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Natalia Cherjovsky  
*University of Central Florida*



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VIRTUAL HOOD: EXPLORING THE HIP-HOP CULTURE EXPERIENCE IN A BRITISH  
ONLINE COMMUNITY

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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2010

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this fast-paced, globalized world, certain online sites represent a hybrid personal-public sphere—where like-minded people commune regardless of physical distance, time difference, or lack of synchronicity. Sites that feature chat rooms and forums can offer a deep-rooted sense of community and facilitate the forging of relationships and cultivation of ideologies.

This dissertation investigates whether this trend is relevant to web sites concerning hip-hop. This genre is arguably one of the most pervasive and influential global cultural forms, yet it is markedly different from most other forms of globalized culture because it emerged within and is still embedded in a distinct subculture. The notion that the Internet could become a bastion for hip-hop fans is quite paradoxical: hip hop is a cultural form so deeply rooted in the sense of place and so invested in its relationship to spatiality that it could potentially pose a particular challenge to the notion of virtual communities.

This research examines the virtual hip-hop experience in the UK in order to assess whether this music and the culture that surrounds it have been adopted in their original American form or whether they have been adapted to make them more relevant to their new locale. In particular, the study probes how the ideology, values, behaviors and attitudes that bestride American hip-hop are represented, consumed, and reproduced on the mediated world of web sites.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Silvio Cherjovsky and Graciela Cherjovsky, who raised me to be curious about the world and value knowledge and education. Without their unconditional and constant understanding, encouragement, support, and love, this process would have been simply impossible.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Picture the following scene: A young white man, decked in urban gear (low-riding baggy pants, a long, loose-fitting t-shirt that reads Run DMC, trendy new sneakers, and a sideways, slanted New York Yankees baseball cap), is standing on the corner of a busy street. The hip-hop blasting from his iPod is audible to passers-by, and he is rapping alongside his favorite MC, rhyming about smoking weed, buying guns, and witnessing the crime and poverty in his racially tense neighborhood.

This sight would hardly be uncommon on any given day, on any random street of any arbitrary city in the United States. Rap music pervades our entertainment, and the culture that surrounds it is often embraced with abandon or even adopted by its audience regardless of gender, age, race, or any other demographic marker. What makes this occurrence remarkable, however, is that this is not a random street in a typical American city, but a busy thoroughfare in London, England, and the man is rapping with a slight English accent.

Bearing witness to instances such as this one, as I spent time in London, piqued my interest. I wanted to be able to grasp how an Englishman whose life in his country's capital is so far removed from American inner city neighborhoods where hip-hop was born, and whose life was probably not marked by racial tension, police brutality, black on black crime, and gang violence, could have come to adopt (whether fully or in part, earnestly or as a trend) not just the music, but certain markers of a culture that is in essence so foreign to his reality. In order to begin to understand this phenomenon, it was clear I would have to delve into the genre and understand the means of transmission of the cultural markers of hip-hop. Quite early in my research, it became evident that, as in much of our media today, the Internet plays a major part in

the diffusion of hip-hop music. This finding was not at all surprising. Indeed, the Internet is a crucial element when it comes to both the production and distribution of most media products. That is not the sole area in which the Internet has become fundamental; it is also central to relationships, which are often at least partly mediated, given humanity's mobility and the vertiginous pace we keep. Undeniably, in this fast-paced, globalized world, the Internet has become almost inextricable from most areas of our existence. It has become a pivotal medium for both our professional and personal lives. Indeed, for increasing numbers of individuals, certain on-line sites represent a sort of *third place*—neither work nor home but a hybrid personal-public sphere—where like-minded people commune regardless of physical distance, time difference, or lack of synchronicity. Sites that feature chat rooms and forums, which allow bidirectional communication and, subsequently, are particularly adept at fostering the production of meaning, can offer a deep-rooted sense of community and facilitate the forging of relationships and cultivation of ideologies. It is this community-building aspect of the Internet, added to its role in the dissemination of media, which makes it an ideal medium for the diffusion of a culture such as hip-hop.

As a result of these different interests coming together, this research project investigates how this trend toward virtual communities is relevant to the diffusion of hip-hop and its concomitant culture through web sites based in the United Kingdom. Anchoring itself in the fairly uncontested understanding that hip-hop culture pervades the American mainstream, and that America sets the global cultural pace by exporting its media products to the world, this study examines how hip-hop is consumed and lived out virtually in the United Kingdom. This project explores the online hip hop experience in UK-based sites in order to assess whether this music and the culture that surrounds it have been adopted in their original American form or whether

they have been adapted to make them more relevant to their new locale. In particular, the study will probe how the ideology, values, behaviors and attitudes that bestride American hip-hop are represented, consumed, and reproduced on the mediated world of web sites and whether the site where this interpellation takes place is experienced by its members and users as a space, a place, and a community.

Because of the complexity of the project, it is vital to set the theoretical framework for my inquiry. Chapter one begins by exploring the role of music and offers insight into the world of hip-hop, including a brief survey of its history and the values that define its attendant culture or ethos. Music has long been an essential element of most cultures around the world, and its importance even transcends the realm of entertainment or art. In fact, among other art forms or cultural objects, music seems to be favored. Its presence is ubiquitous, from the sounds to which we choose to wake us up, to the tunes we listen to in our cars, the rhythms we select for our workouts, and the soundtracks of the movies we watch. Music is also highly portable. The omnipresent iPod is only the latest iteration of gadgets humankind has devised to be able to take our music with us. Daily, fans wait in line and pack into venues to listen to their favorite artists sing their favorite songs. In Mediated, Thomas De Zengotita describes concerts as akin to religious experiences and posits artists as heroes of sorts. About musicians in concerts, he proposes, “Then they offer, in song and persona, the only cultural vehicle we have left that can penetrate lives, that can make people feel collectively recognized and acknowledged in their otherwise irreducible individual complexity, understood and somehow redeemed in the moment of the chord that seems to reach forever and the lyric that brings it all back home” (De Zengotita 114). His description is quite apt; it captures the essence of what music can do: inspire us, bring

us back to a particular moment in time, radically change our mood almost instantly, and make us feel connected to others who enjoy the same notes and lyrics.

While music occupies this sort of privileged site in our culture, there is one genre that has become nearly omnipresent in our society since the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Indeed, as Murray Forman puts it in his book The 'Hood Comes First, “hip-hop has evolved into one of North America’s most influential youth-oriented forces” (3). One of the reasons for this might just be that, unlike other varieties of music, hip-hop is ensconced in a larger force that not only engendered it but also still feeds it. This genre of music is arguably one of the most pervasive and influential global cultural forms at present, yet it is markedly different from most other forms of globalized culture because it emerged within and is still embedded in a distinct subculture. Hip-hop is not just about music. It is a culture. It is a movement. From an idiosyncratic vernacular that has seeped into our language, to the distinctive clothing that signifies kinship, this subculture and its attendant behaviors and values have saturated the American mainstream.

This “mainstreaming” of a distinct subcultural form raises numerous questions, not the least of which is that while many of us have been actively consuming it, it still remains unclear whether we truly understand hip-hop. What is it exactly that is being consumed? In her acclaimed book Black Noise, Tricia Rose defines hip-hop as a phenomenon that “emerges from the deindustrialization meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect” (21). She explains that it “...is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community” (Rose 21). Hailing from the impoverished and segregated—albeit no longer institutionally—streets of the South Bronx in New York City, this subculture, and its most recognizable expression, music,

became a way of attempting to unify and in turn invigorate a sector of society that often found itself without a voice.

Yet, is that how hip-hop is understood and experienced by those who consume it today? More specific to the present study, what does it signify to people of other countries and ethnicities as it is marketed internationally? Most self-aware hip-hop insiders are conscious of the controversies within the culture, just as Murray Forman recognizes many "...regressive positions that are articulated within hip-hop (i.e., the reinforcement of restrictive patriarchal values, the expression of traditional notions of heterosexual masculinity, a preponderance of racist or bigoted sentiments, and a pronounced commitment to narrowly conceived capitalist ideas of wealth and power)..." (13). Is the notion of ethnic pride lost in favor of the blinding light being reflected off the diamonds encrusted in the platinum pendants that adorn the bare muscular chests of gangsta rappers on videos looped on MTV? Do outsiders who might not be privy to the history and the nuances recognize any hints of political struggle in hip-hop or do they just see the systematically objectified, scantily-clad women?

