now considered by many people (though not all) to be culturally valuable and distinct. And yet this victory of “proving” the existence of black American cultural traditions is being subtly and not so subtly undermined by the equation of black culture with the so-called black cultures of poverty and dysfunction. The long history of considering blacks violent, sexually deviant, and stupid has been maliciously fused with the black-propelled effort to reveal and examine the depths of the important cultural traditions that black people have contributed to American culture and the world in general. This process has turned the behaviors of some who grapple self-destructively with insanely powerful forms of social oppression into black cultural traditions, twisted black people's own radical efforts to prove that black people have created valuable cultural traditions in America, and then reduced and equated those extraordinary musical, verbal traditions to the claims of cultural dysfunction that have been leveled against black people for decades.

So, hip hop and its commercialized decline are being used to confirm and cement two key aspects of America's racial problem: (1) the

tradition of denying the deep and continued practices of racial discrimination and its impact on black people as well as American society as a whole; and (2) the tradition of imagining black American culture as separate, self-propelling, and dysfunctional. Comprehending the creation of forced racialized ghettoization and consistent forms of societal destruction of poor black communities is crucial to understanding the kinds of behaviors that have been deemed “cultural.” Some behaviors are “pathological” only in the context of the unjust terms of “normalcy.” Do we still have to make the case that presumed male authority inside and outside the family is a form of gender injustice? Black women as heads of households are not pathological or sexually deviant. Both parents should be sharing the duties and responsibilities attached to parenting, and obstacles that interfere with this joint project should be removed. But joint parenting does not have to happen via heterosexual marriage, nor should it include installing men as patriarchal heads of families.

Other behaviors that seem to be understandable (if deplorable) responses to a given situation, when applied to poor black people, somehow become a black cultural problem, one generated entirely by black people. The national policies that created black urban ghettos produce similar conditions for survival and self-destruction in Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Oakland, Washington (D.C.), New York, and other major cities. Yet the continuity of policy that has created nearly the same Petri dish of implosion and corrosion gets read the other way around: These black people, although scattered all over urban America, seem to create the same conditions everywhere they go. Their humanity becomes unrecognizable; the orchestrated and accumulating conditions confronting them recede, and their responses to what seem to be invisible forces appear self-generating.

Such a dislocated kind of reasoning seems insane in other contexts. Children raised in war-torn regions who become involved in youth guerrilla outfits, who behave in ways that would be considered troubling and self-destructive, are understood as being profoundly

shaped by their environment, not as cultural or genetic incubators for violence. But this obvious point of comparison falls away from consciousness in our own national context because we seem incapable of facing the ways our nation has orchestrated a war on poor black people.

Some might fear that criticizing and rejecting the dysfunctional black culture thesis will result in supporting the images of street crime and underground economies that overly define commercial hip hop today. Is drug dealing in poor communities “okay”? Is the glorification of predatory behavior—directed primarily against other African-Americans—desirable? Are prison-derived behaviors and socializations a good model for nonincarcerated community development? Of course not. Should young black men and women, boys and girls, be emulating street hustling as a way of life? No. Should black fathers leave all parenting responsibilities to black mothers? No. But we have to admit that these are real problems in the iconic core of commercial hip hop songs. The power of these songs is not only reflective (mirroring the actions and points of view of those who are already invested in street culture and criminality) but seductive as well (in that they encourage young people to emulate the facets of underground street economies such as drugs, gangs, and sex trades.)

The expansion of street economies has created more space for the values associated with them. There is no question that once-illicit street economies fill the void left by the racially compounding effects of deindustrialization; the values of such economies take up more and more social space and prestige. The use of prisons to warehouse young black people who are shut off from any real opportunity and the continual underfunding of schools and other social support institutions that support poor families only intensify this trend. But those who imagine that the modeling of prison culture or other street economy-derived attitudes is a form of black culture have collapsed the context in which black people find themselves into the people themselves. The accusation that poor young black people are agents

of their own demise is pervasive indeed. As noted, virtually all the highly visible supporters of the claim that “hip hop reflects black dysfunctional culture” deny society’s overall role in creating the conditions that foster problematic or self-limiting behaviors. Since this position tends to rely on the fiction that individual behavior determines opportunity, why should society get involved? Real opportunities must include a forthright and unflinching recognition of contemporary racism as it occurs structurally, not just at the level of individual belief. Many supporters of the idea that some or all of black culture is dysfunctional deny this reality, focusing instead on personal choice and negative behavior.

Such denial is the distorted public conversational context for comments like the one by Whitlock quoted at the outset of this chapter: that black people—especially as represented by hip hop—are their own worst enemies. They are “the real black-folk killas,” he says, without mentioning any of the powerful—and unjust—forces that shape and define the lives of the black urban poor. To say this—given both the reality of deep structural racism and the increasing reluctance of many in the larger society to admit, let alone confront, it—is to lay the blame only at the feet of the most vulnerable and poorest urban black residents themselves.

Somehow, so-called black dysfunctional culture has become its own self-fulfilling prophecy, even though the power and seduction of hip hop images—for blacks and everyone else—is significantly driven by the desire, voyeuristic pleasure, and consumption of middle-class whites. Why are these consumers, who are key to the creation of a larger and more profitable market for hip hop images and street styles, not considered part of a “dysfunctional” culture, too—and why are they not charged with being some of the “real black-folk killas”?

No reasonable person thinks that a dominant black youth cultural expression—one that is widely consumed and shared—should be saturated with negative representations of underground street economy or criminal behaviors and attitudes. Rather, the issue is how we explain *and then address* this situation.

Dysfunctional Defenders Gone Wild

Increasingly, too many of hip hop’s supporters point to structural racism to explain the origins of the problem but refuse to link these structural forces to individual action and to the power of media seduction. By failing to posit a progressive strategy for responding to negative behavioral effects, these pro-hip hop spokespeople actually fuel the “dysfunctional black culture” thesis.

The ascendance of the black gangsta, pimp, and ho in commercial hip hop is not a reflection of some imagined black dysfunction. It is the result of (1) the structural racism that grew out of the spatial and economic conditions of black ghettos in the post-civil rights era; (2) the hyper-marketing of hip hop images by major corporations, including black industry moguls, to promote and satisfy white consumer demand (indeed, this is one means by which racist ideas saturate and propel racial expectations and associations) as well as to sustain black “street credibility”; and (3) insufficient and Johnny-come-lately progressive critique of this direction in hip hop among hip hop fans, leaders, and artists themselves, especially the refusal to deal with hip hop’s racially specific brand of violence and sexism.

Some defenders of commercial hip hop are in essence refusing to criticize the ways that many commercially successful rappers use the high market value of images of black criminality for their own gain. Few are willing to confront the fact that popular icons not only *reflect* the legacy of structural conditions but *shape and define* popular responses to it. The more prominent, creative, and charismatic artists are, the more likely they will be to generate desire for and imitation of the styles, personas, and ideas expressed. This is especially true of those who find the most lived-experience connection to such images. When the street economy icons—the gangsta, pimp, and ho—are celebrated and exaggerated in mass media, and when they represent local forms of prestige in areas with chronic and exceptionally high levels of joblessness and educational disarray, an already overwhelming situation is compounded. Some of hip hop’s supporters spend far

too much time criticizing the black dysfunctional culture thesis while deflecting emphasis on the modeling impact of these images. By denying or underplaying the seduction and power of mass-mediated black criminal iconography for black youth, progressive supporters wind up co-signing a vicious cycle—and even then, without disabling anti-black ideas about black culture. They might, in fact, be encouraging them both.

Behaviors that destroy community, prevent people from taking advantage of real opportunity, and foster despair and nihilism should be fought and rejected. But if the terms of these challenges confirm the hateful stories used to justify racism, then they, too, should be challenged. There is no question that proper encouragement along with stern admonishment to reject self-destructive paths—*along with creating real opportunities*—will produce the kinds of healing and generative results that can turn the devastation around. This combination strategy means acknowledging the deep connections among behavior, context (past and present), and circumstance. But the strategy further admits that the structural changes required to bring about this legacy must include a serious form of behavioral transformation for those who have internalized and begun to reflect the destructive conditions in which they find themselves.

3

Hip Hop Hurts Black People

No amount of money or strategy will close the gap as long as black children are raised in an environment that devalues education. . . . Rap music, poverty and pop culture celebrities combine to create an alluring “cool-pose culture of self-destructive behaviors.”

—Policy Bridge (an African-American-led think tank based in Cleveland, Ohio)

The black community has gone through too much to sacrifice upward mobility to the passing kick of an adversarial hip-hop “identity.”

—John H. McWhorter

While racism remains a potent force in American life, it does not hold the malignant power of gangsta culture.

—Cynthia Tucker, journalist

MANY WRITERS, LEADERS, social critics, and cultural commentators claim that hip hop hurts black people—especially poor black youth, who can least afford it. Among the injuries they suffer are lower levels of academic and economic achievement, for which there are three primary explanations: self-destructive anti-education attitudes, emphasis on violence, and misogyny. Some claim that hip hop is fueling (if not instigating) a self-destructive, anti-education attitude that reduces chances for already at-risk, economically fragile youth. Others argue that it promotes violence, thus contributing to crime rates and black social decline by encouraging and glamorizing those

disposed to committing petty or violent street crime. And regarding misogyny and representations of hyper-sexual and exploitative behavior, language, and imagery targeting black women, hip hop is considered the key societal culprit. Some critics claim that hip hop fosters negative interactions and exploitative relations between young black men and women, in ways that degrade black women. Finally, some claim that hip hop is self-destructive, that it is black people's own worst enemy, and that paying attention to the myriad other reasons underlying the conditions that plague poor black communities, especially young people, is misguided. It's really the "enemy within" that is destroying black people and limiting opportunity—or so the argument goes.

Unlike many other claims made against hip hop, the idea that it hurts black people tends to come from black critics such as Bill Cosby and those quoted at the outset of this chapter. Despite my many concerns with how, where, and why this argument has been made, it is completely understandable that observers, fans, and leaders would be concerned about the content of commercial hip hop. And there is some important truth to the notion that the direction commercial hip hop has taken over the past ten years especially hurts young black people. Even some strong supporters of hip hop could be coaxed into agreement with this point. Writers such as Bakari Kitwana, Joan Morgan, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Ewuare X. Osayande, and others in the hip hop generation have grown increasingly concerned over the massive changes that have taken place in hip hop. Some even say that hip hop as they once knew it is dead.

The sheer abundance of lyrical, stylistic, and iconic references to violence, gang activity, drug dealing, verbal and sexual abuse of black women, and homophobia in hip hop cannot be denied, defended, or explained away as *only* a reflection of actual lived experience. Surely these references are fundamentally connected to the devastation of black communities and thus emerge from some aspect of reality. But the state of hip hop isn't entirely about reality; it also ties into the social prestige and market power associated with these versions of black reality. Few thoughtful observers would make favorable claims for a

constant barrage of misogynistic street hustling as a perpetual metaphor for black cool. Poor black kids are definitely not helped by heavy consumption of constant negative and mean-spirited sexist images and lyrics that distort black masculinity, or by stories that glorify violent confrontations with other black teens and celebrate predatory behaviors and the necessity of selling drugs to one's neighbors.

Yet despite the substantive merits of the claim that hip hop hurts black people, there are significant problems with the overarching idea and the way this idea is expressed. These problems revolve around three issues: (1) *unfair generalizations* made through sweeping claims and overblaming; (2) *the tone of disdain and disregard* that is smuggled in under "outrage" and gets misunderstood as tough love; and (3) *what's left out*—that is, the extraordinary absence of collective responsibility for what's happened to hip hop and the silence among many critics about structural racism and its heightened impact on the black poor. Given the flawed tone and limited scope of this claim, what appears on the surface to be an effort to help protect and support black youth ultimately contributes to the harm done to them.

Unfair Generalizations

The claim that "hip hop hurts black people" is based on the notion that *all* hip hop, not merely commercially dominated and controlled hip hop, harms black kids. This is an undifferentiated and sweeping indictment that obscures profound corporate involvement in commercial hip hop and refuses to acknowledge and embrace the facets of local, enabling, and progressive hip hop. Few critics come right out and say that "commercial hip hop and its hyper-presentation of violence, gangs, and misogyny hurt young black people." This is not a matter of semantics. The bulk of the kind of hip hop that promotes the worst of what we find in the music and imagery is commercially promoted, encouraged, produced, and distributed by major corporations. Images and ideas that reflect good will, love of community, and a diverse range of black experiences are relegated—no matter the

quality of the rhymes or beats—to the underground or to the commercial margins of youth culture. Young fans are far more influenced by images and ideas in heavy media rotation—and rappers themselves cannot be held solely responsible for this.

Many critics who talk about hip hop hurting black people are too quick to overlook the vital, dynamic, and heroic—albeit marginalized—voices in hip hop such as The Roots, Common, Immortal Technique, Akrobatik, and Zion I, to name just a few. In The Roots's song "Star/Pointro" (*The Tipping Point*, Geffen Records, 2004), Black Thought raps about the distorted quest for status and fame produced in society at large and its particular brand expressed in poor black communities. At one point he says: "Kids call themselves killers let they hammers do the talkin', don't even know the meaning of life, ain't seen a thing." Akrobatik's song "Remind My Soul" (*Balance*, Coup d'Etat Entertainment, 2003) is a mournful yet inspiring song about the legacy of black resistance to hatred that produces self-hate. In one place he raps: "So why we killin' for crumbs when there's so much at stake?" Later he says: "Harriet Tubman would be turning in her grave. Like remind my soul."

The one-dimensional but highly visible claim that hip hop hurts black people refuses to shine a light on these less exploitative artists and aspects of the music—where critiques of society as well as humanizing and contextualized internal critiques of black community-destroying behaviors are the norm rather than the exception. The repetition of this one-sided strategy contributes to the marginality of hip hop's better self and reflects a complete disregard for the gifts that hip hop has bestowed on world music. Furthermore, when critics overly generalize and neglect to mention those who work against the destructive commercial grain of hip hop, they lose the attention of youth who know that there are worthy aspects to the music and culture. Blanket criticism against something people feel such a powerful connection to often falls on deaf ears.

Too many attacks use hip hop as an easy scapegoat for much larger social issues—issues that require our sustained empathetic attention and commitment. Angry railing at the music without serious attention

to the contexts for its creation and evolution generates an illusion that hip hop is a primary cause of urban social ills. This scapegoating happens frequently when it comes to the educational component of how hip hop hurts blacks. Critics suggest that the anti-education "cool pose" represented by hip hop, which some say has "gripped" poor black youth, is the central explanation for black educational failure as revealed by high drop-out and unemployment rates. For example, as quoted at the outset of the chapter, Policy Bridge—a black think tank in Cleveland, Ohio, founded and run by three local black professional men, all of whom attended Cleveland public schools—has produced a report claiming that "no amount of money or strategy will close the gap as long as black children are raised in an environment that devalues education." Rap music, poverty, and pop culture celebrities combine to create an alluring "cool-pose culture of self-destructive behaviors." Similarly, John McWhorter has argued that "the attitude and style expressed by the hip hop 'identity' keeps blacks down." Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that the opportunities he personally enjoys are available to everyone and that all these black kids have to do is give up their bad attitude, gestures, and behaviors, and a world of opportunity will be open to them.¹

So, rap music and pop culture and their emphasis on the "cool-pose culture of self-destructive behaviors" (a stylish form of unflappability and feigned disengagement) not only rank with poverty as the central problems facing poor black youth today but also, according to Policy Bridge, account for two-thirds of the whole problem facing poor black youth today! This is bad enough, but even worse is their claim that "no amount of money or strategy" will have a meaningful impact until this cool-pose attitude (held solely responsible for devaluing education among some black youth) is defeated. It's as if rap attitude is responsible for all the ways that race and class discrimination affect poor black youth. So, following this logic, there is no point in making policy changes, creating school improvement plans, expanding job training programs, enhancing economic opportunity, or relying on rehabilitation over punishment and criminalization—at least not until rap music and popular culture change.

This oft-repeated position—that the cool-pose attitude now associated with hip hop and black popular culture hurts black people—denies two key facts: (1) This type of self-protective, male response preceded hip hop by decades, and (2) the cool pose itself functions as a survival strategy in the face of crushing oppression and violence against poor black youth, especially boys and men. It is indeed a form of protection against their actual and perceived long odds in society. For example, an important and award-winning study on job application discrimination done by Princeton University sociologists Devah Pager and Bruce Western concluded that “black job applicants are only two-thirds as successful as equally qualified Latinos, and little more than half as successful as equally qualified whites. Indeed, black job seekers [who have not gone to prison] fare no better than white men just released from prison.”²

The post-civil rights era brand of racism that creates these realities operates under a rhetoric of already achieved racial equality and has thus generated a unique kind of disillusionment among racial minorities. How are rejected black job candidates like the ones in Pager and Western’s study supposed to respond to the ongoing reality of unjust limitations on opportunity, no matter how well they achieve? Perhaps a motivation for the cool pose that youth sometimes present reflects an effort to appear undaunted by this reality, to seem untouched by the real effects of racial injustice that continue to be underaccounted for in our analysis of why some black children lag behind others. Or perhaps the study explains why the merits of an investment in educational achievement might be difficult to sustain under conditions of class, racial, political, and social oppression. If these well-performing job applicants, who likely focused on school and made all the necessary sacrifices, still were only *half* as successful as equally qualified white candidates, what is the point of their effort and sacrifice?

The idea that a cool-pose attitude is a free-standing black cultural disposition that is hurting black people, and not a response to hurtful, discriminatory environments, makes the social condition of injustice appear “normal” and pathologizes the response to it. Public

attention to this issue has uncritically and selectively adopted the results of research such as S. Fordham and J. U. Ogbu’s 1986 study “Black Students’ School Success: Coping with the Burden of ‘Acting White,’” which concluded that one significant reason for underachievement among black youth is a broad cultural devaluation of educational attainment. Oppositional research and other details from this study—most significantly, the role of social, economic, and political subordination of African-Americans in producing conditions that spawned an oppositional identity—are excised from public conversation.³

In the popular media and in conservative think tank circles, hip hop and oppositional cool-pose behaviors are the reason for the unwarranted emergence of an “anti-education culture” that has sprung up out of the depths of some strange black alternative world. The point of origin and significant power ascribed to this anti-education cool pose are both incorrect and problematic. The pose is overwhelmingly cited as the source of devastatingly high African-American high school drop-out rates. Acting cool in ways that are anti-educational is so widespread and influential that, to quote Policy Bridge once again, “no amount of money or strategy will close the gap as long as black children are raised in an environment that devalues education.” Worst of all, this reading of young black men and women helps us wash our hands of any collective responsibility or empathy while obscuring the forces working against these young people. From this angle, young black people are not our kids in pain brought on by us, who need our love, guidance, defense, support, and resources, but, instead, an alien bunch who just seem to refuse to get with it. So, as the argument goes, nothing “we” can do will make it stop until they help themselves.

The poorest among us, especially those who are nonwhite, seem to be permanently and deliberately left behind. The conditions in which they are born and asked to survive are brutal and terrorizing, and they are often left to their own devices as to how to make it through. And with “friends” who tell you that despite all the odds stacked against you a good attitude will solve all your problems, who

needs enemies? The brutal irony of this assessment—that no amount of money or strategy will succeed until the cool-pose attitude ends—is that the opposite is actually true: It won't end until we make the proper kinds of investment in young people. And this investment involves attending to the internalization of despair (rather than treating despair as a cause) and creating meaningful, accessible opportunity.

Tone Speaks Volumes

Bill Cosby, himself a high school dropout, has received a great deal of attention over several comments he has repeated regarding poor black people's dysfunctional behavior and actions, which he has claimed explains their conditions. While some of his ideas share a long history of black conservative strategies for self-empowerment, he trades on the popularization of racial stereotypes about poor black people. At a speech he gave in 2004 at the DAR Constitution Hall, he said that "the lower economic people are not holding up their end of the bargain. . . . These people are going around stealing Coca-Cola. People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake and then we run out and we are outraged, [saying,] 'The cops shouldn't have shot him.' What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand?" A few weeks later, Cosby similarly addressed a group of black activists in Chicago at the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition's annual conference. He suggested that poor young black people's behavior (some of which is closely associated with hip hop style and attitude) is what's keeping black youth from succeeding, and he said it in deeply insulting ways, designed to injure and disparage: "Your dirty laundry gets out of school at 2:30 p.m. everyday, it's cursing and calling each other [the N-word] as they're walking up and down the street. They think they're hip. They can't read. They can't write. They're laughing and giggling, and they're going nowhere."⁴

John McWhorter, in the same article in which he declares that black youth are kept back by their own behavior, disdainfully describes what is decidedly problematic behavior by some kids in a Ken-

tucky Fried Chicken restaurant in Harlem: "So completely was rap ingrained in their consciousness that every so often, one or another of them would break into cocky, expletive-laden rap lyrics, accompanied by the angular, bellicose gestures typical of rap performance." His tone is what emotionally drives the argument:

The arm-slinging, hand-hurling gestures of rap performers have made their way into many young blacks' casual gesticulations, becoming integral to their self-expression. The problem with such speech and mannerisms is that they make potential employers wary of young black men and can impede a young black's ability to interact comfortably with co-workers and customers.

He challenges hip hop supporters, Michael Eric Dyson in particular, to point out "just where, exactly, the civil rights-era blacks might have gone wrong in lacking a hip-hop revolution. They created the world of equality, striving, and success I live and thrive in. Hip-hop creates nothing."⁵

Unfortunately, it is completely socially acceptable to talk publicly about poor young black people as a group, in the context of hip hop, with such a pejorative tone. This tone, which communicates the sense of holding one's nose at the stench coming from dirty laundry, arises frequently in public conversations these days. Finding belligerent, antisocial black boys to serve as examples for all black boys reveals the subtext, the real political point of this argument. Surely there were other young black men in the same Harlem KFC that McWhorter was visiting; some probably actually prepared his meal and at least a few probably listen to hip hop, despite their cooperative, appropriate behavior. We should challenge the worst of what commercial hip hop has become, but not with this tone, not with this political subtext. Beneath what could be progressive outrage at the way that hip hop has mutated is a deeply problematic, nearly laughable argument suggesting that the successes of the civil rights movement created a world of opportunity for all those who behave properly.

By contrast, it is worth noting the kind of approach that addresses behaviors that might have a good reason for emerging, yet still rejects them as self-destructive. Not surprisingly, these constructive critiques come from activists who have sustained, community-based professions and thus are able to see the world from the perspectives of poor young black men and women. Geoffrey Canada, founder and director of the Harlem Children's Zone, has spoken out eloquently and powerfully against the ways that behaviors taken up by some young black men and women undermine achievement and enable a social world where violence and criminality thrive. His comments were related as well to the death of rapper Busta Rhymes's bodyguard Israel Ramirez, a student Canada mentored, and the refusal of Busta Rhymes and others to give information to the police about Ramirez's killer. He responded passionately to this "no-snitching" attitude that enables crime to go unpunished in poor communities, thereby undermining community values of anti crime, pro-community stability and growth:

It's like we're saying to the criminals, you can have our community. Just have our community. Do anything you want, and we will either deal with it ourselves or we will simply ignore it. . . . I just think of him, being shot, falling down, probably thinking, this might be it. And I just wonder, who held his hand? Or who caressed his head? . . . Who stayed with him? Who made sure this man didn't die alone for nothing?⁶

So, this argument isn't just about whether criticism should be made; it's about the tone of the criticism, what damage is done in its wake, and how publicly popular comments can be distinguished from empathetic, historically informed critique that also rejects self-destructive behavior.

What's Left Out

The notion that hip hop harms black people is often couched in a language that implies that hip hop today—despite its contemporary

role as a corporate-dominated product—is a home-grown, local-black-ghetto cultural phenomenon, one that can be understood as emerging organically and autonomously from some imagined un-commercialized, all-black recreational space. The general attitudes, style, language, and behavior of black kids invested in hip hop serve as "proof" that this is a "black thing," made by and for black youth. The crux of the idea that hip hop hurts black people is that hip hop represents social problems that result from behaviors generated by blacks. The charge begins with hip hop as the key source of injury to black people and ends with the idea that black behavior alone will fix the problem.

The operative illusion is that truly "black" images and styles cannot be products, regardless of the degree to which corporate power defines, shapes, and promotes them. This fiction allows us to imagine that the core of commercialized hip hop emerges entirely from poor black youth themselves. Yet, the bulk of the kind of hip hop that promotes the worst of what we find in the music and imagery is commercially promoted, produced, and distributed by blacks, whites, and others for a predominately white audience.

Many who claim that hip hop hurts black people conveniently leave out (or at least remain silent about) the extensive role of corporate power and white desire as key ingredients in creating the centrality of self-destructive ideas and images in commercial hip hop. What we hear and see on commercial radio, on cable TV, and in magazines are products of global corporations whose employees work night and day to generate sales of their products. Once a highly expensive music video is produced (a process that can cost as much as a half-million dollars), that song is promoted via every means necessary, including paying off television and radio program managers who assist in high levels of airplay to help encourage sales. And now that the global corporations have realized that black death (as Chuck D has put it) is a highly profitable black product, they do what they can to make money on it.

Radio-station program managers and record-label executives who promote the gangsta-pimp-ho trinity often claim that this is what

sells, so, in effect, they pretend to be slaves to audience desire. They shrug their shoulders and say: “What do you want from me? If we don’t play (fill-in-the-blank-rapper), then we lose record sales and listeners. We’d love to play more Talib Kweli, but we gotta pay the bills!” Meanwhile, rappers say they are trapped by contracts to sell records, that what they do is a business. As Nelly noted during BET’s *Hip Hop vs. America* forum: “When you get done it’s a business. You sign a contract to sell records. You don’t sign a contract to state your feelings and hope that everybody else understands it. . . . [Y]ou have an agreement to sign this contract to sell records, therefore if I don’t sell records [for the record company] then, I’m out of a job.”⁷ These positions are profoundly disingenuous because they evade the widely known fact that radio stations are regularly compensated for playing the artists chosen for high-rotation airplay by record labels. Fan requests rarely determine programming. Many of these larger conglomerates own multiple radio stations and determine the playlists for all of them in a given urban radio market. Record labels hire promoters to pay off these radio programmers, who now have more power than ever to shape national listening habits. And this process ensures that most of the singles and the artists that record labels have decided to promote get regular airplay. Why isn’t this corporate-based, unethical, socially irresponsible behavior, which impacts millions, criticized and held up for disdainful commentary with the same frequency, the same levels of disdain, as the “cool pose”?

Multimillion-dollar corporations with near total control over the airwaves and playlists, which never release objective and complete information about callers and song requests, refuse to openly discuss how they determine their playlists or explain the cozy and illegal relationship between many record companies and radio stations uncovered by various investigations over the years. They want us to believe that we, the listeners, determine what gets played. And they give the impression, through sometimes rigged call-in segments and other contrived listener-based contests, that we, the listeners, determine what gets played. Yet, even people who have little content criticism of the songs heard on commercial black/urban contemporary radio

think that there is too much constant repetition of a depressingly short playlist. Most people tolerate the hyper-repetition; few are happy about it. The sense that songs are being played more often these days is in fact quite true. In the early 1990s (prior to the Telecommunications Act of 1996) programmers played popular songs an average of 40 times each per week. By the end of the decade that number had jumped to 140 plays per week.⁸

This means that the constant marketing, distribution, and playing of commercial hip hop that reflects negative images and ideas actually cultivates these images and ideas. The cool pose, the black thug, the black ho—these are *brands* being hawked and overemphasized, touted as the way out of the ghetto. Given that there are few alternative ways out, black youth, especially males (who make far more money than black women do from “investing” in hip hop), see this as their ticket to economic independence and wealth.

Thug life is a product, and given our history of racial stereotypes, young black men are the ideal sales force for it. So if we’re going to talk about investment and opportunity, we have to admit that there is a large market for these images and attitudes, a market far bigger than black people can be held responsible for. In a way, thugging has enhanced the financial opportunity for many young black men. Hip hop moguls like Damon Dash often defend their thug-reliant products, claiming that they are businessmen providing jobs for the community and serving as entrepreneurial role models. During his appearance on *The O’Reilly Factor*, Dash defended the content of the material he promotes by suggesting that his success as a businessman is paramount: “We don’t promote entrepreneurship? We don’t promote positive and ownership of your company? I’m making it cool to be smart. I’m making it cool to be a businessman.”⁹ This kind of reasoning is precisely why our conversation has to be driven by a larger set of progressive questions that go beyond helping poor black men and women “take advantage of America’s economic opportunity.” Thugging/mugging for the camera in hip hop is doing just that.

White consumption—the biggest market for hip hop since gangsta rap emerged as commercial hip hop’s front runner—didn’t just mean

a bigger market for hip hop; it also pointed to the fact that what soon became the most profitable and desired images in hip hop reflected the ideas about black people most commonly held by its audiences. This shift reflects how mainstream images and desires for some representations about black people overshadow others. Whites do not consume all black musical genres equally, so the level of popularity of black music among white fans is not a given, based solely on racial demographics. Hip hop is by far the most disproportionately white-consumed popular black music genre.