Music crossing geopolitical and cultural boundaries is not unheard of. However, the espousal of an alien subculture is a phenomenon on a whole different plane, especially when said subculture is ingrained not only in ethnicity but in territoriality as well. Reinforcing this idea, Tricia Rose claims, "identity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family" (34). However, if this is so, then why have so many individuals—from devoted fans to casual listeners who are so far removed physically from the strife and the places where the music and the culture are rooted—come to identify with the genre? Perhaps Rose's view of hip-hop may also be realized in the international experience. Could it be that even if partially or completely decontextualized, hip-

hop could still be useful as a vehicle for other disenfranchised people to voice their concerns? Of course, the process of how hip-hop came to be globalized could have been far less organic, functioning as a product of marketers seeking to expand the fan base to which they can sell their products, media-based or otherwise. As Bakari Kitwana posits in this seminal work, Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop, “Another reason for its wide acceptance is that consumerism has become an American value. And hip-hop, as part of the American entertainment industry, is now for sale to all buyers” (xiii). While this appears to be a rather jaded view of hip-hop, there are many who believe the genre’s popularity has removed it from its rightful place and made it another casualty of the mainstreaming process and rendered it a mere cash cow for the music industry.

Straddling both sides of the issues at hand, writer Patrick Neate recognizes that “...because of both its global marketing and innate characteristics, hip-hop has become a key tool in the production of identity for young people worldwide” (132). This compromise of sorts allows for the possibility that while there might be an agenda to the international marketing of the genre, it doesn’t necessarily detract from the fact that it may have become culturally significant for disenfranchised people around the world.

One of the major contributors to this putative globalization of hip-hop is the Internet, and Chapter Two offers the theoretical foundation to help us understand what about the Internet makes it a viable source of interpellation and investigates the intersection between hip-hop and this developing medium. The notion that the Internet could become a bastion for hip-hop fans is quite paradoxical: hip hop is a cultural form so deeply rooted in the sense of place and so invested in its relationship to spatiality that it could potentially pose a particular challenge to the notion of virtual communities. Nevertheless, the Internet is no ordinary mediator. While we certainly cannot point at it as revolutionary medium simply because of its extensive role in

mediated communication, the Internet has expanded the horizons of what is technologically possible when it comes to communicating with others. This medium has also contributed quite heftily to blurring the line between what is and is not local. With this in mind, I ponder whether it could be that in this globalized world, where national identity is eroded and borders appear far less tangible or significant, the local could be resituated in the digital world. Again, we return to the notion of place. In her book, Connecting, Mary Chayko seems to foreground this idea when she states that, “with the ‘erosion of territory’ as the preeminent marker of community, our societal need to conceptualize nongeographic forms of social space is great” (30). Indeed, the Internet might represent a new iteration of common space that is not subjugated to the geographical or political limitations of the nation-state.

And why shouldn’t the Internet seem like the perfect place to renegotiate the notion of community? For one, the younger generations have an unprecedented sense of familiarity and comfort with “new” media technology. As Chayko puts it, “we use mass media so frequently and regularly that we have become experts at performing the mental shift from ‘everyday’ social life to these ‘alternate,’ media-generated worlds” (116). This means there isn’t necessarily a complex and disconcerting paradigm shift we have to activate every time we enter the online realm. In addition, our perception of the Internet as a place and a space could provide us with the closest approximation of a virtual spatiality where relationships can take root and communities can be formed. For the notion of community, here I borrow Chayko’s definition, that is to say a group “...formed when three or more people become socially connected in a generally structured or patterned way, develop a collective identity and purpose, and share an extra-dyadic “sense” of belonging to a social entity larger than the individual or dyad” (40).

The acknowledgement of the validity of virtual communities is not without complications. There has been a tendency—both on the part of laypeople and those in the know—to assume that lack of shared physicality hinders the process of cohesion. This hasty and limited conjecture often results from the erroneous presupposition that mediated forms of communication aim to replace face-to-face interaction. This is certainly not the case. However, the increasingly normative aspects of virtual communities challenge more traditional notions of community based on prior spatio-temporal relations.

Chayko assures us that, “communities of the mind yield networks of sociomental connection and bonds that are mental rather than physical (mental networks) but are quite real and do indeed provide a sense of structure, purpose, and belonging for their members” (40-1). These affiliations are not the result of chance encounters. People flock to populate chat rooms and forums that deal with subject matter with which they identify. Because of this, “people who join and become involved in online groups often assume a common identity with one another which implies similarity and affinity. In the exchange of online messages, a shared identity often is reinforced” (Chayko 59). Couple this sense of camaraderie with the freedom afforded by privacy, and accessibility, and the tendency for self-disclosure that anonymity fosters, and the online environment certainly appears primed for the formation of communities.

Such developments seem to apply as well to the web sites that delve into the world of hip-hop. Murray Forman refers to *Billboard*'s rap reporter Havelock Nelson's May 31, 1997 column that “reported on the growing influence of a burgeoning hip-hop Internet underground and its capacity to generate new international alliances, expanding and intensifying the bonds of the hip-hop nation ” (283). Nelson's rhetoric comes across as buoyant, infused with the imagery of people using a new medium to rally in a crescendo of communal unity out of affinity for hip-



hop. Yet, reeling us back to a less idyllic reality, Mary Chayko warns that communities “...also are built by careful design. [...] Audiences are sought for products, services, and ideologies. [...] Corporations and other businesses have a commercial interest and investment in seeing “clusters of interest” coalesce around their products and services” (62). This may very well be the case with the globalization of hip-hop, when media conglomerates might regard the rest of the world as less of a community and more as a demographic of potential consumers. However, as a counterpoint to that, Murray Forman reminds us that, ultimately, control over the understanding, absorption, and revision of cultural forms is tricky at best. He affirms that, “...while transnational media enterprises and the global culture industries have a powerful influence over what gets circulated into world markets, there are no guarantees as to how cultural commodities will be incorporated into localized practices and the lived experiences of subjective pleasure and desire” (20). Forman points to the notion that even if there was a capitalistic agenda behind the globalization of hip-hop on the part of producers, how the actual experience plays out and how the ideology is consumed is not something that can easily be regulated with any certainty or predictability.

One such aspect which might escape rationalized management, and which strikes at the heart of the matter for my study, is the nature of hip-hop being consumed globally. Is hip-hop being taken up in its original form, the American variety that we consume in the U.S. daily? Or is it being altered and retooled—in either minimal or essential ways—to be more representative of local flavors and local issues? Are UK nationals merely consuming imported media products or are has the homegrown hip-hop taken over? Or is it a combination thereof? If one is to look to the ostensible experts in this area, those who have studied the phenomenon of the rise of hip-hop in places other than the United States, there is definitely a healthy dose of dissent. Scholars like

Patrick Neate, Murray Forman and Andy Bennett seem at best at odds about how hip-hop is being experienced abroad. To some researchers, mainstream American Hip-Hop has become the foremost hip-hop style the UK consumes. Others believe that the imported hip-hop mainly serves as a model after which domestic acts pattern their local sounds and lyrics that speak to their own community. Between the extremes, there are shades of gray that take into account how both of these circumstances coexist within the UK. Yet, it is an area that still deserves further exploration.

As Chapters One and Two tie up the theoretical framework, Chapter Three moves the venture into the research phase. This project epitomizes the spirit of the progressively interdisciplinary route that cultural and media studies seem to be following in the last few decades, and as such its methodology will be necessarily provisional. This is a truly multi-disciplinary undertaking of international scope. The research is very timely, as we are still witnessing the formative stages of online communities, yet we have access to enough data to start mapping out noticeable trends. The approaches to online ethnographies are still somewhat raw. Yet, academically, this is a unique project. A preliminary review of literature indicates that, although the different topics—globalization, online communities, hip-hop, etc.—have been researched and written about at length, there is not significant work, if any at all, that ties all of these areas together. The fact that I have been unable to find prior research that matches the specifics of my topic is at once daunting and refreshing. Breaking new ground is exciting but bears a lot of responsibility as well. Besides its academic weight, this is a project which, while buttressed in a sturdy theoretical foundation, also belongs fully in the realm of field work and deals with real world issues of identity and transnationalism and identifies immediate applications to current concerns within the disciplines it spans.

Having laid out the theory and the methodology in the previous chapters, I move, in Chapter Four, to the actual case study of a UK-based hip-hop community, Rap Central ([rapcentral.co.uk](http://rapcentral.co.uk)) in which (if I can take the liberty of using such spatially-laden terminology) I spent over two years observing the changing landscape and the daily goings-on of a group of hip-hop enthusiasts who have made that particular site their online home when it comes to the music and culture they enjoy. This chapter synthesizes my experience and places their actions and utterances within the theoretical frameworks of Chapter One and Two, paying special attention to the reification of any hip-hop cultural markers, to the treatment of the Internet as space and place, and to the identification of community building behavior within the site.