While white consumption of black musical genres always outnumbered black consumption, differences in proportionate racial consumption can influence which groups' desires and preferences shape the direction of the genre. So, for example, in 2002, whites made up 54.3 percent of total consumers of R&B while black consumers made up 41 percent. Similar proportions apply to gospel music: White consumers made up 58.1 percent while black consumers made up 39.7 percent. (This shifted to even greater parity in 2004, when whites comprised 53.7 percent and blacks 41.7 percent.) For hip hop, however, white consumption is significantly higher than black consumption: In 2002 whites made up 64 percent while blacks made up 31.9 percent. Over the next four years, this racial consumption gap in hip hop widened: In 2004, whites were 60.6 percent of the consumers and blacks were 24.8 percent; in 2006, whites were 60.1 percent and blacks were 25 percent. The racial consumption gap for hip hop was 32.1 percent in 2002, 35.8 percent in 2004, and 36.1 percent in 2006. By contrast, for R&B, the gap was 13.3 percent in 2002, 8 percent in 2004, and 3.1 percent in 2006.¹⁰

Although black and white consumers have different tastes regarding R&B, they have a nearly equal chance of impacting corporate-sponsored artist content, since they are nearly equally important to the overall sales of the genre. This is not the case for hip hop, since following the tastes and concerns of black consumers over and above those of white consumers has the potential to alienate two-thirds of total consumers while retaining only a quarter of them.

Proponents of the "hip hop hurts black people" claim often remain silent about the profitability of images that derive from white desire and consumption. The cycle looks like this: Mainstream white consumers drive hyper-demand for these images (whites are raised on images of black thugs—images that appeal and seem authentic to whites), thereby fueling higher sales given the size of the white consumer market, which then encourages unscrupulous corporations to demand more of these images to make greater profits. This in turn encourages black youth, who are also raised on images of black thugs as a primary source of power, to tailor their image to suit market needs. For the most part, only gangstas and their promoters make it to the tippy top of hip hop power and wealth. Given this domino effect, the key issue is how consistently profitable some images of black people remain. The idea of black men as gangstas, thugs, and pimps and of black women as hoes and tricks feeds long-standing myths about black people, and this normalized racist history is largely what makes such images popular.

If injuries to poor young black people are the main issue in the claim that hip hop hurts black people, where is the sustained outcry about all the evidence we have for the existence of powerful forms of racialized inequality and discrimination and the ways that our nation as a whole has retreated from solving these problems? The issue isn't just the sometimes hostile form of tough behavioral love; it is also the deafening public silence about the stark and brutal realities that our society has created and continues to direct against poor black people. When Bill Cosby appeared on *Larry King Live* with Harvard social psychologist Allen Pouissant, he claimed that he has long been an outspoken critic of racism in American society.¹¹ Perhaps there is some truth to this, but it's difficult to find critiques of racism from Cosby expressed with the same outrage, anger, disdain, publicity, and consistency with which he has responded to what he perceives as dysfunctional black behavior and attitude.

If this conversation were really about injury to black people, it would have to include mention of the importance of housing discrimination and its role in maintaining white wealth, which accrues

at a rate ten times greater than black wealth—a gap that is primarily the result of accumulation of white institutionalized racial privilege. It would also have to emphasize the research showing that black men live not in the state of constant bravado displayed by hip hop images or the cool pose some claim determines their behavior but, instead, in a state of serious fear. Sociologist Al Young's extensive interviews with young black men in their 20s revealed stories of isolated young men "living in fear of being victimized, of dropping out of school because they were afraid to go, of spending considerable time figuring out how to avoid joining gangs."¹² Illuminating the injuries to black people would highlight how the lack of affordable, accessible child care in poor black neighborhoods forces poor working parents to leave their children in undersupervised environments—a situation that researchers have shown increases the risk of sexual abuse of young women and children. How is it that so many of these disgusted critics have virtually nothing to say about the depths of this kind of structural racism? Why are so many critics, black ones included, so outraged about black behavior and yet so very blind to, and bored with, the reasons for black pain and alienation?

If black middle-class leaders and celebrities want us to believe that this focus on the injuries for which hip hop is presumed to be responsible is really about helping "the lower economic people," as Cosby calls them, then they might want to consider giving quite a bit of additional public airtime to the many more powerful forces that have created the conditions in which far too many poor black kids live. This wouldn't deemphasize behavior so much as properly locate it. Without drawing attention to these powerful and extensive forces, critics who lambaste hip hop let society—and themselves—off the hook and feed stereotypical ideas about black people that generate racist policies and minstrel-like hip hop images and lyrics. They represent a mean-spiritedness that has long been leveled at poor black people, especially youth.

Having listened to too many critics of hip hop, one could come away with the dangerous and hurtful belief that racial discrimination in American society is a thing of the past, that it plays no meaningful

role in the life choices and opportunities facing poor youth today. Black folks didn't look at a map and say, "Hey, let's migrate to the ghetto, that's a good place to live. It reflects our cultural values." Ghettos have been created and maintained by structural forces beyond the control of individual parents, teachers, students, and local businesses; they produce the bulk of the conditions we see and have been designed to destroy the spirit of their inhabitants. The brilliant essayist James Baldwin understood this; in his highly acclaimed book *The Fire Next Time*, he included a letter to his nephew in an essay titled "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation." Here, Baldwin warned him of the intended purpose of the ghetto and its relationship to the larger operations of white supremacy:

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. . . . You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. . . . You have been told where you could live and what you could do. . . . Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear.¹³

The Rock and the Hard Place

It seems crucial that we find a way to address the relationships between personal behaviors and structurally maintained inequalities based on race, gender, and class that diminish opportunity and skill and damage the possibilities for a truly democratic society. Many black writers, leaders, and critics have been arguing for decades in favor of attention to both sets of "reasons," as they are deeply intertwined. The problem comes into focus when a particular black behavior is isolated, made to

appear as the single point of origin, demonized, and overemphasized, and when the long-standing denial of racial inequality and the maintenance of white privilege and power in contemporary society serve as the silent backdrop for this attack. This is why we should not only keep our attention on the partial truths inherent in the claim that “hip hop hurts black people” but also examine the powerful contexts in which such comments are made and the way they serve larger agendas that really do hurt black people. To put it more bluntly, those who insist on making public, hostile attacks on some of the most vulnerable, least powerful people in society while at the same time neglecting to offer the same kind of vitriol against institutionalized racism, economic oppression, and sexism contribute to the very inequality they claim behavior should fix. They should begin with a deeper examination of their own behavior before moving on to that of anyone else.

All of this having been said, behavior, attitude, and worldview do matter. They can reduce or enhance one’s chances; they can build community or tear it down. Progressive youth, parents, teachers, leaders—indeed, all citizens—should be asking hard questions about why commercial black youth culture as represented by hip hop has become a comfortable home to nihilistic attitudes that devalue the kinds of investment in self that create nourishing and sustaining community and how we can change it. Fighting despair and fighting for justice also require youthful artists and leaders who have hope, who are willing to sacrifice for the larger good, and who have a fighting spirit for creating better and stronger communities. This isn’t just a matter of helping kids achieve personal success; if it were, we would have no way to challenge the “I need to get paid” philosophy of creating personal wealth that has gripped society at large and taken root in hip hop, too. The future of black grassroots leadership’s ability to fight structural oppression depends on winning the war against the current national embrace of profits over people.

Efforts at the level of individuals are not sufficient; they can’t be effective without far more serious investment in stamping out systemic injustice. Publicly beating up on those who have the shortest

end of the stick without exposing and keeping our eye on the deep forces working against black people contributes to our collective denial about the profound role of discrimination in our society, and may even end up “justifying” it.

On the other hand, it is silly to think that we can address the role of personal behaviors and responsibility “after” racial, gender, or class discrimination ends, as some hip hop defenders claim. Jay-Z takes this position in his song “Say Hello,” in which he says to tell Al Sharpton that “I’ll remove the curses if you tell me our schools gon’ be perfect, when Jena Six don’t exist, tell him that’s when I’ll stop sayin’ bitch, bitch” (*American Gangster*, Def Jam Records, 2007). While we should certainly keep our attention on structural racism, sexism, homophobia, and class oppression in all of their crushing manifestations, we cannot pretend that *how* we live with these realities, *how* we behave, what choices we make—especially when such choices are so very limited—have no impact on our lives.

There is no way to claim that constant commercialized promotion of thug-inspired images won’t negatively impact black youth, race relations, and society in general. The force of this impact is tied not only to images that repeat a history of associating black people with crime and violence but also to the available counterimages, which are limited at best. At the same time, we must provide a meaningful visible space for creative expression of suffering and marginalization; we can’t pretend that silencing such expression—especially in the form of stories that use humor, style, and powerful critique—will make the origins of the suffering go away. The question is how to provide space for these tales while guarding against their easy morphing into minstrelsy and “proof” of black inferiority.

We need to develop a progressive position on the role of behavior and worldview in enhancing as opposed to reducing opportunities, especially for those most impacted by oppressive or discriminatory conditions. We must cultivate enabling behaviors and attitudes but tether them to impassioned removal of structural racism and discrimination. Behaviors don’t just flow from larger social forces; they also help

change them. Divesting from an ethos of “get mine at all costs” makes room for behavior fueled by a radical love ethic, a commitment to reducing violence and stamping out hunger, a national investment in affordable housing, access to healthcare for the poor, meaningful wages, and better schools.

4

Hip Hop Is Destroying America's Values

I think that nothing less is at stake than preservation of civilization. This stuff by itself won't bring down civilization but it doesn't help.

—William Bennett, former secretary of education, former director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, quoted on the PBS series *Culture Shock: The TV Series and Beyond*

One of the greatest threats to American family values is the way our popular culture ridicules them. Our music, movies, television and advertising regularly push the limits of decency, bombarding our children with destructive messages of casual violence and even more casual sex. . . . I think we have reached the point where our popular culture threatens to undermine our character as a nation.

—Bob Dole, Republican presidential candidate, Los Angeles speech, May 31, 1995

Unless we speak against this [rap music] it will creep continually into our society and destroy the morals of our young people.

—Reverend Calvin O. Butts III, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and president of SUNY (Old Westbury campus), quoted on the PBS series *Culture Shock: The TV Series and Beyond*

The attacks of the killer culture are relentless. From the commercials, to the gangsta and street-walker clothing styles, to the

movies, magazines, games and music marketed to teens, decency is under attack. . . . I awake every morning with a simple prayer, "Lord, please help me today to uphold the values and standards my husband and I have set for our family."

—Rebecca Hagelin, a vice-president of The Heritage Foundation (an established, very conservative think tank), "The Culture War: A Five-Point Plan for Parents," August 9, 2005, available online at www.heritage.org

PROBABLY THE MOST HYPERBOLIC EXAMPLE of blaming hip hop is the idea that it is destroying America's values. This claim is made in a variety of ways, but the key strategy lies in the use of a narrow set of conservatively defined values to represent a much larger group of diverse and often competing American values. As the above quotes demonstrate, the American values that rappers are most accused of destroying are "decency" and "morality." Both of these values are frequently subsumed under the fuzzy but recently politically resonant concept of "family values." As the earlier quotes also reveal, hip hop is accused of contributing to the demise of Western civilization and of fueling anti-Americanism, both internally and abroad. Proponents of this position claim that the major threats to American values are conveyed through cultural expressions of violence, lawlessness, and sex outside of heterosexual marriage—all of which they associate with hip hop.

Those who profess fear that American values are under assault owing to the negative influence of rap music are part of a much larger movement to align morality with conservative values—a movement that involves crafting a very short list of values (about which there has never been any unanimous agreement in U.S. society) and defining them narrowly. This explicitly moral value-based form of cultural politics has dominated popular politics over the past twenty-five to thirty years, basically paralleling the emergence and ascendance of hip hop, and powerfully affecting how the public has perceived it. Partly because of its historical timing, hip hop has be-

come a central figure in the culture wars, conveniently standing in for all that has gone wrong in our society. Yet conservatives' definition of what does and does not constitute American values studiously avoids other equally if not more compelling American value systems that challenge the apparent priority of (as well as their definition of) decency, sexual morality, and lawfulness.

It seems dramatic to claim that a youth music or culture, particularly one heavily peddled by corporate America, could significantly contribute to the decline of Western civilization (unless capitalism is itself considered part of the problem, too). The misinformed characterizations of popular culture, especially rap music, as "killer culture" have gotten a good deal of traction. There are at least five explanations for why this has happened: (1) the long association of black people with violence; (2) youth cultural challenges empowered by the development of modern society; (3) fears associated with the vast economic, political, and social changes that have taken place over the past fifty to sixty years; (4) the singularly dramatic impact on American society of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s; and (5) the profound shift from an industrial to a postindustrial service- and cultural-products-driven economy.

First, as I described in Chapters 1 and 2, there is a long and entrenched history of associating black culture and black people with violence, lawlessness, and deviant sexuality. These associations have been fabricated to justify and maintain various forms of racialized and gendered oppression and inequality of black people throughout U.S. history. This history, although not necessarily in the forefront of citizens' consciousness today, is embedded in our collective unconscious and deployed within the rhetoric of race that is still in cultural and political circulation. This historical "common sense" reinforces and overly identifies black expressive culture such as rap with these tendencies.

Second, during the early part of the twentieth century, when mass entertainment became accessible, youth began to challenge aspects of traditional family-oriented leisure that previously determined youth socializing. Enhanced by the shift from family-based socializing

venues to mass entertainment venues, youth cultural spaces developed more freedoms to create, consume, and participate in a variety of music, dance, and other amusements away from direct adult supervision and in other social and cultural networks. This shift was also responsible for creating what is now considered a highly profitable market: youth culture. The anxiety that youth will be corrupted and that society will be undermined by sexuality and vice is fundamentally linked to modern society and the emergence of youth culture. Much of this anxiety is intertwined with fears about the influence of black culture on society as a whole.¹

In the Jazz Age of the 1920s, young white middle-class urban residents who went into black, racially segregated neighborhoods to listen to jazz were cause for considerable concern among establishment religious and social leaders. The fears of moral decline resulting from race mixing and from the spread of black culture among whites were quite similar to the ones being expressed today, as were the general contours of the polarization between modernists (today called liberals) and traditionalists (conservatives) over this issue. Modernists were excited by the dynamic contributions that jazz was making to modern music and urban culture. Traditionalists, however, feared that decency and sexual morals would be destroyed by uncivilized and dangerous influences like the blues and jazz. And many publicly argued that black music would bring down society if allowed to “spread.”² (Traditionalists registered similar concerns about allowing women to enter public drinking establishments and drove prohibition laws and other socially conservative agendas.) While not all of these fears revolved around black cultural influence, many did, and this parallel is worthy of note.

Third, some of the recent hyperbole about rap’s role in bringing down civilization and corrupting youth morals involves a fear-based response to the vast changes in the U.S. economic, political, and social spheres over the past fifty or so years. These fears have been stirred up and misdirected by conservative political movements. Like the shift from an agrarian society to one dominated by industrial pro-

duction, which produced many tumultuous changes, the economic shift out of industrial production into a service, consumer-based economy caused a great deal of social and economic upheaval. This latter transition, from industrial to postindustrial economy—one heavily based on knowledge, information, and consumption rather than on production of material goods—resulted in high levels of unemployment in previously stable and profitable industries such as steel and other base-goods. It was exacerbated by anti-union policies that undermined unions and other vehicles of protection of labor, wages, and job stability for working families while the rising costs of living, healthcare, and childcare were unfunded by the government and passed on to workers. These changes in economic direction reduced the value of living wages for many families. All of this has had a profound impact on workers’ stability and sense of security. In keeping with the long history of moral panics, the fears and uncertainty these changes produced have been channeled away from structural conditions and toward a corruption of morals, especially as imagined by the influences of black music and culture.

The increasing attempts among far-right commentators to connect hip hop to Islamic terrorism and nonwhite hostility to Western society reiterate a legacy linking fear of infiltration, decline of society, and economic insecurity to black culture. Lorenzo Vidino, writing for the *Terrorism Monitor*, makes these presumed connections crystal clear:

Many young, often European-born Muslims feel a disturbingly intense sense of detachment from, if not sheer hatred for, their host societies and embrace various antagonistic messages. . . . Many youngsters from the Muslim-majority ghettos of various European cities adopt several behaviors typical of Western street culture, such as dressing like rappers, smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol, yet watching jihad videos and having pictures of Osama bin Laden on the display of their cell phones. Any individual who attacks mainstream society becomes a hero to these teens, be it Abu Musab al-Zarquawi or the late American rapper Tupac Shakur.³

Fourth, social movements in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to this extended period of tumult and challenged normalized forms of gender, class, racial, and sexual inequalities and discriminatory laws and customs. As crucial as such challenges are to improving democracy, they often serve as fodder for traditionalists who overly emphasize the value of order above all else and rely on a nostalgic and conservative view of the past to undermine the necessity of the unrest that making such changes entails. Challenges to unjust social arrangements that threaten the American values of equality and democracy are often misinterpreted as negative forces rather than as agents for the advance of the democratic promise. Thus, even socially conscious rap and its constant attention to festering injustices can be interpreted as creating instability rather than revealing its source. I am thinking here of rhymes such as “the white unemployment rate is nearly more than triple for black” and “sixty-nine billion in the last twenty years spent on national defense but folks still live in fear,” from Mos Def’s powerful and funky song “Mathematics” (*Black on Both Sides*, Priority Records, 1999).

During the 1960s and 1970s, many thousands of women and people of color, whose social, political, and economic contributions were undervalued, took great risks to further the necessary and long-overdue extensions of the democratic promise to all citizens. These changes were wrought by the courageous citizens who participated in the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, the labor movement, and the women’s and gay rights movements. These movements attempted to bring the American values of egalitarianism, genuine equal opportunity, inclusion, access to financial and social resources, and justice into full practice both here and abroad.

The social movements to end racial, gender, and other forms of institutionalized discrimination contributed to the transformation of social norms and workplace relationships, especially inasmuch as whiteness and heterosexual masculinity were no longer automatically given gender and racial protections and advantages. These changes also called for the inclusion of the collective experiences of women, people of color, workers, religious minorities, and gays and lesbians in

our national memory and educational institutions. Expansion and revision of our historical sense of self shed previously extinguished light and fire on the injustices maintained by violent repression, marginalization, and dehumanization. They helped pave the way for democratic improvement. Yet these changes were resisted, and racial, class, and gender privileges were protected by traditionalists who undermined efforts to transform public- and private-sphere relations and opportunity. This contributed, for some, to further feelings of insecurity and upheaval in American society over the past fifty years. For others, it has been a sign of real democratic possibility, an example of the best of American citizens’ investment in democracy and in America itself.

A central element in the attacks on such democratic expansion is the devaluing and marginalizing of alternative and resistive cultural expressions, especially those that have received some form of institutional legitimization. Writing in the *National Review*, Candace de Russy offers a disdainful rejection of hip hop in terms that reiterate both the fear of diseased invasion associated with black popular expression and the need to de-legitimize it in the interests of intellectual and national security:

Higher education’s elevation of pop culture and transmission to youth of all things countercultural (hip hop and rap, nihilism, etc.) as serious “study” can only be fueling the growth of this cancerous subculture. Analysis of cross-cultural, cyberspace-influenced trends should focus more on the influence of Western higher education on worldwide jihad networks.⁴

This argument basically contends that studying how youth music responds to conditions in society—as opposed to the reality of injustice and discrimination themselves—encourages unrest and conflict and threatens national security, thus contributing to the destruction of American values and society.

Despite the many successes of the social movements, visible conservative attacks on their cultural gains (such as expansion of the educational curriculum) belie the maintenance of long-standing societal

structures, such as high levels of economic consolidation and power among the few. Wealth (defined as the value of everything a person or family owns, minus any debts) has always been highly concentrated in the hands of a very few at the top, but over the past forty years it has increased to what can only be considered indecent levels. In fact, the wealthiest people were able to augment their share of the wealth immediately following those times when efforts to create more egalitarian access were at their most intense. For example, in 1976, a year when all of the above-mentioned movements were making meaningful strides in the interests of justice and equity, the richest 1 percent of the citizenry commanded 19.9 percent of the overall wealth of the nation. Any gains in equity were short lived, especially in relation to wealth. By 1998, that same 1 percent controlled 38 percent of the wealth, insulating themselves from changes designed to ensure fairness and real economic justice for the average American citizen. This insulation was provided by laws and government supports that favored the hoarding of resources among the wealthy and large corporations and encouraged the repression of wages for the 80 percent of the population who, in 2001, shared only 16 percent of the national wealth.

This grossly imbalanced system, especially the gargantuan tax loopholes that have been continually widened for the wealthiest people, left middle-class workers with an unfair burden. Indeed, those 80 percent who share only 16 percent of the national wealth have disproportionately carried the costs associated with making democracy work for all. Tax shelters and loopholes allow those who can most easily afford it to avoid paying the taxes that support programs that help ensure equal pay for women; prevent racial and sexual discrimination at work and in housing; provide aid to the poor, the elderly, and veterans; and level the highly unlevel playing field for blacks and other people of color. As of 2000, net worth differences based on race remained staggering: The median net worth of white households was \$79,400, while that of Hispanic and black households was \$9,750 and \$7,500, respectively. Similarly, women, who in 1964 (the year of the Civil Rights Act, which banned workplace dis-

crimination based on race or sex) earned only 59.1 cents on the dollar compared to men, continued to lag behind by 23.1 percent in 2006, earning only 76.9 percent of what men earn.⁵

Given these numbers it seems logical that much of our conversation should revolve around how to reduce clear markers of structural inequality and injustice rather than how to modify cultural values or sexual behaviors. But anxiety about feeling as though one has little personal control over the broadest contours of one's life fuels both denial over massive gender, class, and racial differences and an effort to view these differences as a matter of personal behavior rather than structural discrimination. In many ways, rappers like Mos Def serve as a constant unwelcome reminder of these buried but familiar facts. Crafting rappers as a cause of the demise of American values instead of seeing them as a reflection of the betrayal of America's promise temporarily relieves the anxiety and justifies status and privileges for those who have been awarded the longer end of the social and economic stick.

Fifth, the shift from a society of industrial production to one of service and information technology dramatically expanded the cultural products-based aspect of the U.S. economy, making culture one of America's primary products at home and abroad. An expansion of the cultural products arena, along with the emergence of multiple niche markets, gave cultural expressions greater visibility, and corporate interests' efforts to cash in on music, style, and other youth-culture trends escalated and intensified. This shift also mainstreamed black youth culture, which, up until the late 1980s, was a marginalized facet of mainstream American youth culture. Black music and style have had disproportionate and expansive audiences throughout the twentieth century, but until the last fifteen to twenty years, the latest black youth expressions were not given such extended prime-time coverage or marketing attention. During the 1990s, black youth culture, especially hip hop, became an important mainstream fixture in the record and other youth-culture industries. This centering of black youth culture helped fan the flames of the American-values moral panic because it imparted

greater influence to a cultural form considered part of the threat to mainstream society.

Cultural outrage over a sense that things are out of control often accompanies periods of larger economic and social change; during these times especially, culture, race, sexuality, and challenges to traditional family formation serve as easy scapegoats. The sphere of sexuality is especially vulnerable to moral panics. As Marvin M. Ellison, author of *Erotic Justice*, points out: “[A]lthough fears about the disappearance of marriage and family are largely unfounded, anxiety persists in a time of rapid social change. . . . Moral panics, whether focused explicitly on family or on sex and eroticism, gain momentum by associating sexuality with disorder, filth, disease and danger.”⁶

These larger social conditions, economic forces, and entrenched racial stereotypes not only fueled the corporate growth of hip hop but also helped usher in the decline in the depth and range of its expression. In the throes of these conditions, the most violent, sexist, and stereotypical images and stories began to outsell all other kinds of rap music, making what some call “gangsta rap” the most profitable sector of the genre. As Jeffery Ogbar notes, “Many consumers know of Mos Def, Common, and Talib Kweli, who have all gotten moderate exposure in hip hop magazines, though none has gone platinum. Though not the darlings of the Northeast-based hip hop magazines, Chamillionaire, Trick Daddy, and Three 6 Mafia have all gone platinum with the help of droves of eager black consumers.”⁷ Given the extent of chronic joblessness, poverty, and community dismantling and abandonment described in Chapter 1, it should come as little surprise that so many rappers signed up to tell tales of street crime and gangs. In many ways, gangsta rap music is a postindustrial black culture industry with job openings and a chance for upward mobility.

“Family values” rhetoric also emerged in the 1990s, helping to galvanize inchoate beliefs—eliciting a fear response from these larger structural changes—that a patriarchal, two-parent (only heterosexual), and “decent” family would somehow restore order and create a sense of stability for society. Virtually all social problems for which there is ample structural cause—high levels of unemployment, edu-

cational failures, racism, gender inequality, drug addiction, consequences related to high concentrations of poverty (e.g., street-based crime and homelessness)—were reconfigured as personal behavioral problems capable of resolution through the application of stronger “family values.” These were not neutral family values; they were family values based on an authoritarian-father model that emphasized discipline, punishment, and personal responsibility. Structural conditions that shape behavior as well as alternatives to punishment (such as rehabilitation) were considered excuses that undermined discipline and authority and were nearly erased from the palette of public discussion. And commercial hip hop, which began emphasizing and sometimes celebrating anti-law and order values and nonstate-authorized violence, became a valuable target to reinforce this vision of family values as national policy.

The politically conservative campaign to define an American value system has been successful in galvanizing the efforts of those who believe in socially conservative values and the elevation of some values over others, such as discipline and self-reliance. As many liberal and progressive writers have argued, values such as equality, fairness, and justice are also bedrocks of the American value system. Linguist George Lakoff has argued that both conservative and liberal value systems have moral foundations, so this isn’t about morality versus immorality, despite what conservative pundits often suggest. Rather, it is about competing national conceptualizations that revolve around different visions of family formations. The centrality of how we envision an ideal family shapes our political values. Conservative political values are based on what Lakoff calls a “strict-father model,” which emphasizes discipline, punishment, protection, authority, individualism, and one-way/top-down communication. By contrast, liberal and progressive political values stem from a “nurturant-parent model,” which emphasizes freedom, compassion, fairness, trust, community-building, and open, two-way communication.⁸

The success of conservatives’ version of what constitutes morality is partly due to liberals’ failure to embrace and promote a moral and emotional language on behalf of liberal values. Lakoff contends that

explicit moral and emotional language is key to connecting with the proponents of these values. After such seemingly debatable terms as “family values,” “decency,” and “morality” were claimed and reinforced by conservative values, what alternative version could easily stand in direct opposition to them? Who wants to stand up for *indecent*? Or *immorality*? Who wants to appear to be against the family? By claiming the terrain of the family, a central organizing metaphor for all political discourse in the United States, conservatives elevated their vision of the family—the strict-father model—to the ideal national standard, thereby creating a fiction that it is equivalent to all family values. This, Lakoff claims, is a case of framing: “The words draw you into their worldview. That is what framing is about.”

This conservative framing colonized the definition of ideal family forms and helped stymie opposition to confining, punitive, and authoritarian definitions of proper families, decency, and morality. Over the past thirty years, such framing also overdetermined the conservative direction of visible criticism of hip hop and shaped the progressive silences that surrounded it, even when many progressives were troubled (for their own reasons) by some of the politics in commercial hip hop. For example, when a rap lyric reflected values that liberals or progressives might consider unjust—such as those related to hustling vulnerable people for personal profit—but also used what conservatives might consider “indecent” language to describe said hustling, the “indecent” argument was more easily folded into an already energized American family values movement that could reiterate its blanket rejection of hip hop. Liberals, on the other hand, were reluctant to render progressive criticism of rappers who engaged in unjust anti-community forms of predatory behaviors, because to do so would appear to energize the already stoked conservative engines of punishment and authoritarianism (e.g., more police, more jails, longer sentences) that are in full force, especially in black communities. Too many hip hop critics with progressive values were left trying to draw important distinctions between types of politics in hip hop; focusing on racial inequality as the only identifiable progressive value, they wound up looking as though they were splitting hairs and

making excuses. Yet a sufficiently decisive indictment of rap's worst kind of attacks on the black community itself could not be offered on progressive terms. In short, the conservative family values frame became the dominant lens through which nearly all criticism of hip hop is filtered.

The irony of this values-based battle in the hip hop wars is that, despite the blanket rejection of hip hop by most conservative pundits and the frequent defenses by liberals, commercial hip hop actually reflects and rejects both liberal and conservative values. This unexpected rejection of both sets of values combined with the emulation of portions of each has added to the confusion besetting the hip hop wars and has produced a significant divide among hip hop fans.

Hip hop is known for embracing certain “strict-father”-based conservative values, such as a patriarchal, aggressive, sometimes violent masculinity; and priority is given to individualism and personal success over community empowerment. But hip hop politics also broadly embraces three liberal, progressive ideas: a general language of justice-based politics, especially regarding antiracism; freedom of expression; and community-building and service to the community.

Although conservative values proponents sometimes talk about violence as if it is some kind of external threat to American society, violent behavior is, in fact, at the heart of the American value system and has been for some time. Throughout the twentieth century especially, violence was wedded to mainstream visions of manhood. And, more recently, celebrated forms of masculinity have become increasingly empowered by the use of aggression and violence, as a primary means not only of settling conflicts but also of establishing economic dominance, maintaining control over women, and disciplining children. The pro-violence, celebratory air associated with military action and action heroes and the fascination with mobsters and other American gangsters, hunting, and the regulated violence that fuels boxing, football, and hockey have saturated American culture. In every case, these expressions of American values celebrate the male who is able and willing to challenge others to battle and be entirely prepared to act violently. As Michael Eric Dyson has noted, “In fact,

national self-expression and violent masculinity are virtually concomitant; they came about at the same time, and they often mean the same thing. In the history of the American social imagination the violent male, using the gun to defend his kith and kin, becomes a symbol of virtuous and redemptive manhood.”¹⁰

The symbolic resonance of Hollywood-action-hero-turned-Republican-governor-of-California Arnold Schwarzenegger’s repeated use of the term “girlie men” to deride opponents—nearly making it a Republican battle cry—epitomizes the links between manhood, sexism, homophobia, and machismo. Schwarzenegger used the phrase in 1988 to deride Democratic opponents of George W. Bush, repeated it during the 1992 election, and employed it in 2004 to challenge opponents to show their courage and then to characterize opponents in the California state legislature. What is the substantive difference between rappers’ use of rhymes about men who are called “bitches” to signal male opponents’ inferior masculinity and their own superior masculinity, on the one hand, and conservatives’ embrace of Governor Schwarzenegger’s use of “girlie men,” on the other? Rappers’ aggressive, sexist, and confrontational style of masculinity reflects a core American value, not an aberration of one.