Chapter Five describes my general conclusions, based on how my findings fit into the theoretical matrix I had proposed earlier, and offers my reflections both on the project and the process. It also suggests new directions for and speculates about potential further research that might be possible as a result of my project.

On a personal note, while there is no doubt in my mind that my deep-seated interest in globalization, and in particular Americanization, has certainly been fanned by lectures taught by my professors, readings assigned for classes, and other academic endeavors, my curiosity about the topic has roots in my own life. As an Argentinean-born person who is now an American citizen, I do not need to rely on third-party accounts of the effects of cultural imperialism. I am actually able to dig into my own life experience when it comes to understanding the weight of American media in the world. As a child growing up in Argentina, far removed from theories that explained the phenomenon I lived, I was constantly exposed to all forms American media. Surely, there was a pool of local programming on television, a healthy dose of indigenous music, and an embryonic film industry. Nevertheless, Argentina's developing economy during the

1970s and 1980s was no match for the amount of products the mammoth entertainment industry of the United States put out. At that point in my life, I was too young to even begin to comprehend the vicissitudes of global socio-political and economic matrices. As I watched American cartoons, listened to American songs, and watched American movies, the concepts of Americanization or cultural imperialism were lost on me. The onslaught of American media, however, had a very real impact on my formative years. For a while, I was thoroughly confused about the geography of my own country. Given the prevalence of American media, which was never labeled as foreign, and much of which was dubbed into Spanish, I was convinced that places like California and New York were simply other parts of Argentina I had yet to visit. The reality of the nation-state and the notion of political borders were blurred in my young mind. As I matured and education entered into my life, I gradually became fully aware of this schism between my reality and the actuality portrayed in the media. As confusion subsided, it gave way to other feelings, out of which the strongest one was an intense desire to belong to the culture that had been like mother's milk to me from my earliest memories. I felt a longing, a misplaced, displaced, atemporal nostalgia, and homesickness for a world I had never inhabited. This craving was deepened by the physical alienation from the life I believed I should have. From a very early age, I worshipped the United States, favoring it over my own country of birth and privileging its culture over my own, which I saw as lacking, unrefined, and retrograde when juxtaposed with the progressive and sophisticated American fantasies I consumed through the media. This protracted courtship culminated in the ultimate act of acculturation and assimilation: my move to the United States and my subsequent adoption of the American citizenship.

Despite the fact that my own experience was a catalyst for and informs my own take on the issues about which I write, it was academia that held up a mirror into which I needed to look

in order to comprehend my own journey wholly. When I started reading about post-colonial theory, globalization studies, and other related literature, I still had no name for what I had lived through, nor a solid explanation for my experience. Yet, I saw my own life story staring back at me in other people's narratives. Details such as countries and years may have been different, but the processes of interpellation and the feelings attached to it were familiar to me. Finding kindred spirits was comforting. I was not alone in my indoctrination. I was not an aberration.

For example, I recognized myself in Arjun Appadurai's Modernity at Large, where he explains that he was bitten by the American bug as he experienced modernity by "...reading Life and American college catalogs at the United States Information Service Library, seeing B-grade films, (and some A-grade ones) from Hollywood...". (1-2). His journey, while somewhat different than mine, was tinted with media-fueled desire for a better reality and had the same outcome, immigration to the United States. Our somewhat parallel paths led us from our distinctly different, yet clearly post-colonial, developing nations to the imperialistic modern mother ship—so to speak—that had so insistently emitted its siren song through the media. Yet, our own experiences here made us reflect upon our journeys and attempt to seek answers through the study of cultural and media studies. I consider myself in good company. Beyond the similarities in our personal lives, I also found that Appadurai's framework for understanding the complexities of the globalized world in terms of the relationships between ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, financescapas, and ideoscapas seems to capture not only the essence of my own journey into Americanization as an interpellated subject, but the quintessence of this project (33). His matrix brings together migration, ethnicity, media, technology, economics, and ideologies to show the instability of the nation-state and the volatile, current cultural global flows that dominate our lives. My theoretical template intends to show how consumerism, mediation,

and technology conflate with the erosion of geographical borders and the instability of cultural identity to create in the Internet a place for virtual migration, even if imaginary, and for the surge of ideologies that are otherwise tied to place and ethnicity.

It is, then, with more than just academic curiosity, but with a real sense of hope of perhaps understanding further my own indoctrination into American culture through the experience of others, that I set out to explore the world of UK-based online hip-hop communities.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE HIP-HOPIZATION OF THE WORLD

### The Soundtrack of Our Lives

Music is a paramount element of our lives and our culture. From the lullabies our caregivers sung to us in our infancy to the songs people choose for rituals such as weddings and funerals, music provides the soundtrack to our everyday lives. In his survey of music and its role in society, entitled Cultures of Popular Music, Andy Bennett suggests that music “is a primary, if not the primary, leisure resource in late modern society” (1). However, this art goes well beyond mere entertainment to permeate all aspects of our existence, and it enters the realm of cultural knowledge production. Bennett goes on to explain how music not only has relevance to a human being’s personal experience, but also infuses us at a collective level, helping us map out an understanding of who we are socially (1). Music, therefore, is not only a reflection of personal preferences or societal trends, but also a means for people to commune, connect, and create meaning, which they will in turn pass on as a cultural marker to the rest of the world and to the next generations.

In his book Mediated, Thomas De Zengotita seems almost perplexed by this privileged position, and asks, “Why are musical preferences so intensely important to kids? You can disagree with friends about movie stars...and about TV shows and even humor...and you can still be friends. But you can’t be friends with someone who loves the latest boy band, in a totally unironic way, if you are into Ani DiFranco or Gillian Welch” (95). This points to the fact that music is so ingrained in our sense of identity that we might find it problematic to connect with or accept people whose tastes differ from ours significantly.

De Zengotita goes on to explain how lyrics have the potential to inculcate value, elucidating, "... words, when they are sustained by the immediacy of music, have a unique power. They represent, they articulate—and they penetrate, they fill dumb bodies with meaning" (De Zengotita 97). In fact, he posits that there is something spiritual about music, especially in live performances, where artists "...provide fans with the only experience of transcendent social belonging most of them will ever know. Hence the undeniably religious quality of these events..." (De Zengotita 114).

The brand of inspirational experience about which De Zengotita writes is particularly applicable to those genres which offer more than just music to their audience. If there is a system of beliefs or a cultural movement of some sort that is linked to the style, then the level of commitment and attachment can easily escalate. Indeed, this is the case with America's dominant genre: Hip-hop. This type of music, unlike other varieties, is deeply entrenched in a larger force that not only engendered it but still supports and nourishes it. This affords the genre a different level of credence and following since it is more than just a musical style—it is a key component of a larger structure, which offers up diverse venues for people to buy into the culture. Andy Bennett points to this when he states, "...the most long-lived and successful [genres of popular music] tend to be those that encompass more than music alone; perhaps a style of dress, attitude or dynamic of consumption [...] symbols [youth] can appropriate as tools of their growing identity" (4). This is the key to understanding music not merely as entertainment but as a vehicle for the creation and communication of ideologies.



## Hip Hop Nation

In his book Why White Kids Love Hip Hop, Bakari Kitwana states—rather simply and without resorting to any euphemisms—what America knows but still grapples with. He asserts, “Now hip-hop is not only mainstream—with its own magazines, television programs, film, videos in regular rotation on MTV and BET and prominent appearances from the Grammy Awards to the Super Bowl halftime show. It’s become woven into the fabric of American popular culture” (69).

Although it might be challenging to fathom at this juncture, there was indeed a time when hip-hop was merely a subculture, consumed primarily within the African American and Hispanic communities. During its embryonic stage, in the 1970s and early 1980s, its primary audience was largely confined to the inner city areas in the northeast; soon after that, it made its mark on the streets of the West Coast, and it later became popular throughout the rest of the continental United States. Some claim there was perhaps even more interest in American hip-hop in the African diaspora around the world. In fact, in his book Hip Hop America, Nelson George argues, “...from 1981 to 1988 videos for hip hop MCs were more likely to be seen in London than the Bronx” (98). However, awareness of—let alone interest in—hip-hop outside these demographic groups was an oddity. Incursions of rap music into the mainstream charts were all but unimaginable. Hip-hop’s impact on the dominant culture was still negligible, and its visibility almost non-existent.