Another conservative value embraced by commercially powerful artists and moguls in hip hop is the focus on individual and financial success. Hip hop has generated some of the most extraordinary examples of entrepreneurial energy, of pulling oneself up by the proverbial bootstraps, in recent times. Hip hop moguls such as Russell Simmons, Master P, P. Diddy, Damon Dash, and Jay-Z have used their considerable business instincts to create individual empires with substantial accumulations of wealth through hip hop. Unlike many others who have such wealth and business power, these men began with nearly nothing—virtually no money, little education, a lack of early access to high-level financial mentorship—and created veritable cultural empires. In the conservatively valued standard of personal success and entrepreneurial spirit, these men should be lauded. Since few businessmen or corporate success stories emphasize liberal values concerned with how such money was made and what impact personal

accumulations of wealth have on an already hyper-privatized model of wealth hoarding, these men should be celebrated. When rappers apply very similar strategies of success that define the often ruthless models of American capitalism (which, in itself, is frequently offset by well-publicized philanthropy), they are viewed as threats, not as proponents of such American values as hard work, enterprise, and self-sufficiency. Not surprisingly, they defend themselves by adopting conservative values of personal success. Damon Dash, for example, has responded to critics by defending his hip hop–related business successes in fashion, alcohol, film, and music (including his visible promotion of gangsta rappers like Jim Jones), totaling hundreds of millions of dollars. Dash says: “[N]o one talks about the jobs we create, no one talks about the things we do within our community, and no one talks about the businesses we’ve done, how we’ve opened the doors and shown people that it’s cool to be smart, it’s cool to be a CEO. . . . I can’t see how that could ever be considered a negative.”¹¹

In fact, if rappers are the threat to society’s values that some conservatives claim they are, then record industry corporations that garner the vast majority of the profits generated by rappers’ products should be the prime targets of conservative ire. Without them, there’d be no real threat at all. Instead, it seems that what really matters to conservatives who attack the influence rappers have earned via their entrepreneurial success is who belongs and who doesn’t: If you are “in,” then what you say in public overshadows what you do and what impact those actions have. As long as insiders present a “respectable” image (no matter the violence done on their watch), they can profit from and undermine democracy and even conservative values all they like.

Hip hop’s association with progressive values is more easily seen, as many writers and critics have identified the legacy of justice-based lyrics and activism and community building in hip hop. Songs with lyrics about the effects of economic and racial oppression are highly respected elements in hip hop storytelling, although most of these songs are relegated to the commercial margins. Earlier hip hop giants like Public Enemy, Queen Latifah, and KRS-One are obvious

examples of the political roots of hip hop, but more current artists such as Mos Def, Talib Kweli, The Roots, Lupe Fiasco, Akrobatik, Zion I, The Coup, Jean Grae, and The Fugees are also known for creating highly political content focused on various forms of injustice. However, emphasis on injustice (a liberal value) does not preclude the embrace of “strict-father” patriarchal brands of masculinity (a conservative value) characterizing those who are willing to act violently in the name of justice and community protection.

Freedom generally, and especially freedom of expression, is commonly expressed among hip hop artists and defenders, revealing hip hop’s strong liberal tendencies. Given that early efforts to censor rap music were directed against rappers who challenged unjust authority through stories of violence, the embrace of freedom was also a direct form of resistance to oppression. As stories of political resistance in hip hop gave way to far more commercially visible and celebrated stories of criminality, sexual domination, and black-on-black crime, the use of freedom of expression to defend hip hop began to contradict the liberal values of justice-based imperatives and community service for which it had been known.

As the quotes at the top of this chapter reveal, the success of conservative framing in the public sphere has encouraged a tendency to define rap and other “nihilistic” popular expressions as alien subcultures that threaten to “creep continually into our society.” They are imagined as infiltrating forces—not as outgrowths of, participants in, or internal responses to society itself. Mainstream society is posited not only as a conservative one but also as one in little need of change and improvement. What kinds of traditions does this status-quo attitude preserve? The calls for maintaining law and order under conditions of grave inequality is a call to continue inequality, to normalize it. Is that the kind of “order” we want?

Contrary to the vision of hip hop as a dangerous outside influence, it profoundly reflects some of the most celebrated American values on both sides of the political divide. Hip hop’s own internal battles over its future political trajectory represent some aspects of the battle in larger society over which American values will serve as the primary guides for

our national actions and agendas. Conservative value-based defenses of hip hop like Dash’s that embrace any forms of capitalist entrepreneurship as models of success should be challenged by hip hop progressives just as vigorously as are conservative attacks. Will we allow capitalism that sells out the community to overshadow the justice-and-care imperatives that anchored black activism and once made America the beacon of democracy around the world? Will we allow fundamentalist politics to reinforce one vision of tradition and undermine the modern expansive, inclusive, and tolerant vision with which it competes? Will market capitalism’s enticement to consume and discard continue to be lauded, or will hip hop reconnect more fully with its own legacy of commitment to the nonmarket values of sacrifice and common good?

A progressive hip hop response to the current tenor of the American values debate involves not only emphasizing other crucial American values for which hip hop is known, such as justice and striving for equality for all, but also redefining what we consider indecent, immoral, and violent. Sexist, homophobic, nonconsensual, exploitative sexual displays are indecent. Consensual, nonexploitative expressions of the wide range of human sexuality are decent. Hunger, abject poverty, and active aid in the redistribution upward of wealth, power, and security in a nation with the amount of resources America has at its disposal, while gutting efforts to create meaningful educational, social, and economic opportunity for all people, are indecent. Relying on and sanctioning violence, policing, incarceration, and military might as models for national policy and international relations are indecent and immoral. A powerful progressive emphasis on the destruction of foundational American values such as equality and justice has the potential not only to successfully respond to conservatives who use rappers as an easy target but also to challenge rappers to live up to the progressive values that highlight and work to change the unequal environment out of which hip hop has emerged.

Hip Hop Demeans Women

We've had people who've said they are going to wait us out. . . . Well, my brothers and my sisters, they've got a long time to wait. Nearly 15 years ago, Dr. C. Delores Tucker and the National Congress of Black Women saw where this disrespect for women, disrespect for Black people, saw where this was going and decided then that enough was enough. . . . We've been getting beaten up for 15 years. We've been getting talked about, but we're still standing. We want you to throw your arms around your pastor, because we know he's been getting a tough time too. He's been getting threats just like we have. But I want you to know, we can stand up to whatever goes on out there. I want you to keep on coming every Saturday until they stop the filthy talk, stop putting down Black people, stop putting down Black women in particular.

—Attorney Dr. E. Faye Williams, president of the National Congress of Black Women, “Protestors Picket Home of BET President,” www.FinalCall.com, October 26, 2007

As two of the so called “Nelly Protesters,” we feel compelled to speak after the egregious presentation of the Hip Hop vs. America forum on BET. Though purportedly trying to redress the sexism, misogyny, and materialism of hip hop videos, the program actually reified all of these by not engaging with feminist women panelists, or panelists that did not invoke a kind of celebrity worship. Once again the voices of young black women were marginalized in preference for a largely older black male voice of authority. Even the women panelists were talked over and addressed less.

—Moya Bailey and Leana Cabral, letter to BET CEO Debra Lee, October 2, 2007

HIP HOP'S SEXISM IS VISIBLE, vulgar, aggressive, and popular. In 2003, Lil' Jon and the Eastside Boys scored a second-most-played song in the country with their song "Get Low." The hook for this bawdy sex song includes the following lines: "To the sweat drops down my balls (my balls) To all these bitches crawl (crawl) to all skeet skeet motherfucker (motherfucker)." "Skeet skeet" refers to ejaculation. 50 Cent collaborated with Snoop Dogg on his 2003 song "P.I.M.P." In it, Snoop Dogg's chorus explains how a "bitch" can't get anything from him and later raps, "yea bitch I got my now and later gators on, I'm bout to show you how my pimp hand is way strong." In one of 50 Cent's lines he brags, "see I was born to break a bitch." In 2005, the Ying Yang Twins' "Wait (The Whisper Song)," which dominated urban radio, included in its hook and chorus the following lines repeated several times: "Ay bitch! Wait til you see my dick. . . . I'm a beat that pussy up."

Given this, it should not be surprising that commercial hip hop has developed a large and growing anti-fan base. Clearly, the issue isn't *if* hip hop—as it has evolved in the commercial arena over the past dozen years or so—promotes sexist and demeaning images of black women as its bread-and-butter product. The fact of hip hop's primary trade in explicit and sustained sexist images cannot reasonably be quibbled over (although some misguided defender of all things hip hop is surely working on crafting a defense). Instead, we are left with other questions and concerns about this hotly debated issue, ones that can reveal what we are really talking about when we talk about sexism in hip hop. Unfortunately, it isn't usually about sexual justice or gender equality for black women.

Those who take on sexism in hip hop can generally be divided into two broad groups: (a) those who use hip hop's sexism (and other ghetto-inspired imagery) as a means to cement and consolidate the perception of black deviance and inferiority and advance socially conservative and anti-feminist agendas; and (b) those liberals and progressives who are deeply concerned about the depths of the sexist imagery upon which much of hip hop relies, but who generally sup-

port and appreciate the music, and are working on behalf of black people, music, and culture.

Members of group (a) rarely speak about the need to prevent discrimination against black women, nor do they offer support of feminist agendas. Their goal has more to do with protecting America from hip hop and deviant black people. The issue of respect dominates this groups' rhetoric, not women's rights or the discriminatory nature of patriarchal culture. The disrespect shown to black women by some black men is, for them, a sign of insubordinate black masculinity and thus needs correction and containment. Group (b) members challenge misogyny against black women and perceive hip hop as a particularly pernicious homegrown version. They worry about the influence of hip hop's commercial vision of black women as sexual objects and how a constant diet of these images and stories might affect black communities.

The political differences between these two groups is not absolute, however. Although the language of disrespect, the emphasis on degradation of women (because it thumbs its nose at patriarchal men's role as protector of women), has roots in white conservatism, it also has solid roots in black religious and patriarchal conservative values. To further complicate matters, the long history of America's refusal to consider black women worthy of patriarchal protection and respect encouraged the development of a strand of black feminism that emphasized what Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham has dubbed the "politics of respectability." This strategy was designed to counter the mainstream idea throughout all of the slavery era and well into the twentieth century that black women were sexually excessive and deviant as a class of women. Black female resistance to this perception encouraged a culture of black female sexual repression and propriety as a necessary component of racial uplift.¹

The intertwined strands of these disparate agendas and motivations play themselves out in today's wars over hip hop, and the overlap between these two groups' positions on sexually degrading images in the music has increased as criticism of and public protests against

commercial hip hop have significantly escalated and broadened. Sometimes this is the result of unlikely collaborations; at other times conservative critics attempt to co-opt progressive agendas. For example, conservative writer Myrna Blyth—whose own book, *Spin Sisters: How the Women of the Media Sell Unhappiness and Liberalism to the Women of America*, attacks what she considers the negative impact of liberal media women's spin—spins *Essence* magazine's progressive challenge to sexism in hip hop into a conservative one. Writing in the *National Review*, she applauds their "Take Back the Music Campaign," saying: "When I told Michaela [a campaign representative] that *Essence* was to be commended for expressing a very appropriate—and conservative—point of view, she didn't want to agree." Attempts, such as this one, to reframe progressive concern have combined with the need for collaborative activism to tackle the brazen racial brand of anti-black female sexism and have thereby given conservative language greater visibility and traction.²

R.E.S.P.E.C.T.—But Not the Kind Aretha Franklin Had in Mind

Tonight I propose a three-year [faith-based] initiative to help organizations keep young people out of gangs, and show young men an ideal of manhood that respects women and rejects violence.

—President George W. Bush, State of the Union Address,
February 3, 2005

Why do we as a nation produce and embrace a pop culture that glorifies rap and hip hop music that teaches men to prey upon women and engage in senseless violence and that is now, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation's recent survey on media and youth, the number one music choice of teenagers from all racial backgrounds and socio-economic status? . . . Mind you, I'm not advocating government censorship, but rather pleading for social and parental rejection to replace the

current proliferation and acceptance of such barbaric and destructive messages.

—Rebecca Hagelin, a vice-president of
The Heritage Foundation, "Throwing Out the Thugs,"
www.heritage.org, September 6, 2005

DISCOURAGE MEN from preying upon women. Show young men, especially those in gangs, an ideal of manhood that respects women. On their face, these seem to be reasonable goals, desirable even. Who wants the preying of men on women or the disrespect of women to be considered positive signs of male identity? But to properly address the issue of male disrespect we must ask: Where does this problem come from? Many, like Hagelin (quoted above), suggest that hip hop's predatory treatment of women and related street gang culture are somehow a return to a long-ago barbaric stage of precivilization. In fact, her article (which is actually about the New Orleans social crisis that took place in the aftermath of Katrina) opens with the example of heroic civility and honor associated with men on the sinking *Titanic* in 1912. She claims that these men, who called for the rescue of "Women and Children First" (her opening line), were more interested in civility and honor—in "protecting" women and children—than in their own survival. She then argues that the acts of lawlessness exhibited after Katrina hit (as contrasted with the heroism of the white middle-class men on the *Titanic*) were due to the negative way of life sponsored by gangsta rap. If Katrina had "occurred in a culture that had daily practiced the Golden Rule," she says, "rather than the Gangsta Rot, we would have seen more scenes of neighbors helping neighbors."

Far too often, critics suggest that vulgar disrespect of women in hip hop is part of a larger decline in American society, as if things were better "before" when society was more "civilized." This is the basic argument in the article by Hagelin. Let's reframe this imaginary respectful, civilized masculinity a bit. In 1912, the year when the *Titanic* sunk and men apparently expressed their chivalry and respect

for women, women could not yet vote. (Women's permanent right to vote was granted in 1920; black men's right to vote was granted at the time of their Emancipation from slavery, but was almost entirely thwarted.) Women suffragists' efforts to secure women's right to vote was a long and difficult battle against which many men, and some women, fought. (And I am referring only to white women's voting rights, as all black people's voting rights were being denied throughout this era and for many decades beyond it.) Is this how we want to show our respect for women? Bush (also quoted above) similarly suggests that gang-invested kids are operating outside the bounds of acceptable male American culture that "respects" women. The problem with statements of this kind is that they imply that hip hop and young black men represent the decline of civility, honor, and good manhood.