In sharp contrast, today, despite abundant controversy around it, particularly because of some of the more objectionable elements associated with it, hip-hop essentially dominates much of the landscape of popular culture, especially when it comes to our youth. Yet, notwithstanding the ubiquity these days of all things hip-hop, the genre’s pervasiveness might still go unnoticed.

Beyond sheer denial or the unsubstantiated belief—or sometimes hope—that hip-hop might just be an ephemeral fad, those who do not seek it out might not recognize the genre’s significance or incidence because they expect to see it in its most unadulterated form—whatever that might mean to them, depending on their level of familiarity. This myopia of sorts prevents them from realizing that hip-hop, and the culture to which it is still tied, has already altered our mainstream culture forever in an essential manner, starting with our entertainment and then spreading past it to conquer other realms.

It is evident that the music business has become quite ‘hip-hopized,’ so to speak. The more obvious aspect of rap music’s sway is its unprecedented sovereignty over the charts. As an example, Kitwana offers the following statistics: “From 1997 to 1998, rap music sales showed a 31 percent increase, making rap the fastest growing music genre, ahead of country, rock, classical, and all other musical forms” (The Hip Hop Generation 9-10). He also points out, “...by October 2004 [...] the ten best-selling artists of Billboard’s weekly Top 100 list were Black” (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 50-51). If one is to look at hip-hop’s reign over the music industry and the casualties it has left behind both on the charts and in sales records, a remarkable phenomenon—which one could easily mislabel as merely anecdotal—is the difference between the treatment of hip-hop and country music in the U.S.A. The latter, which many considered the genre that espoused all-American values, or best represented the American experience, has been relegated to genre-specific radio stations in most of the United States. Our society considers country songs and artists that make it outside of the niche to be crossover hits, while neither the industry nor audiences rarely, if ever, use that label for rap music or artists that are popular across the board. Additionally, one would be hard-pressed to find a popular hits station that does

not play hip-hop songs as a staple of its repertoire. It would seem that these days hip-hop is more representative of America than country, jazz, or even rock n' roll.

Hip-hop's enduring hegemony over the charts is not necessarily the most telling sign of its sovereignty over the music industry; loyalty is at a high premium with today's fickle listeners, who have such a vast array of products from which to choose. Audiences change, genres become media and listener darlings, and no one is safe from the flavor-of-the-month syndrome. Yet, what makes hip-hop omnipresent and significant is that hip-hop producers or artists have collaborated with other musicians to generate much of the other (non-hip-hop) music we consume, and in the process, they have infused other genres of music with its style. Kitwana alludes to this when he explains that in music today, "The outer packaging is familiar, while the contents inside vary. From Britney, Christina and Mariah to boy bands like 'N Sync to hip-hop/rock bands like Limp Bizkit, Korn and Linkin Park (dubbed rock-rap hybrids), the style and cultural packaging prevails, even when the content is shifting" (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 157). It is quite clear that hip-hop affects us as we consume products the genre has permeated and morphed, perhaps even unbeknownst to us. No one is immune—which is not to assign its impact a decidedly negative quality. It is also highly possible that this influence on more mainstream products has whetted our appetite for the original artifact as well. Conceivably, the watered-down versions have changed our palate and made it easier for the less diluted forms of hip-hop to gain further acceptance.

The mutation of our entertainment is not limited to music but extended to other aspects of the media in which we partake daily, as evidenced by the advent of T.V. programs and movies with predominantly black casts and decidedly black cultural references. In time, many more television shows and films were created, which, while not branded as 'urban,' were highly

affected by the omnipresent elements of Hip-Hop. This was a noticeable departure from earlier years, as “Prior to the 1990s mainstreaming of rap music, the nightly news was where young Blacks were most widely represented in terms of televised images” (Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation* 18). At the other end of the spectrum was *The Cosby Show*, which many complained was quite an unrealistic portrayal of black people, an idealized view of African-American life to which most African Americans could not relate.

While fresh images of African-Americans were emerging on people’s television sets, their images were also proliferating on the silver screen. Bakari Kitwana comments, “As hip-hop was on the fast track to becoming a force in mainstream American popular culture by the mid-1990s, its presence inevitably became felt in film as well” (*Why White Kids Love Hip Hop* 111). When it comes to movies, Kitwana points out that “Aside from rap artists, films released between 1991 and 2001 that depicted gun-toting, ruthless, violent, predatory Blacks killing other Blacks (dubbed ‘hood films by industry insiders) have been the most effective medium for defining and disseminating the new Black youth culture” (Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation* 121). While some argue that those movies were an artistic reflection of African-American reality, others repudiate them because of their consistently negative depiction of blacks. Kitwana explains: “Over the decade, these films (with few exceptions) portrayed the nihilism of Black youth culture in the form of wanton, bloodthirsty, buck willin’ violence for violence sake, substituting it wholesale for the new Black youth culture itself” (*The Hip Hop Generation* 127). Not only that, since many of these films relied on hip-hop soundtracks, many well-known artists—DMX, Eminem, Tupac, and Ice Cube, to name a few—also snagged starring roles and used some of those movies as vehicles to showcase their acting skills, and some of them even crossed over into more mainstream movies and now enjoy fairly successful acting careers. In fact, in

what's perhaps one of the most ironic instances in the mainstreaming of Hip-Hop, Ice T, who once antagonized the establishment and caused major controversy when, as the front man of a band called Body Count, he wrote and performed the song "Cop Killer"—a song he defended as a protest against race-driven police brutality—had a break-through role playing a cop in the movie New Jack City and now plays a police detective in the primetime drama 'Law & Order: Special Victims Unit.' Nelson George also notes that "The appearance of all these MCs in films, theatre, and on TV raised a bigger cultural question as well: what was and what wasn't hip hop?" (218). Rappers seemed to be trying their luck at different media and "unlike the world of alternative rock where the phrase 'sell out' still carried weight as a dis, hip hop figures were immune to any embarrassment" (George 218).

Yet, hip-hop's reach goes well beyond the media. Indeed, the effects that our consumption of hip-hop has had on us are evident in practically every facet of our lives. In fact, "...today, when we speak of hip-hop culture, we are also referencing a hip-hop specific language, body language, fashion, style, sensibility and worldview" (Kitwana, *Why White Kids Live Hip Hop* xii). Nelson George confirms this when he states that "Now we know that rap music, and hip hop style as a whole, has utterly broken from its ghetto roots to assert a lasting influence on American clothing, magazine publishing, television, language, sexuality, and social policy as well as its obvious presence in records and movies" (ix). This moves hip-hop from a subculture to a main thread of American culture, and a predominant and influential one at that.

Take the example of clothing: it is of note that over the last few decades numerous 'urban wear' brands have sprung up throughout the U.S., many of them designed, owned, managed, or backed by famous industry insiders, artists, or producers. The masterminds behind these ventures found out quite quickly that there was a market with a great demand and not enough

supply, and flooded the marketplace with products that have made the hip-hop style not only extremely visible and popular but tremendously profitable as well. Kitwana highlights this notion as he explains, “In fact the logic for hip-hop artists-owned fashion companies at their inception was the realization among emerging hip-hop designers that hip-hop kids were a sizeable consumer audience for mainstream designers” (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 97). Today, it is no secret that hip-hop gear has carved out a niche in the fashion world. In fact, “Hip-hop fashion is now estimated to be a \$2 billion a year business, according to HPD Group, with companies like Rocawear and Ecko each claiming sales of over \$300 million a year” (Kitwana, Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 97).

Some might imagine that the impact of hip-hop cannot possibly be as intense or profound as to alter the fabric of our culture and our economy, dismissing it as a fleeting trend that involves inconsequential elements, such as teenagers’ choice in garb. To clue in the naysayers, Kitwana urges them to reassess their position given the evidence, and for example, when it comes to the economy, to “...consider the case of the French cognac maker Courvoisier. The boost that Busta Rhymes’ song “Pass the Courvoisier” gave to the company simply can’t be denied” (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 98). Courvoisier is but one illustration of the many trademarks that have achieved greater brand recognition as well as an upsurge in their sales thanks to their affiliation with the genre. As companies began to take notice and consider what hip-hop could do for their popularity and bottom line, many corporations capitalized on this trend and artists began to harness their marketability. It is noteworthy to mention that not every brand that rappers adopted has taken kindly to the idea of being associated with the music or the culture of hip-hop. In fact, a few manufacturers were outraged because their image and ideology, as well as those of their clientele, clashed with the values espoused by—or attributed to—the hip-

hop crowd. Yet, aside from the marketability of the hip-hop product, Kitwana points out that, “Rap music’s ability to influence social change should not be taken lightly,” and that “Perhaps rap music’s influence as a transmitter of ideas should be more carefully considered” (210).