Both of these comments and many others like them rely on the fiction that American mainstream models of masculinity are non-violent, "respect" women, and reflect a history of civility, honor, and justice. This is, of course, a widely held fiction that denies the fact that mainstream ideals of masculinity have consistently celebrated male violence as a necessary means for conflict resolution. Despite important improvements in gender equality, mainstream masculinity continues to treat women as fundamentally less valuable than men (albeit worthy of protection as an expression of male responsibility and power); keeps women less powerful in social, economic, and political arenas; and tries to control, label, and, at times, exploit women's sexuality. It assumes that men should rightly be the primary leaders of their families and of society at large. These kinds of male dominance in all the important arenas of society are what add up to that dreaded term: "patriarchy." Patriarchal mainstream masculinity is what we have inherited and continue to treat as ideal.

It is true that the bulk of commercial hip hop images and lyrics treat black women with disrespect and contempt—so these framing words are not entirely wrong. This is why they resonate across the political spectrum, but also why using them is so dangerous. Phrases like "respecting women" and "fighting degradation and filth" are key

elements of the conservative framing language that undermines progressive politics and diverse, empowering, feminist representations of black women. Think of the situation in reverse: Lyrics and images that show respect—that elevate black women instead of demeaning them—do not ensure gender equity, or empowerment. In fact, respectful, elevating images and phrases remain a central means by which black women's complicit subordination to respectful patriarchal power has been secured: "be respectable," "stand by your man," "look pretty," "be modest," and so on. Respect for women is part of an exchange that rewards women who follow these rules. It is distinct from, say, the need to show respect for all people. So, respecting women, in this worldview, has nothing to do with advocating and respecting women's full equality or encouraging challenges to a society organized around male power and privilege. Indeed, this call for "respect" is a Trojan horse, in that it undermines what real respect for women requires: an active commitment to women's equality and gender justice.

The most visible representations of black women in hip hop reflect the hallmarks of mainstream masculinity: They regularly use women as props that boost male egos, treat women's bodies as sexual objects, and divide women into groups that are worthy of protection and respect and those that are not. Thus, hip hop does not break from the fundamental logic of mainstream masculinity so much as convey it with excess, bravado, and extra insult. The depths of disrespect and sexual vulgarity in hip hop seem a category away from this chivalrous mainstream ideal that Bush wants our faith-based leaders to instill in young men. In fact, though, as long as patriarchal definitions of mainstream masculinity are embraced, we will continue to produce both the polite and insidious expressions of gender inequality and sexism that we currently hear *and* the excessive margins where these ideas are most harshly represented, as in hip hop.

American popular culture, along with most of the mainstream political and religious leadership, continues to reflect a deep investment in many of these long-standing male-dominant, sexist facets of ideal manhood; the intertwining of religious, moral, social, and political

means controlling women continues along traditional lines but today looks quite different. Visible religious leaders in black communities are getting on the “respect”-black-women bandwagon and, given the absence of any commentary on the distinctive ways that black women are discriminated against, confirm a polite form of control and domination of women and male authority along with it. So, while Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton properly challenge the constant peddling of corporate-sponsored “disrespect” of black women, this protest does not generally include a black feminist analysis. Nor does it properly attack other, equally significant places where black women and men are regularly indoctrinated in male-dominant (female-subordinate) ideals. As Michael Dyson has pointed out so eloquently:

So that's when I mentioned to my friends, Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, instead of in the aftermath of Imus, protesting record companies, how about smashing the sermons of some of those preachers who stand up in church on Sunday mornings in Black America. 75–80 percent of those churches are attended by black women, the minister is not calling them the b-word or the h[-word] or a skeezer or a slut, but he is reinforcing a gospel that subordinates them to the interest of men and therefore he is much more seductive, he's got a bigger pulpit, he's got a bigger platform, and he's got god on his side.³

Protests against the “disrespect” of black women rightly suggest that the major record labels are primarily responsible for peddling, promoting, and profiting from hip hop images and lyrics. This is largely true: Although these companies often set limits on what they will distribute, they don't seem all that interested in doing so when it comes to the troubling, mean-spirited, and sexist representation of black women. During a Manhattan rally in May 2007, Al Sharpton pointed out this contradiction: “We're not asking for censorship. But there is a standard in this business. They have a standard. They had a standard that said Ice-T can't rap against police. They had a standard that said you can't rap against gays, and you shouldn't. They had a

standard against Michael Jackson saying something anti-Semitic. Where is the standard against 'n—,' 'ho' and 'b—h'?”⁴

The attacks made on corporations often leave out the fact that artists, especially the very powerful ones, are generating and happily spewing these images and ideas, and millions of Americans are buying them. So, it's compelling for protestors and leaders such as Dr. Faye Williams to say that they'll “keep on coming every Saturday until they stop the filthy talk, stop putting down Black people, stop putting down Black women in particular.” But the erasure of these images won't address the long-standing, day-to-day normalcy of sexism in black communities that fuels some rappers' attitudes and lyrics. After all, gangsta rap isn't just a corporate fantasy, nor did it create sexism in the black community. Creating systemic change means implementing a progressive racial, gender, and sexual justice project in schools, in churches, and in the mass media.

Despite the appearance of what seems like proper outrage about women being disrespected, far too much of the criticism coming from those who have gotten on the anti-hip hop bandwagon completely avoids any larger analysis of how gender and racial inequalities affect black women in particular. It's as if one is saying: Once imagery and music are “respectful,” order will be restored. Few are making the connection between the entrenched forms of polite sexism and acceptable patriarchy being touted by most religious figures and most middle-class leaders.

But there are important exceptions. I am especially happy to see progressive ministers who are joining with various groups to protest what has happened to hip hop. The “Enough Is Enough” campaign, led by Revered Delman Coates, pastor of Mt. Ennon Baptist Church, has resorted to picketing the home of BET CEO Debra Lee and the New York corporate offices of Viacom, primarily because less-public challenges and concerns had been deflected. Coates has invited people from across the political spectrum to join his group, and he has carefully crafted his criticism to avoid an anti-hip hop, anti-black youth message. During the protests he organized outside the January 2008 BET Honors awards show, he explained his agenda: “We are

here to protest the corporate sponsorship of messages and images that degrade Black and Latina women, images and messages that glorify drugs and criminal activity and that negatively stereotype black and Latino men as pimps, gangsters and thugs. I want to be clear: our campaign is not an anti-hip hop campaign. I grew up on hip hop. This campaign is about those elements of commercial rap which I distinguish from hip hop. Those elements that we deem, as a community, offensive. . . . What we are fighting for is the fundamental equality of black people in the public square.”⁵

Public, coalition-based challenges such as this one are vital and growing. However, the urge to rely on existing and media-friendly conservative framing language has the potential to solve one problem but reinforce another. Conservative language about women needing to be respected as part of a larger patriarchal agenda needs to be reframed so as to highlight women’s agency, fight sexism against black women, and promote the need for human respect. Progressive protest must develop clear, anti-sexist, gender-equality language about sexism in hip hop. Otherwise, we will continue to deny the ways that sexism is lived beyond media images, and we will trade a degrading form of male power over women for a “respectful” one.

Explicit Isn’t Always Exploitative

Far too often, charges of “filth” and “degradation” draw no distinctions between sexist forms of degrading sexual culture and sexually explicit culture. In fact, too much of the rhetoric against sexism in hip hop ends up being very compatible with an anti-sexual-expression agenda, one that associates any and all explicit sexuality with filth and immorality. The level of sexual insult found in much hip hop makes this slope toward an anti-sex agenda even more slippery. Yes, we should protest sexually degrading imagery, but when pro-sex and sexual-agency language is not advanced in its place, then the whole arena of sexuality (especially outside marriage and beyond its role in procreation) faces the threat of being painted with a shameful, dirty brush. This places women’s own sexual freedom and autonomy at stake.

Once the issue of sexism is married to “filth” and “degradation,” women’s ability to deploy empowering but sexually explicit language in their own way, as a form of resistance to sexism itself, is endangered. Sarah Jones, a black feminist performance artist and poet, wrote a powerful song—“Your Revolution”—that directly criticizes the sexist portrayal of black women in hip hop by using common phrases from some of hip hop’s more sexist lyrics in reverse. For example, she says: “your revolution will not be you smackin’ it up, flippin’ it, or rubbin’ it down, nor will it take you downtown or humping around . . . because that revolution will not happen between these thighs.” This is as a clear statement of women’s sexual empowerment.

In response to the 1999 airing of her song on KBOO, a radio station in Portland, Oregon, the FCC issued the station a \$7,000 fine. Only her song and one by Eminem received this fine, and only her song made the FCC’s final list of songs deemed offensive. Their notice said: “The rap song, ‘Your Revolution,’ contains unmistakable patently offensive sexual references. . . . [T]he sexual references appear to be designed to pander and shock.”⁶ Two years later, the decision was revoked and the fine rescinded. But what message did the earlier notice send? What effect did it have on black women’s ability to respond to a constant barrage of sexist lyrics designed to dominate, to respond in a way that claims the sexual arena rather than rejects it? This wasn’t just a matter of free speech; it was, given the incredible range of explicit and sexist sexuality expressed by men and women in American commercial culture, a direct attack on independent, feminist sexual empowerment cloaked under the language of “decency.”

Explicitness isn’t always exploitative, but it sure can be. Not all black women’s sexually explicit material is feminist, anti-patriarchal, or empowering. In fact, the women who have been elevated as mainstream commercial rappers over the past ten years generally follow the larger pattern of hypersexualized, objectified terms reserved for black women in the genre. Highly visible rappers like Lil’ Kim, Trina, and Foxy Brown use the black female-required sex card in hip hop; their stories of so-called sexual power generate from using their sexuality as the basis for their image. That in itself

is part of the very trap they claim to have escaped. Kim herself admitted that she uses her identity as Lil' Kim to get money, "a character I use to sell my records."⁷ Yet even when such performers seem to be expressing women's sexual power, they use sexually exploitative images and stories and sexually dominating personas similar to those expressed by many male rappers. They are hustlers instead of victims, but the male-empowering terms of hustling, victimizing, and sexual domination as legitimate power remain intact. And they also rely on and promote male sexual fantasy-based images of women as sexually voracious and talented in their ability to please men. In the 2003 duet Lil' Kim performed with 50 Cent, "Magic Stick" (a song that reached the number-two position on the Billboard Hot 100 list that year), she says she can "sex a nigga so good, he gotta tell his boys." Don't challenge her skills, she brags, "cause my head game have you head over heels, give a nigga the chills, have him pay my bills." Even less sexually self-exploitative women artists like Missy Elliot and Eve have had to figure out how to embody forms of femininity empowered by masculine standards in order to express their power. Given the highly marginal place that black women rappers have been given throughout the past decade, it is completely understandable why those who survived the commercial demands have relied on the product reserved especially for black women: sexual excess.

"Free the Girls": Hip Hop's Betrayal of Black Women

My daughter can't know that hip-hop and I have loved harder and fallen out further than I have with any man I've ever known. That my decision to end our love affair had come only after years of disappointment and punishing abuse. After I could no longer sacrifice my self-esteem or that of my two daughters on an altar of dope beats and tight rhymes.

—Lonnae O'Neal Parker, "Why I Gave Up On Hip Hop,"
www.washingtonpost.com, October 15, 2006

I guess I just try not to listen to the words; I just want to have fun come the weekend. I don't want to get into all of that [what the words are about], so I just try to block it out. I know it's not good though.

—Latina student in my college class on hip hop music and culture, October 2007

I don't even listen to contemporary hip hop anymore. My collection ends, like, about ten years ago.

—Black female student in my college class on hip hop music and culture, October 2007

In the office we were all grumbling about this. We kept saying it has to change but it is not going to change on its own. We have to do something about this.

—Michaela Angela Davis, editor-in-chief of *Honey Magazine* and founding committee member and spokesperson for *Essence* magazine's Take Back the Music Campaign, www.nysun.com/article/7604, January 12, 2005

We are tired of trying to defend hip hop when it becomes indefensible. We are tired of hearing music that assaults our very humanity.

—Moya Bailey and Leana Cabral, letter to BET CEO Debra Lee, October 2, 2007

ON THE MARGINS of the public outrage over the images and messages about black women in hip hop are fans, progressives, and feminists who support the music and its less destructive elements and artists, but who are hurt, angry, and worried over the constant portrayal of black women as objects of male sexual use in what has become the most visible of venues. The particular perspective from which these women make their critique often gets lost in the public discussion on sexism in hip hop.

Progressive writers, scholars, activists, journalists, fans, and students have been making noise about the increasing number of sexist

portrayals of black women in hip hop, drawing attention to the fact that these images have escalated with every year that rap's audience has grown, along with corporate interest and control. Others challenge the artists directly, asking why—since these artists claim to represent black youth—black women are so terribly portrayed. Even some black women who have been listening to hip hop since its early years feel betrayed by the hip hop of today.

Some say that they have to let it go, likening it to a love affair gone bad. Lonnae O'Neal Parker's quote at the outset of the section relies on this powerful metaphor. Joan Morgan, journalist and author of *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, also poignantly equates her love of hip hop, despite its increasingly misogynist attitude, to that of women who stay in abusive relationships:

So I tell them how good you do that thing you do. Laugh and say I'm just a slave to your rhythms. Then I wax poetic about your artistic brilliance and the voice (albeit predominantly male) you give an embattled, pained nation. And then I assure them that I call you out on all of your sexism on the regular. That works until someone, usually a sista-friend, calls me out and says that while all of that was valid that none of it explains why I stayed in an obviously abusive relationship. And I can't lie Boo, that would stress me. 'Cuz my answers would start sounding like those battered women I write about.⁸

Another pioneering black female journalist, Dream Hampton, has written a poignant article on the limited future for empowered women in hip hop. Hampton, too, identifies with the sense of pain that is too often generated by hip hop. Like O'Neal Parker, she comes to it through watching her daughter. In an essay titled "Free the Girls: Or Why I Really Don't Believe There's Much of a Future for Hip Hop, Let Alone Women in Hip Hop," Hampton relays this exchange she had with her daughter while passing by someone loudly playing an uncensored version of an x-rated song by Ludacris:

"They're hurting me, Mommy," my daughter yells dramatically. "I know baby, sometimes a lot of bass in the music make your chest hurt, like it's stretching."

"No," she insists. "They're hurting my feelings."