Hip-hop culture’s influence is so palpable and its presence so commonplace that some people seek to capture its essence to use it as a tool. Of late, education is another arena that seems to have been taken over by the genre. Not only have courses in hip-hop music cropped up at many universities, but “At the high school level educators seek out ways of incorporating hip-hop into the curriculum in order to empower their students” (Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop* 50). This seems to be an attempt on the part of the establishment to reach children on their level, in what has now become their native language. In turn, this occurrence validates the idea that hip-hop has been incorporated into our lives, as opposed to being a fad we dip into arbitrarily.

The consumption of hip-hop, whether in its unadulterated form or as a hybridization of other products, has had a trickle-down effect that leads right to the core of not just American trends and tastes but to our beliefs, attitudes, values, and ultimately, behavior. Nelson George simply concludes, “Our nation’s clothes, our language, our standards for entertainment, our sexuality, and our role models are just a few items that have been affected by hip hop’s existence” (211). Kitwana further explains, “More than simply a staple in American youth culture, hip-hop has become nearly indistinguishable from it. What was once a marginal culture has become mainstream” (*Why White Kids Love Hip Hop* 48). His words point to the fact that today the scope of hip-hop’s impact seems to know no limits.

While most people would concur that hip-hop permeates our society, not everyone readily agrees on whether its influence is entirely welcome. Certainly, hip-hop deserves praise

for daring to broach complex subjects that are awfully relevant, extremely current, but often unfairly discounted. Murray Forman elucidates, "...rap and its associated hip-hop practices have provided a lightning rod for heated debates about [...] social values, moral and ethical parameters, gender inequality, sexism or misogyny, class conflict, intergenerational dissonance, and the ongoing antagonisms of racial disharmony in America today" (12). However, there are those who see more detriment than benefit and are alarmed by the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors associated with hip-hop music. In fact, some frown upon the culture to which hip-hop belongs and which it still promotes. As Nelson George explains, "It's been said that African American culture is the most marketable pathology in the world..." and, hip-hop, as its most visible product, takes a lot of that responsibility (XIII). Yet, it is not solely an issue of ethnicity or predilection. Kitwana, an African-American author and a self-confessed hip-hop lover, warns that when it comes to this genre, "Parents, regardless of race, should be concerned about the various mixed messages transmitted to youth under the rubric of hip-hop" (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 3). This proposition can be complicated enough when the definition of what hip-hop is and represents is still nebulous to most people.

### Defining Hip-Hop

Before I can even begin to delineate the meaning of hip-hop, I should consider the linguistic slippage of the two terms I have been and will be using: hip-hop and rap. While the terms have been and will likely continue to be widely used as synonyms, it is important to note that there are nuances that separate them. From a strictly denotative point of view, if we turn to Merriam Webster Online, we will find hip-hop defined as, "A subculture especially of inner-city youths who are typically devotees of rap music; *also*: rap together with this music," while rap is



described as, “A rhythmic chanting often in unison of usually rhymed couplets to a musical accompaniment” (“hip-hop,” “rap”). A second source, the Compact Oxford Dictionary (OED), (accessible through AskOxford.com) which is considered one of the top UK dictionaries, defines hip-hop as, “A style of popular music of US black and Hispanic origin, featuring rap with an electronic backing,” and rap as, “A type of popular music of US black origin in which words are recited rapidly and rhythmically over an instrumental backing” (“hip-hop,” “rap”). Alonzo Westbrook’s Hip Hoptionary offers yet another designation, describing hip-hop as

The artistic response to oppression. A way of expression in dance, music, word/song. A culture that thrives on creativity and nostalgia. As a musical art form it is stories of inner-city life, often with a message, spoken over beats of music. The culture includes rap and any other venture spawned from the hip-hop style and culture (64).

The same book defines rap as a way to “Tell a story or offer a message through rhymed lyrics, usually over music” (Westbrook 113). What this points to, broadly speaking, is that the closer we are to the source, the more in tune with the culture and the language a person or community is, the more likely it is that the fine distinctions will be discernible or even matter. The OED, which is a UK publication and is therefore removed culturally and geographically from hip-hop, posits both words are referring to a type of music. Merriam Webster, on the other hand, which is an American dictionary, acknowledges more of a divergence in the terms, conceiving of hip-hop as an allusion to something larger than music, a subculture, but still tying specifically to rap, which is designated as more of a musical style. Finally, Westbrook’s Hip Hoptionary, which might not hold much sway with any other community, but which is faithful to hip-hop, makes a far more nuanced division between the two. Nevertheless, these denotative definitions are but a few of the ones available in the spectrum, and even the full denotative gamut does not even begin to make

an incursion into the range of connotative meanings of the word that exist. Given this linguistic melee of sorts and adding to that the fact that my own experience (as a hip-hop listener, as an educator who teaches at a college with ties to the music industry, and as a researcher) has resulted in understanding that not only that most people, but that actually many devoted fans and theorists mix and match the terms, I have chosen not to concern myself with the differences and allow myself to use hip-hop and rap almost interchangeably when it comes to the music. This conflation might meet with some disapproval, but I believe it will not interfere with my research.

While the intricacies of the differences between the terms rap and hip-hop are not at the core of the study, specifying what I mean when I refer to hip-hop is vital to the study. To many, the term hip-hop refers to an amorphous set of elements. Many only associate it with the music they hear and the videos they see. Nelson George explains that, “At its most elemental level hip hop is a product of post-civil rights era America, a set of cultural forms originally nurtured by African American, Caribbean American, and Latin American youth in and around New York in the ‘70s” (VIII). Tricia Rose adds a deeper sociological dimension to this definition in her book Black Noise when she states,

Hip hop culture emerged as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished along with large sectors of its built environment. Alternative local identities were forged in fashions and language, street names, and most important, in establishing neighborhood crews and posses (34).

It is certainly important to emphasize that while we consider hip-hop indigenous to the United States, its musical and cultural roots extend far beyond the continental US, reaching Africa, the West Indies, and other territories. In addition, while we might associate hip-hop with

African-American culture primarily, Hispanics have influenced the genre as well. It is also vital to underscore the fact that “Certainly the commercialization of rap music expanded the definition of hip-hop culture beyond the four elements (graffiti, break dancing, dj-ing, rap music) to include verbal language, body language, attitude, style, and fashion” (Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation* 8). In fact, many people consider mainstream hip-hop to be a compendium of “aspects of the culture that have been packaged, often distorted and then sold by corporate America” (Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop* xii). For many of the genre’s fans, “Distinctions must be drawn between hip-hop as it’s packaged for consumption and the local, off-the-radar culture of hip-hop that young people live and engage every day” (Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop* 128).

There surely are varied opinions along the continuum that is the definition of hip-hop. At one end, some would claim that “once a black cultural practice takes a prominent place inside the commodity system, it is no longer considered a black practice—it is instead a “popular” practice whose black cultural priorities and distinctively black approaches are either taken for granted as a “point of origin,” an isolated “technique,” or rendered invisible” (Rose 83). Others, however, do not regard hip-hop’s success among other cultures as a sign of its co-optation by outsiders, and sustain that while hip-hop has incontestably developed into a commercial genre, it remains, at least partly, always true to its roots. Another stance on this issue is that hip-hop has been evolving, as any other genre does, and there is no reason not to consider the new styles that have emerged to be as valid as the older ones. As Nelson George posits, when it comes to the cultural migration pattern of music, “how the cultural artifact itself is transformed by the journey cannot be predicted” (7).

For the purposes of this interrogation, however, hip-hop, when it comes to music refers to the hip-hop readily available to and consumed by America and the world. It is vital to sidestep

the complications of becoming persnickety about subgenres and underground versus commercial, or delving into the intricacies of what constitutes real hip-hop or not. Music videos played on television, songs played on radio stations, websites where fans congregate, urban clothing displayed in stores and worn—almost as a uniform—by young people everywhere, and magazines with information about rappers represent the brand of hip-hop which is casting its spell on us, the type we consume and that has permeated our lives and is changing the make-up of our society.

### Hip-Hop Values

Since Hip-Hop emerged from the most economically-depressed and racially-tense areas in the inner cities in the Northeast of the United States, it should not come as a surprise that many of the elements that pervade the genre and the culture are a direct reflection of the street culture of said neighborhoods. Hip-hop is rife with references to street culture or simply ‘the streets.’ Researcher William Oliver provides a definition of the phrase ‘the streets’ as a term that refers “...to the network of public and semipublic social settings (e.g., the street corners, vacant lots, bars, clubs, after-hours joints, convenience stores, drug houses, pool rooms, parks and public recreational places, etc.) in which primarily lower and working class Black males tend to congregate” (919). These sites are prominent landmarks where socialization takes place in the ghetto, so it is predictable that lyrics and images should reference these locations and the cultural transactions that ensue within them.

Whilst artists might be holding up a mirror to the places and circumstances they once knew, in turn, audiences consume and emulate rappers’ representation of street culture. In the book The Code of the Street, author Elijah Anderson states that when it comes to the dwellers of

these impoverished urban neighborhoods, “many pride themselves on living the ‘thug life,’ actively defying not simply the wider social conventions but the law itself. They sometimes model themselves after successful local drug dealers and rap artists like Tupac Shakur and Snoop Doggy Dogg...” (36).

The system of codes and rules that governs impoverished areas that experience high levels of crime and racial tension is intricate; undeniably, the structure that permeates and regulates life in the ghetto is the result of years of disregard, struggle, and suffering. The music and culture that spring from these neighborhoods is bound to retain more than a trace of those elements. These very ingredients translate into the aspects of hip-hop that are most easily identifiable and most controversial. One of the most ubiquitous—and arguably pernicious—factors is the profound disenfranchisement, distrust of and resistance against authority and the establishment. Other equally troubling elements are the unapologetically brazen materialism and the almost obsessive preoccupation with wealth that are commonplace in the culture. Familiarity with and celebration of prison culture and criminality, especially drug-related crime, are also essential to the genre. Hypermasculinity that demands respect, especially through aggression is another vital component, as is its counterpart, the negative portrayal of women—who are seen not only as sexual toys but as gold-diggers who trap men into commitment, albeit sometimes only financially, by becoming pregnant—which is often also supported even by female rappers. Finally, yet importantly, apart from these more negative elements and in keeping with its foregrounding of the street and the ‘hood, hip-hop is also famous for its remarkable attachment to space and geographical location and the adoption of a hip-hop-specific language.

It is significant to note that many of these factors are not exclusive to these neighborhoods. In fact, as Nelson George explains, “It is also essential to understand that the

values that underpin so much of hip hop—materialism, brand consciousness, gun iconography, anti-intellectualism—are very much by-products of the larger American culture” (XIII). Yet, these elements appear to be more unadulterated and accepted within these localities, and their tolerance and even glorification may have indeed contributed to the increased leniency our society affords them on a larger scale. As such, they merit closer inspection, especially as they are interrelated and, in concert, form a frame of reference, a matrix that allows us to understand behaviors and attitudes inherent to the genre and culture.

It is also necessary to remark that there is no agenda or intention on my part to demonize the music or the culture, or to reduce it to a handful of elements, the majority of which society deems as negative or even anti-social. Hip-hop has long been a means for expression and a tool for protest; it has served to address inequality and to point out injustice when other means were not available. As a form of art, hip-hop deserves respect, and, in the interest of free speech, it deserves protection from those who might want to silence it. In no way is this advocacy for its censorship.

Nelson George explains that “While hip hop’s values are by and large fixed—its spirit of rebellion, identification with street culture, materialism, and aggression—it is also an incredibly flexible tool of communication, quite adaptable to any number of messages” (155). In turn, this flexibility has betrayed the genre’s essence, in a sense, and has made it “so easy to turn every element of the culture associated with hip-hop into a product...” (George 155). In the process, perhaps the more detrimental aspects of the culture have been alienated from their real meaning, co-opted, amplified, and commodified. In The Psychology of Hip Hop, Terence McPhaul references this issue in writing that “...record companies are targeting rebellious adolescents, and in many cases irresponsibly [...] And in this process African American culture is being

sacrificed because the only message that is getting to the public, through the music, is that African Americans are murderers, drug dealers and thieves. Moreover, in these images African American women are worthless” (2-3). On the other hand, Bakari Kitwana sees the need to take responsibility and declares, “...our generation of African Americans must come to grips with the damage we do ourselves in popular culture (rap lyrics and ‘hood films) and in everyday life (inadequate parenting, resentment-filled interpersonal relationships, and inferior education performance), which stands counter to traditional ideas of Blackness” (xii).

Apparently, there is enough blame to portion out among members of the music industry and even consumers. However, no matter who is responsible for the creation and dissemination of these messages, the fact is they are ubiquitous, powerful, and worth exploring.

#### Attachment to Locality

Despite the putatively negative factors that life in the impoverished urban communities encompasses, there is a marked attachment to locality connected to life in these neighborhoods, which appear to provide far more of a sense of community than other neighborhoods. This kinship seems to exist regardless of whether the community bestows upon its members healthy or injurious patterns and examples or supports positive or negative lifestyles. There is a sense of loyalty that is palpable, even if this is achieved in retrospect, once a person has removed his or herself from the environment.

Before delving into how attachment to locality figures into the hip-hop world, it is important to take a closer look at the concept of neighborhood in this modern world. In his book Modernity at Large, Arjun Appadurai draws connections between his notion of ethnoscape, which I discussed briefly in the introduction to this project, and the idea of neighborhoods. He

reminds us that ethnoscape is a word he employs "...to get away from the idea that group identities necessarily imply that cultures need to be seen as spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or ethnically homogeneous forms" (183). This idea is quite interesting when applied to hip-hop. A further complication of place for the genre and culture is the fact that a part of them, despite their rootedness in the Bronx and other urban areas, is also decidedly Afro-centric. Hip-hop often references mother Africa as a place that represents home, even if some of the artists may have never been to the continent or may not know much about it. Here, then, we see a sort of dislodged nostalgia for an imagined home, not in the sense that the place is imaginary, but in the sense that there was never a physical connection. The bond is a matter of ethnicity, of history, and perhaps of ideology, all areas Appadurai references in his work. Furthermore, the diasporic nature of the African population, due not only to involuntary migration for slavery but also to deliberate migration later on, both from Africa to America and the Caribbean Islands and from the Islands to the United States, further conflates the notion of space and place. The Afro-Caribbean influence on Hip-Hop is also highlighted, especially by those whose lives or whose families originated there. Again, attachment to the geographical location of the islands and the lifestyle they favor may be based on an experience lived or imagined. If it is the latter, then it was likely created and kept alive thanks to family members' storytelling, media narratives and images, and other indirect stimuli. Since the African migration and subsequent diaspora started well before hip-hop was ever a fully wrought style, these experiences inform not only the musical aspect of hip-hop, but the socio-political themes of the lyrics, and the actual socio-political conditions that engendered the culture of hip-hop. Nevertheless, the sounds and themes of hip-hop, in turn, now inspire that diaspora's fantasies of American life and produce their own set of displaced nostalgias.



Furthermore, Appadurai sees locality, which is central to a neighborhood—in the most traditional and accepted linguistic sense, at least—as fragile, far more fragile than ethnographers, who seem to take locality for granted, seem to realize, which in some ways could problematize the idea of locality as central aspect of hip-hop (182). He insists that “...locality is an inherently fragile social achievement. Even in the most intimate, spatially confined geographically isolated situations, locality must be maintained carefully against various kinds of odds” (179). It is clear from his elucidation that geographical proximity cannot guarantee the survival of a community, which depends on other typically social elements to survive. Whereas neighborhoods always found themselves at risk of disintegration, Appadurai finds that the threat has burgeoned, and the flanks from which these attacks come have proliferated as modernity has moved in. He suggests, “the production of locality—always, as I have argued, a fragile and difficult achievement—is more than ever shot through with contradictions” and posits there are “three factors that most directly affect the production of locality in the world of the present—the nation-state, diasporic flows, and electronic and virtual communities” (198). Here again we see his foregrounding of the diaspora and the overall state of flux in which the concept of nation and borders find themselves. Indeed, for Appadurai, this disintegration of the territory is not happening only at the micro level that neighborhoods might represent, but in a far more encompassing macro level. Appadurai sustains that it isn’t just neighborhoods that are being undermined. In fact, he proposes that “...the isomorphism of people, territory, and legitimate sovereignty that constitutes the normative character of the modern nation-state is itself under threat from the forms of circulation of people characteristic of the contemporary world” (191). Relating this notion to the world of hip-hop, it would follow that this convoluted sense of place is further complicated then when hip-hop is exported. It is easy to see how the layers build upon one another and problematize the idea of

rootedness within hip-hop. Yet, despite the multiple attacks that the concept and application of locality appear to be undergoing, inner city neighborhoods, for all their putative pitfalls, appears to still function in a far more cohesive manner than most. Perhaps, the reason for this lies in the concerted effort to build a sense of community to counter what feels like the ungluing of the social fabric. Appadurai points out: “The many displaced, deterritorialized, and transient populations that constitute today’s ethnoscaapes are engaged in the construction of locality as a structure of feeling, often in the face of the erosion, dispersal, and implosion of neighborhoods as coherent social forms” (199). Whether this assault on locality has affected the neighborhoods where hip-hop was born and the ones in which it has become a major element of the local culture or not, the fact remains that the element of locality is central to hip-hop. Perhaps, even if both the nation-state and the neighborhoods it encompasses lose the battle with the forces of erosion they face, the idea of locality can still be mythologized through cultural markers, such as music, which is something that hip-hop seems already quite adept at doing.