I want to tell her all the ways hip hop has made me feel powerful. How it gave my generation a voice, a context, how we shifted the pop culture paradigm. How sometimes it's a good thing to appear brave and fearless, even if it's just posturing. I want to suggest that maybe these rhymes about licking each other's asses are liberating. But I can't.⁹

The pressure young black women feel to defend black men against racist attacks, even at their own expense, is a new variation on the centuries-old standard for black women's race loyalty. This community-wide standard—which asks women to take the hit (metaphorically and literally), to be content with dynamics in which they sacrifice themselves and care for others' interests over their own—mimics the terms of an abusive relationship. As bell hooks has pointedly reminded us, although we should avoid demonizing black males, "[b]lack females must not be duped into supporting shit that hurts us under the guise of standing beside our men. If black men are betraying us through acts of male violence, we save ourselves and the race by resisting."¹⁰

More and more progressive women such as these are acknowledging that they have to break their silence and are rewriting the terms of the necessary criticism hip hop must face. In fact, Michaela Angela Davis has begun some of her workshops on *Essence* magazine's "Take Back the Music Campaign" by apologizing to black women for witnessing the extended assault on them in the music but doing nothing about it. In doing so she shows solidarity with black women but also acknowledges that women who have loved hip hop have an important leadership role. They can and will set new terms for these attacks on black women, offering direction, protection, and affirmation to young women and men who have come up in the hip hop we have today.

The public battle over hip hop, characterized by the foaming-at-the-mouth “outrage” and corresponding defensiveness that are so prevalent in today’s media, keeps these powerful, smart, well-informed black women on the margins of the conversation. In this climate, one comment too many about hip hop’s sexism by any of these progressive writers could be interpreted as an anti-hip hop voice. Yet, at the same time, if they don’t sufficiently challenge the sexism in hip hop and constantly refer to other areas in which it arises in American culture, then they become apologists, serving the agendas both of the artists with the worst records of insulting women and of the corporations generating profits. This dynamic has contributed to the marginalization of many progressive black feminist voices that would otherwise force us to attend to sexism, not simply complain about disrespect.

Despite the marginalization of black feminist women in the hip hop wars, many women are working locally to create change. Organizations like Black Girls Rock!, a mentoring outreach program for “at-risk teenage women of color,” also reflect the channeling of black feminist energies toward progressive change in hip hop. This organization, founded by Beverly Bond, began as a direct response to the one-sided images of black women in hip hop. It includes mentorship programs designed to empower young women of color and to “encourage dialogue about the images of women in hip hop music and culture, as well as promote analysis of the ways women of color are portrayed in mainstream media.”¹¹ Similarly, Tonya Maria Matthews (aka JaHipster), a spoken-word poet from the Baltimore area, has launched what she calls the “Groove Squad,” a group of two dozen or more women who go to clubs and enjoy the hip hop music until they hear a song that is openly offensive or derogatory. Then they walk off the floor en masse. This is a powerful statement because it joins women who love the music into groups, not just as a protest but as a form of musical affirmation. By collectively turning their backs on offensive hip hop, they reject music that “destroys the groove,” tell other club goers that something is really wrong, embarrass others if they stay, and deprive the party of a large group of

women.¹² These kinds of response to hip hop’s sexism (other than anti-sexist education) have the greatest potential to eradicate sexism and the appetite for it. (See Chapter 12 for other examples of activist organizations.)

These types of strategies, though, involve actually listening to the music and its progressive critics, not simply getting on board with mainstream “outrage” that stands in for serious consideration and conversation. This listening has to involve a direct and sustained challenge to sexism, not just public defense of hip hop with an admission that it is also sexist. Too often in our public debates the whole thing turns into a “blame or explain” festival. One side attacks and blames, and the other side explains.

But neither of these positions actually works toward educating people about sexism, and neither gives young women activists the central place they deserve in this conversation. When they speak on these issues, black male scholars, leaders, and media figures should mention the young women involved in organizations like Black Girls Rock! and “Groove Squad.” They should demand that more black women activists and writers who work to eradicate sexism and study gender and sexuality (not just black women who work in the media) be placed at the heart of the conversation.

Beyond this, visible male social critics who defend hip hop need to hold the artists with whom they are in apparent dialogue to a very serious standard. There are many veteran artists such as Jay-Z, Snoop Dogg, and Nelly who continue—despite their access to numerous kinds of knowledge and resources—to promote and defend the sexism in hip hop music and their own participation in it. These artists must be seriously and publicly challenged—not just by “haters” of hip hop but also by people who have expended a good deal of energy and public space defending it. To continue to make general statements against its sexism but then show public love and support for artists who are unrepentant for their blatant and constant sexism is to support their sexism and encourage others to do the same. We cannot have it both ways, given how far this gleeful assault on black women

has gone. Too much cozy association with unreformed artists who seem uninterested in undoing, rejecting, or challenging the excessive sexism they have contributed to hip hop is a tacit approval of it.

Protesting an individual artist alone does not address the fundamental issues and can even backfire, creating sympathy among some fans for the rapper attacked by “haters.” However, sometimes it is very useful to make a clear example of both a popular artist who regularly participates in sexist performances and the powerful community support that sexism receives. This is what happened in the case of Nelly and his infamous song and video for “Tip Drill.” The Spelman College women who demanded a conversation with Nelly before his visit to campus for a bone marrow drive, his refusal to meet with them, and the protests that ensued would likely have been much less powerful were it not for the specificity of his example. We are going to have to draw a clear line in the sand with the most powerful hip hop celebrities and all who pander and cater to them. The celebrity allure surrounding them has begun to overshadow the destructive force of their lyrics and videos; it’s almost as if there are two celebrities in one: the cuddly, friendly one for mainstream sales pitches, and the one that maintains street credibility by celebrating “the game” and bragging about “f-ing bitches.” Artists who are this sexist, this hateful, toward black women should become radioactive to listeners and, thus, inactive on radio. They should become pariahs, not messiahs. And their performances should bring them shame, not fame.

This scenario cannot be limited to artist responsibility, though. During a recent BET awards show, many grown, middle-class black men and women were dancing merrily in the aisles to “Crank Dat Soldier Boy” by the artist Soulja Boy, a song most noteworthy for a steel drum-inspired, catchy (but simple) beat that has generated a brief dance craze. What’s the driving story of the song? And what are the key lines in the chorus? “Soulja Boy off in this hoe . . . watch me crank it . . . watch me Super Man dat hoe.” Many middle-class white men and women revel in the same types of lyrics and images;

some have sponsored “pimp and ho” or “gangsta” parties at colleges across the country, energized by the celebration of sexually exploitative stories and images of black women in hip hop. It will take a good deal of sustained force to make corporations more responsible, to reveal the workings of sexism, to unpack what is wrong with this kind of portrayal of black women in hip hop, and to create the proper conditions to reject it. This problem will be solved not by making patriarchal appeals for “respecting” women but, rather, by educating everyone about the subtle workings of sexually explicit sexism and the reasons it has been so profitable—especially since this success has come at the expense of black women.

So the challenge is threefold:

1. To develop and promote a serious, progressive attack on sexism in hip hop without patriarchal, conservative religious, or anti-black youth politics as its guide.
2. To encourage, promote, and support those young black women and men who are embedded and invested in hip hop music but who also want to fundamentally challenge the sexism that defines the music.
3. To educate all youth, both boys and girls—especially those with the least access to ideas about gender equality—about sexism: how it works, why it works, and how to “keep it real” without it.

Just Keeping It Real

Kanye West raps about being a college dropout, and that's what he knows. I rap about what I know. College kids listen to his music, ghetto kids listen to me.

—T.I., rapper, during BET's *Hip Hop vs. America* forum

There's a bad part because the kids see that and they mimic you. That's the part I haven't figured out yet. . . . To me it's like, when I sing, "I live the thug life baby I'm hopeless," . . . I'm doing it for the kid that really lives a thug life and feels like it's hopeless. So . . . when I say it like that it's like I reach him. You understand? And even if when I reach him it—it—it makes it look glorious to the guy that doesn't live that life. I—I mean, I can't help it, it's a fact, you know. . . . I think I am being responsible, but it's hard.

—Tupac, interviewed in *Tupac: Resurrection*

Rap music is the voice of the underbelly of America. In most cases, America wants to hide the negative that it does to its people. Hip hop is the voice . . . and how dare America not give us the opportunity to be heard.

—David Banner, rapper, quoted at congressional hearing titled "From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotyping and Degradation," September 25, 2007

Although we take our standards and practices role seriously, we also believe that it is not our role to censor the creative expression of artists whose music often reflects the pain they've suffered or seen in their lives and communities.

—Philippe Dauman, president and CEO of Viacom, Inc.,
quoted at congressional hearing titled “From Imus to
Industry: The Business of Stereotyping and
Degradation,” September 25, 2007

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON CLAIMS heard among rappers, their corporate managers, and fans of rap music is the idea that hip hop/rap music is “*just keeping it real*.” This phrase can mean many things, but generally speaking, it refers to talking openly about undesirable or hard-to-hear truths about black urban street life. This popular phrase has also surfaced as a challenge to “unreal” images of hyper-consumption among rappers and hip hop fans who sport extravagant clothing, cars, and jewelry that emulate and suggest wealth levels light years away from nearly all hip hop fans, let alone the black inner-city ones. So, sometimes, keeping it real means rejecting all the bling bling.

But more often than not, the claim that hip hop is just keeping it real is usually made in response to criticism that hip hop lyrics are contributing to negative social conditions: encouraging violence, representing the criminal life, supporting sexism and homophobia. So, the primary use of the “keeping it real” defense of hip hop is to prove hip hop’s role as a truth teller, especially the truths about poor black urban life that many people want to shove under the rug. Although rappers themselves are the ones most frequently heard making this claim, the head of a major media conglomerate—Robert Morgado, a former executive vice-president of Warner Communications—has also been quoted as identifying their role as reality’s troubadours:

Rap music provides a window on our urban culture. Through it we can gauge the realities of life in our inner cities, which would other-

wise be obscured, realities that are deeply troubling. . . . To listen is to hear from a population desperately in need of attention, slipping headlong into despair and destruction. . . . The music can be frightening. It is angry and subverts aspects of order. It is violent and hard to understand, absolutely. Much of modern life is like that. Music and its lyrics reflect a reality that can’t be censored. One can work to keep from being reminded of it, but there it is.¹

Among these unpleasant “realities,” revealed through rap music’s “window on our urban culture,” are black community street-based criminal lifestyles: drug dealing, hustling, gang-banging, hoes and pimping.

There is an important core truth to hip hop’s “keeping it real” claim, despite its overall mendacity: A good deal of hip hop speaks and has always spoken openly and in depth about aspects of black urban poverty, particularly the grip that street culture has on many young people. Hip hop gives a ground-level view (though not the *only* view, or a *comprehensive* view) of what it might mean to live under what are nearly warlike conditions in communities that face myriad daunting circumstances. Sometimes, rappers’ lyrics really do offer gripping tales of loss, sorrow, exploitation, rage, confinement, hopelessness, and despair about conditions that are denied in the larger society. It is important to admit that these powerful stories far too often uncritically reflect attitudes and beliefs that many would consider destructive to achieving a socially just environment. But it is also true that society at large only sporadically pays attention to the extraordinarily despair-producing conditions in which young black poor youth attempt to survive. Americans seem far more interested in being entertained by compelling portraits of horrible conditions than they are in altering them.

Young people who love hip hop understandably want to maintain and defend the spirit of “keeping it real.” Hip hop remains one of the most accessible creative forms for those who feel that most if not all other avenues for telling their own life stories have been cut off by limits established in other genres. Beyond this, many fans need to

hold onto the idea that hip hop is a place for such personal portraits, even when this idea might be untrue. Despite its disturbing turn in the commercial realm, hip hop truly is one of the few creative and visible places where in-depth criticisms of society's failures (e.g., social injustice, corporate control of culture and media consolidation, racial inequality, class oppression, normalized sexism, and homophobia) can be expressed. Perhaps many hold onto this role for hip hop because they believe that if hip hop continues to be identified as a place where one can "keep it real," it might encourage more visible social commentary.

The notion of keeping it real is about both representing a particular black ghetto street life and being truthful about one's relationship to that life. So, rappers not only have to tell compelling stories about being in the life but also have to convince listeners that they know that life personally and intimately. Hip hop remains a genre largely valued for its seemingly autobiographical nature. Leading criminal lives seems to enhance artists' credibility, as has been the case for 50 Cent and T.I. Alternatively, some artists, most recently hip hop-inflected crooner Akon, have lost credibility not because they lack talent but because they were discovered to be telling lies about their criminal past or origins in "the 'hood."

Keeping it real has become a genre convention as much as a form of personal storytelling. I am not claiming that there was nothing real being said in 50 Cent's or T.I.'s lyrics, that they were entirely fictional, that none of them contained crucial elements of truth. Even if a rapper himself didn't exactly live the tale being told, it is not unreasonable to imagine that he witnessed many of the elements presented in a given rhyme, thus making it a socially real tale if not a fully truthful autobiographical one.

Comedian David Chapelle's second-season series of skits titled "When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong" is a brilliant satire of how keeping it real—defined partly as an exaggerated response to slights and small-scale mistreatments—can lead people to behave in destructive ways that ruin their lives. The skits are not directly about hip hop, but their scope as well as the series title signal that the "keeping it real"

brand of aggression made popular in hip hop has destructive consequences. For example, the first skit involves a black club scene where a man starts a fight with a champion of martial arts in response to a mild comment made to his girlfriend. He ends up with massive hospital bills and has to move in with his grandmother. In another, a black corporate director angrily rants in reply to a white coworker's off-color use of black slang, ending his tirade with "Thug Life! Bark! Bark! Wu-Tang!" In the next scene, he's seen working in a gas station, clearing snow from car windshields for a living.

Chapelle's comic skits make a sharp-witted point. Keeping it real is not just about telling one's truth; it is also about how a "keeping it real" attitude is wedded to a valorization of aggressive and self-destructive actions that have consequences—and how the attitude itself often creates the conditions to which it claims to be responding. The defense that anything rappers rap about is truthful and therefore valuable "ghetto" storytelling has been overused in ways that are destructive not only to hip hop itself but also to black communities and society at large. The claim that a rapper or hip hop in general "keeps it real" has become a catch-all defense of everything that comes out of a rapper's mouth, no matter how manufactured, invented, distorted, or insanely stereotypical it may be. The illusion that commercially manufactured rappers are unvarnished, gritty truth-tellers has gotten completely out of hand. It has been used to silence legitimate criticisms of the narrowing and increasingly parodic images of black urban life that dominate commercial hip hop. Indeed, saying that one is just keeping it real has become a kind of vaccine not only for rappers but for many industry representatives and corporate managers as well: This statement is a way of inoculating them from any and all criticism for their role in reducing and narrowing the stories told by the same young people they claim to represent—thus making commercial rap lyrics less real even while they claim ultimate realness.

Rappers and corporate managers claim they are "just representing" or "mirroring" society. On September 25, 2007, during the congressional hearing titled "From Imus to Industry: The Business of

Stereotypes and Degradation,” Alfred C. Liggins III, CEO of Radio One, claimed that its urban contemporary radio stations played “hip hop music which often reflects the realities that many in the audiences face and observe in everyday life.” His industry colleague, Doug Morris, chairman and CEO of Universal Music Group—which registers 25 percent of all music sales and houses rappers such as Lil’ Wayne, Jay-Z, Snoop Dogg, Nelly, 50 Cent, Kanye West, and Busta Rhymes—said that “hip hop has always been one of the most reflective genres in our culture. . . . [Rappers’] words often reflect what they see and experience firsthand in their communities. Rap and hip hop may be the vehicle by which they escape lives of hopelessness, injustice and poverty. Their words reflect their lives, which regrettably, is often an unpleasant picture.”

This logic has been able to mask what has been a reduction of creative space in commercial hip hop brought about by the claim that what we hear there (even when it is fully manufactured, limited, and contained) is the unmediated truth. We must listen, we are told, because it is real; and who wants to look prudish, or worse, who wants to appear to support the silencing of the already marginal and silenced? Who wants to silence or criticize the stories coming from poor young inner-city black men who are finally getting a chance to speak about their environment? Who wants to undermine their chances at relatively legitimate financial success?

However, there are five urgent problems with the “keeping it real” defense in commercial hip hop:

1. It refers to an ever-narrowing slice of black ghetto street life.
2. The constant commercial promotion of thugs, hustlers, pimps, and hoes reflects *and* promotes this aspect of street life.
3. It denies the immense corporate influence on hip hop’s storytelling.
4. It contributes to the idea that black street life is black culture itself.
5. By reflecting images of black people as colorful and violent criminals, drug dealers, and sex fiends, this defense is intended

to protect the profit stream such images have generated; at the same time, however, it crowds out other notions of what it means to be black and reinforces the most powerful racist and sexist images of black people.

Let’s consider each of these problems below.

1. The stories of black street culture—which are at the heart of “keeping it real” rhetoric—do not represent all or even most of black ghetto life. But by letting commercial hip hop become a nearly constant caricature of gangstas, pimps, and hoes, we’ve come to equate black poverty with black street life. This denies and silences a wide range of black urban ghetto experiences and points of view and venerates predatory street culture. The black male street hustler/gang-banger and his friends, across various regions and in different dialects, isn’t the only reality to be told about black ghetto life. If radio- and television-promoted hip hop were really keeping it real—even in its portrayal of this narrow slice of black urban ghetto life—the perspectives on black street culture in commercial hip hop would be far more diverse. So, not only are these commercialized sources of hip hop not keeping it real in general, they’re not even keeping it real about the narrow slice of black ghetto street life they claim to be representing. What might we hear if commercial radio and televised hip hop were really keeping it real?

If black ghetto street life were really being represented, we’d hear far more rhymes about homelessness and the terrible intergenerational effects of drug addiction. There would be much more urban contemporary radio play of songs about fear and loss, and *real* talk about incarceration. Prison is not a rite of passage; it is a devastating and terrorizing place to be. And the loss of potentially life-changing opportunities that define life after prison are rarely exposed in mainstream hip hop lyrics, despite the deep impact that incarceration has on the lives of young black men especially. Where are the conversations about the terrorizing acts of violence against men that are commonplace in prison life? Where are the stories about women

who work two and three jobs to keep their children fed while hundreds of thousands of black fathers languish in American prisons? Where is the outrage about white racism and the anger and frustration about police brutality, economic isolation, and unemployment that define too much of black ghetto life? Is this not keeping it real?

Why are there so few music videos or radio-played songs about the extraordinary sacrifices that neighbors, teachers, coaches, mothers, fathers, friends, ministers, and others make to help keep communities together, to keep kids from falling into life-destroying potholes? Where are the regularly played songs about kids who have made it through the minefield of growing up within conditions of racialized poverty but who *haven't* dealt drugs to their neighbors, *haven't* joined a gang and terrorized kids who are just like them—kids who have graduated from high school and tried to figure out a nondestructive way to survive and maybe even get ahead? Finally, where are the stories about community and romantic love and vulnerability, and the high-rotation songs that promote visions of love for the black community and an investment in trying to make it better? I'm not talking about telling countless tales on CDs about needing to sell drugs to folks who live next door and then using monies generated from those CD sales to "give back" in the form of philanthropy. Nor am I talking about finding a "gangsta bitch" to ride shotgun in one's car as a model for love. Love and intimacy require enormous sacrifice and sustained vulnerability; the models of black manhood promoted in commercial hip hop are allergic to both.

Not all commercialized hip hop finds the need to constantly represent the issues listed here. Indeed, there are exceptional, underground songs and voices in hip hop (tokenized on commercial radio airplay and marginalized on music video rotation) that deal with a wider range of elements of black inner-city poverty and everyday life. Several highly marketable artists have songs on their albums that move beyond the caricatures of the gangsta-pimp-ho trinity, but these songs—despite their lyrical creativity and infectious beats—never see the light of radio play and in no way define the genre or these artists'

careers. For the most part, these songs are the exceptions that prove the rule.

Consider Ludacris's number-one-selling single, "Runaway Love," which tells the story of young girls' particular kind of suffering and vulnerability to domestic violence and sexual abuse. In one verse, he raps about a young girl who runs away because her drug-addicted mother refuses to believe that one of the men she brings over is sexually abusing the daughter. When Ludacris appeared at the 2007 Grammy Awards presentation for winning Best Rap Album and Best Rap Song for "Money Maker" (a song encouraging a woman to shake her body "like somebody's bout to pay ya"), his acceptance speech included a challenge to those who say that rap has no content. Yet powerful songs like "Runaway Love" do not contradict the reality that mainstream representations are clearly dominated by highly seductive portraits of street hustling, sex for money, and gangsta life. It's as if the existence of *any* exception somehow negates the rule. Pointing to exceptions is a shellgame; it keeps the truth of the matter obscured and in constant motion.

The "keeping it real" rhetoric is also a cover for perpetuating gross stereotypes about black people—stereotypes that have deep roots in American culture. Commercialized hip hop's distorted and narrow focus on one aspect of black ghetto street life—under the guise of truth telling—exaggerates and perpetuates negative beliefs about black people and obscures elements of life in poor black neighborhoods that contradict these myths.

From listening to too much commercialized, highly visible hip hop, one could get the impression that life in the ghetto is an ongoing party of violence and self-destruction with "style," that street culture is an all-consuming thing, that poor black folks have chosen to live in the ghetto, and that they have created the conditions under which they live. Who needs conservatives' attacks on poor black people, when we rep their vision ourselves, with corporate sponsorship? The "keeping it real" line is far too often used to justify the way that rappers and corporate executives rely on voyeuristic fantasies

about black people as pimps, hustlers, and gang-bangers to sell records. The fact of the matter is that artists who consistently bring too much complexity or too wide a range of nonstereotypical images of black men and women to commercial hip hop are destined to end up at the margins of commercial success.

2. The commercially promoted depiction of this aspect of street life as stylized, fun, and cool doesn't just reflect the destructive aspect; it energizes, elevates, and promotes it. Much of what gets to count as "keeping it real" storytelling in hip hop isn't just journalistic-style reportage of actual lived experience; it also works as a form of affirmation and glorification. Once black street life takes hold in mainstream commercialized hip hop and becomes a part of widely distributed and promoted popular, celebrity driven culture, it can no longer be understood only as a reflection of some aspect of life. It is also an agent of creation and reproduction. All of this talk about "reflecting" reality in a genre that has garnered so much cachet and media glamour is a deeply dishonest argument. It is ridiculous to claim that video after video and lyric after lyric on black commercial radio and television are not also cultivating street culture.

Tupac Shakur understood this dynamic and worried about how his attempt to tell compelling stories to and for an already existing criminally involved subculture might encourage other kids to join the fold—or at least to emulate the style and attitude associated with it. This is the dilemma he fretted over, as reflected in his statement in the film *Tupac: Resurrection* quoted at the beginning of the chapter. When he said that it might make thug life "look glorious to the guy that doesn't live that life," he acknowledged how his celebrity made thug life "cool." And Tupac's stories of ghetto life were far greater in range and complexity, less glamorous and celebratory, and more expressive of pain and loss than those that populate mainstream commercial hip hop today. He admitted to worrying about his power to negatively influence his fans. Tupac wanted to speak to those kids who were already caught up in the system because he felt they were

herded there and discarded. Their stories and lives were considered unworthy of social recognition, and he wanted to give them social space and value. But he also knew that a compelling recognition of that life—without strong critique and without real-life options—can encourage the very actions and behaviors that get kids involved in crime and violence in the first place.

3. The "keeping it real" argument denies the capacity of corporate power over commercial mainstream hip hop to move this genre away from complex, diverse images of black youth and toward stereotypical ones. The defense of a much less evolved "reflection of reality" argument, as advanced by Russell Simmons and others, glosses over the fact that as more profits are generated from various "takes" on the black gangsta, hustler, and pimp, more artists are encouraged to redefine themselves to fit those molds. When Simmons defended rap's commercial content by saying that "[p]overty creates these conditions and these conditions create these words" or that "the rap community always tells the truth," he used the "keeping it real" argument to hide extensive corporate influence over product content. Together, vast consolidation as well as marketing and sales strategies have compounded the narrowing of what we see and hear, and are then used to prove that hip hop's stories are being entirely self-generated from the black community.²

Corporate record companies, while claiming to be mere middlemen distributors of authentic black ghetto tales, are product makers, and they really do steer public attention toward and away from ideas and images. They want to sell records and thus they promote, tailor, encourage, discourage, sign, and release artists based on two crucial factors: what they think will sell as many copies as possible and what they think won't cause too much negative attention, friction, or resistance from society and government. Such decisions are based not on whether a particular story is true but on what kind of story has been selling. It is also based on what kind of story has not been under profit-threatening scrutiny in larger society.

Previous versions of the “keeping it real” stories found in hip hop in the mid-1990s, about youth rage directed at police and racism, generated a great deal of real social pressure that eventually shut down the commercial promotion of stories that included references to killing cops or contained strong social critique. This public outrage against lyrics expressing anger at what was perceived as unjust authority (which was, by the way, greater than the public outrage about police brutality itself) had the potential to reduce sales since distributors were being pressured not to carry such records in their stores. That sort of truth telling was apparently keeping it *too* real. So, where was the corporate defense of the need to listen to stories about black rage against police brutality? Why wasn’t this considered something that everyone needed to hear? When this rage and frustration threatened government authority, corporations feared they’d be regulated and would lose money, and thus they backed away, steering artists elsewhere. Apparently, black people shooting and killing themselves and insulting black women are profitable images and don’t threaten society. So, they are defended, and we, as part of our democratic duty, are encouraged not to turn away—not to protest the exploitation they reflect—but, instead, to consume.

Ghetto street culture is the central brand of blackness for sale in American popular culture. As astute hip hop commentator Bakari Kitwana has observed: “[M]any rap artists, regardless of where they fall in the food chain, have succeeded in developing relationships outside the music industry and are cashing in on the image of blackness in the most significant way. Artists like Russell Simmons realize that their own image is a brand.”³ And a signature feature of this brand is the caricatured portrayal of the suffering of the bottom 20 percent of black America.

4. The distorted and exaggerated use of “keeping it real” to claim that today’s commercial hip hop represents the truth of black ghetto life betrays the valuable history of black culture’s role as a community-affirming means of expressing a wide variety of perspectives and lived

experiences. There is a long tradition in African-American culture of using music, poetry, dance, religion, literature, and other expressions to spread affirmation to counter a society saturated in racial hatred and to “speak truth to power.” This is a strategy designed to prevent internalization and acceptance of hurtful mainstream ideas and to challenge injustice through speech. Speaking truth to power serves to unify people who feel that their points of view and life experiences are being overlooked, denied, and ignored. Hip hop comes out of this tradition, and despite the current state of commercial hip hop, many young fans, less visible artists, and activists are working to keep it alive. Furthermore, it is important to remember that not all of these wider, more complex portraits of black life are squeaky clean or politically progressive; hip hop has always included graphic and disturbing tales, and should continue to do so.

But the claim that today’s commercial hip hop is the unadulterated reality that naturally comes out of inner-city communities too often amounts to a manipulation of black prophetic histories of speaking truth to power in service of corporate, mainstream agendas. The casual and dishonest use of “keeping it real” dishonors the longer tradition of speaking truth to power. Those who uncritically defend all of hip hop’s commercial trading in ghetto tales tarnish this radical tradition and confuse young people who are less likely to see the difference between the two.

5. Other versions of black lived experience (no matter how broadly representative) don’t satisfy larger society’s stereotypes and fantasies about black youth and ghetto life, so record companies and their radio outlets don’t support them nearly as strongly. Truth notwithstanding, these other images are not as profitable. Although many critics and fans consider Mos Def, Common, and Talib Kweli to be talented hip hop artists, not one of these three has gone platinum; by contrast, Chamillionaire, Trick Daddy, and Three 6 Mafia have all reached this important record sales milestone. Thus, as David Banner pointed out during his testimony at the “From Imus

to Industry” hearings: “The truth is that what we do sells. Often artists try to do different types of music and their music doesn’t sell.” So, aspiring rappers tell the stories many Americans *want to hear*. Stories that reflect the fullness of black life, humanity, and depth of perspective do not turn a profit the way stories of ghetto street criminality and excess do. And this problem is not limited to hip hop. It reflects a broader and ignored facet of what kind of blackness continually gets created, invented, and then re-created in American society. Keeping it real has gone really, really wrong.

Since hip hop’s portraits of street culture reflect a real and legitimate aspect of many poor inner-city communities, their realness can’t be completely denied, and rappers and corporate representatives manipulate this fact, denying legitimate challenges to the corporate processing of and profiting from black community destruction. As it stands now, “keeping it real” is a strategy that traps poor black youth in a repetitious celebration of the rotten fruits of community destruction. We can change this by expanding our investments in the principle of telling hard-to-hear undesirable truths that underwrite “keeping it real” to emphasize a full exploration of the historical and contemporary realities of economic, social, and political oppression that have created a definition of realness as equivalent to black criminality and street culture. Knowledge about this history will enable detachment from the street-based ghetto fictions that have become an industry formula. Then, the brand of “realness” being sold should be forcefully challenged as a form of containment that limits youth expression through its unreal emphasis on smaller and smaller aspects of everyday life. It should be rejected on the grounds that it normalizes and reiterates symbols of black community destruction as black experience. “Keeping it real” must also be exposed as a cover for satisfying the titillating temptation of listening in on seemingly “authentic” black life as criminality.

Finally, “keeping it real” has to be forced open to honestly reflect the full range of black youth’s realities, experiences, desires, vulnerabilities, sacrifices for common good, demands for justice, longings,

and hopes. These, too, are realities that many refuse to hear; but unlike a repetition of ghetto hustling and criminality, they empower, they propel us toward a future that improves black life. Defined this way, “keeping it real” has the power to envision a new, more affirming world drawn from the lives of black youth. These are the realities worth keeping.