The influence of the notion of the local can be seen in hip-hop lyrics, where artists often draw on their experiences to paint a picture of where they have come from, in the manner of homage, or to remind people they have not forgotten their roots. Tricia Rose elucidates, “Hip hop replicates and reimagines the experiences of urban life and symbolically appropriates urban space... [...] Talk of subways, crews, and posses, urban noise, economic stagnation, static and crossed signals leap out of hip hop lyrics, sounds, and themes” (22). At times, the neighborhood and the streets are mythologized as a safe haven, perhaps racially, and looked back upon with tangible nostalgia. Yet, there are times when the urban enclave is drawn upon when reminiscing about hard times gone by. Either way, whether fetishized as a sanctuary or maligned as a

dangerous battle zone that confers street credibility, locality plays a crucial role in the hip-hop narrative.

Forman references this when he notes that, “the issue of space and place remain central to hip-hop, whether it emerges from Los Angeles, Long Beach, Houston, Atlanta, New Orleans, or the boroughs of New York” (9). Yet beyond the possible similarities of urban locales, there is a level of competition—healthy and otherwise—when it comes to artists representing where they come from. Kitwana acknowledges this fact; he posits “The love the hip-hop generationers have for their home cities is evident by the race by kids across the country to put their city on the hip-hop map” (Kitwana *The Hip Hop Generation* 180). Admittedly, the most publicized example of territoriality in hip-hop—at least in the mainstream media—has been the notorious and violent East Coast/West Coast rivalry, which allegedly claimed the lives of famous rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. However, McPhaul is quick to remind us that, “The media has helped in concocting this overwhelmingly intense idea, that there is a huge war going on within the hip hop community, which pits east coast performers against west coast performers” (7). While the former is accurate, it is also true that both sides did little to dispel those rumors and in fact capitalized on the publicity generated by the gossip, even taking their dislike for one another to their lyrics. In that sense, the artists were complicit in the ultimate downfall of their respective representatives.

Despite this and other dismal examples, an artist’s connection to a locale, be it a neighborhood, a city, or a larger community, often has far less ominous connotations. Most frequently, allusion to a particular place through either imagery in music videos or song lyrics can be seen as a way to assert one’s roots, to show support for and pride in one’s community. Not only that, rappers might just be doing what comes naturally, which is writing about what

they know; their music is framed by their identity and their experience, which are often tied quite directly to spatiality. For some it might indicate a need to claim ‘street cred’ by rapping about the hardships of the ghettos they once called home. Yet, this culture-marker-dropping of sorts might especially come in handy for those whose roots lie outside of the ‘hood, since “Today many top acts, like their audiences, hail from the middle-class or more affluent suburban enclaves, complicating the commonly held impressions about the music, the artists who produce it, and its origins” (Forman xix). Forman points to this when stating that, “the ghetto, ‘hood, street, and corner all surface as representation of a particular image inscribing an ideal of authenticity or “hardcore:” urban reality” (5). For other artists, however, introducing references to the places to which they belong is simply a means to acknowledge their past, become political by bringing national attention to long-standing issues, or even try to paint a picture of where they come from, so as to create a context for understanding.

### Disenfranchisement

As evidenced by the blatant negligence demonstrated in the days prior to, during, and after Hurricane Katrina, poor people, especially the subset of poor minorities, do not often make the American government’s priority list. This very public blunder was a revelation for those detached from the strife, and a reminder of the government’s level of indifference to those involved in it.

In The Hip Hop Generation, Bakari Kitwana offers some perspective on the young African–American experience: “Young Blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed as their white counterparts. Young blacks with similar skills, experience, and educational backgrounds

continue to be paid less than whites for the same jobs. More so than any other ethnic group, African Americans remain segregated from whites in housing” (13).

The systematic disregard and even exploitation of particular segments of the population at the hands of those meant to protect them often results in elevated levels of dismay, distrust, disconnection, and hostility. As Elijah Anderson points out in his book The Code of the Streets, “When alienation becomes so entrenched, an oppositional culture can develop and flourish. This culture, especially among the young, gains strength and legitimacy by opposing the dominant society and its agents” (318). In this manner, a counterculture of sorts emerges from the ghettos, complete with its own forms of expression, including music, which is an art form to which people often turn as a form of protest, as a means of voicing their opinions about the status quo and the injustice they experience.

Tricia Rose puts it into perspective when she writes, “Poor people learn from experience when and how explicitly they can express their discontent. Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion” (99). She goes on to claim that cynicism and disaffection are in fact direct causes of the genre. She points out, “Hip hop emerges from complex cultural exchanges and larger social and political conditions and disillusionment and alienation” (Rose 59).

Among the many issues hip-hop artists draw on, their sense of estrangement is ubiquitous. Patrick Neate refers to this in his book Where You're At, as he labels hip-hop as “... the voice of the alienated and the disenfranchised” (11). Tricia Rose furthers the explanation: “Hip hop is very competitive and confrontational; there are traits of both resistance to and

preparation for a hostile world that denies and denigrates young people of color” (35-6). In that sense, hip-hop is a means to assert the community’s identity, legitimize their predicaments, and fortify their stance. This indictment of society is, in turn, what gives hip-hop its strength. Rose points out, “As more and more of the disenfranchised and alienated find themselves facing conditions of accelerating deterioration, rap’s urgent, edgy, and yet life-affirming resonances will become a more important and more contested social force in the world” (184). Moreover, Kitwana clarifies, even if they are not casualties of the establishment, some might just see hip-hop “... as an appealing antiestablishment culture” which they can advocate (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 26). This means that even those who are not victims of oppressive governmental and social institutions can relate to the rebellious spirit that hip-hop symbolizes.

For those who have managed to overcome subjugation, validating other people’s continued struggle, or even remembering their own in their lyrical narratives, is a way to emphasize that they have not lost touch with the places they come from and the discord they once knew.

### Materialism

In an environment marked by indigence and scarcity of resources and where lack of opportunity for upward mobility is the norm, material possessions, which often signify having beaten the odds and risen above one’s fate in life, become iconic. They not only represent having overcome but are also a metaphorical slap on the face of the oppressors, proof that the status quo could not hold this person down.

The magnitude of these symbols, as well as their appeal, is not lost on the hip-hop crowd. As Tricia Rose points out, “Hip hop artists use style as a form of identity formation that plays on

class distinctions and hierarchies by using commodities to claim the cultural terrain. Clothing and consumption rituals testify to the power of consumption as a means of cultural expression” (36). In this sense, people in these neighborhoods begin to fetishize material goods and consider them markers of identity and proof of having persevered, triumphed and, more importantly, eluded failure, poverty, and despondency, which are largely understood to be the legacy of the ghetto. In sharp contrast to those concentrated on writing songs about oppression and struggle, which might resonate with their audiences, some artists pen lyrics that do not “... reflect the hard-core reality of urban youth but their Mœet-sipping, Rolex-wearing aspirations” (George 119). This imagery is fodder for young minds that dream—not just as a fantasy but as a coping mechanism that allows them to endure their reality—about getting out of the neighborhood and becoming rich and famous. Kitwana reflects, “For many, the American Dream means not just living comfortably but becoming an overnight millionaire while still young,” and “This desire for wealth is accompanied by a sense of entitlement. That a handful of widely celebrated hip-hop generationers have achieved the dream makes the possibility real, despite the odds” (The Hip Hop Generation 46). The likelihood of such fortune is even more unrealistic in these poor neighborhoods. However, companies capitalize on those fantasies, and as people “...struggle to survive, these corporations work diligently to sell them a slice of modern life—from automobiles and electronics to food and entertainment” (Kitwana, The Hip Hop Generation 11).

These days, ostentatious displays of financial status and prowess are a familiar—even compulsory—ingredient of the hip-hop churned out for our consumption. Flamboyant pieces of jewelry, often referred to as ‘bling,’ and diamonds, dubbed ‘ice,’ are often mentioned in lyrics and featured prominently in photographs or videos. Allusions to making large sums of money, or ‘getting paid,’ are also customary, as are accounts of how much money people are spending with

complete abandon, since prices are no object. Kitwana notes, “‘get money,’ for example, is as central to the hip-hop generation as social uplift is to the civil rights generation” (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 170). Multiple expensive cars, luxurious mansions, haute couture, and trips to exotic locales are some of the elements featured without fail in the lyrics and images of hip-hop lifestyle sold to the world. The flashier, the better.

Wealth is not just a means of demonstrating one has risen above. As feminist Joan Morgan puts it in her book When Chickenheads Come to Roost, “Let’s face it, money and the ability to spend it freely is one of society’s strongest assertions of power—and power is a very sexy thing” (214). Indeed, beyond being a symbol of having succeeded, money and the luxuries it can bring act as lures for attractive partners, who, in what seems a bit like a vicious circle, also become trophies that speak to someone’s success and, as we shall see, further complicate the already precarious state of gender relations.

### Criminality, Drugs, Prison Culture, and Violence

Whilst earthly possessions are of high import in the street life, the legality of the methods used to get them is sometimes questionable at best. Researcher William Oliver, who has written about ‘the street’ as a socializing agent, remarks, “not only does rap music describe the rage and anger that exists in the ghetto, but it also describes the extreme means that a distinct segment of the Black male population are willing to use to transcend poverty and hopelessness” (925). Here, we see the intricate connection among disenfranchisement, materialism, and crime. Criminality in the neighborhoods is not a element that arose in a vacuum, and it is currently so entrenched in the lifestyle of the ghetto that it is practically inextricable from it. In order to understand the incidence of crime in these neighborhoods, one must understand that, “The inner-city economy is



delicately balanced between (a) low-income jobs, (b) welfare payments, and (c) the underground economy of drug dealing, prostitution, and street crime” (Anderson 317). In effect, criminality is almost institutionalized and even depended upon for the survival of certain neighborhoods.

Kitwana asserts, “In the 1980s and 1990s, many hip-hop generationers quickly realized that a forty-hour-a-week, minimum wage job wouldn’t meet their basic needs” (The Hip Hop Generation 35). The fact is that crime is not only an option for those looking to make money quickly but a much more immediate and pragmatic one when education is not an option and when drug dealers and other criminals typically out-earn those with decent, socially-acceptable jobs. Add to that a gun-friendly culture in which access to firearms is easy and where glamorized gun iconography, which equated firepower with authority, control, and even sex appeal—in a crudely phallic manner—, is rampant in widely-consumed, popular media products, and the path of least resistance becomes the path most traveled.

Elijah Anderson further points out, “In such communities there is not only a high rate of crime but also a generalized diminution of respect for the law” (317). This makes a life of crime even far more tolerable. In addition, due to disenfranchisement and the ensuing lack of deference toward the status quo and the institutions that represent it, illegal means of attaining wealth, as well as the sheer act of foiling the work of police officers and other representatives of the law, are often cause for celebration and a reliable way to earn respect and street credibility. All of these factors conflate to create a place where criminality is an established, viable way to earn a living, while accruing street cred, an important element in these rough neighborhoods.

When it comes to hip-hop stars, street credibility is also highly important. A rapper’s background, upbringing, and struggles not only fuel his or her songs but also are vital components of his or her public persona. There are more ex-convicts and people with rap sheets—

no pun intended—in hip-hop than in any other entertainment segment. For many of them, rapping about dealing drugs, being shot at, and doing time is mere nostalgia. Many wear these stories as badges of honor. Often enough, their past is not the only jurisdiction of criminality. Despite—or perchance as a result—of their newfound financial freedom, fame, and power, and given the temptations and pressures that come with the territory, hip-hop artists have frequently found themselves the protagonists—read perpetrators—in incidents ranging from theft to drug deals, and from sexual misconduct to even murder.

It is imperative to point out that there has been an undeniable shift in America's perception of crime. Surely, an element of courting danger and even romanticizing outlaws exists in most cultures to different degrees. The arts have exploited this theme ad nauseum. However, the lines between fiction and reality have become fuzzy, especially when it comes to the rich and famous. Certainly, the level of forbearance afforded to celebrities who engage in improper behavior is not novel. In the last decade, nonetheless, technology and media have made it hard for famous people to avoid the prying eyes of paparazzi and fans. Cameras on mobile phones allow amateurs to capture drunken stars, while celebrity blogs can easily disseminate pictures and lurid details of their antics to the world in seconds. Yet, despite—or perhaps due to—the thorough coverage their actions receive, there has been an evident escalation in what our society considers acceptable conduct among celebrities. Not that long ago, what today amounts to insignificant indiscretions could have easily ended someone's career. As an example, in 2004, the release and dissemination of a leaked sex tape did not preclude Paris Hilton from co-hosting Fox's Teen Choice Awards later that same year. Celebrities' behavior has gone beyond what is disgraceful or unpalatable; criminal activity has become tolerable. The once central concern regarding famous people and the law—the question of whether stars receive preferential treatment

and therefore escape punishment—has become somewhat of a moot point, as, even if convicted, celebs do not necessarily suffer the loss of popularity, job offers, or money. Citations for drunk driving have become the latest celebrity trend, and court-ordered ankle-bracelets are treated almost as fashion statements. With exhaustion or addiction as passable excuses and a stint in rehab as the panacea for all ills, stars bounce back rather effortlessly from what might have once amounted to career suicide. However, while Martha Stewart’s publicists tried to spin her actions in order to minimize the negative impact on her public persona, hip-hop artists need not worry about their image suffering as a result of criminal offenses. In fact, they are likely to reap the benefits of notoriety in a genre that equates ruthless behavior and disregard for authority with power and street credibility. Therefore, hip-hop lyrics and videos as well as ‘hood films not only tolerate but exalt criminality. Crime is trendy.

Again, it is a case of life-imitating-art-imitating-life. The unhappy marriage of rampant joblessness and alienation proves to be a volatile one, and hip-hop lyrics reflect as well as encourage the behaviors and attitudes surrounding criminality. Anderson illustrates, “Nowhere is this situation better highlighted than in the connection between drugs and violence, as young men involved in the drug trade often apply the ideology glorified in rap music to the problem of making a living and survival in what has become an oppositional if not an outlaw culture” (107). Anderson expounds on this notion by relaying that this correlation “can be seen with particular clarity in the rap music that encourages its young listeners to kill cops, to rape, and the like” (107). While not every set of lyrics in hip-hop is as crude or violent as the ones referenced by Anderson, there is always a flagrant sense of danger, aggression, and rage at the core of hip-hop.

Furthermore, whilst drugs are often featured as a means to a financial end, they also play a part in the party culture that hip-hop exalts. Joan Morgan explains that while tracks often allude

to “spending each day high as hell on malt liquor and Chronic,” the fact is that, in real life, “What passes for ‘40 and a blunt’ good times in most of hip-hop is really alcoholism, substance abuse and chemical dependency” (73). This legacy of addiction, which seems to incur complete erasure, is neither glamorous nor amusing. Where hip-hop is vociferous about glorifying drugs, it is silent about how this drug culture has adversely affected the community.

With criminality, guns, and drugs being central to the culture of hip-hop, prison culture does not lag far behind. Nelson George encapsulates the issue when he writes: “Suspicion of women, loyalty to the crew, adoption of a stone face in confronting the world, hatred of authority—all major themes of gangsta rap—owe their presence in lyrics and impact on audiences to the large number of African American men incarcerated in the ‘90s” (44). Here, he points to a grim reality: the alarmingly disproportionate percentage of black males that make up the population of American prisons today. Kitwana offers some statistics, citing that, “Approximately 1 million Black men are currently under some form of correctional supervision” (53). He also points out that, “Gun homicide has been the leading cause of death of Black men between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four since 1969” (21). These statistics speak to an endemic issue that has often been linked to the unequal treatment of blacks in a court system that may very well be linked to an intrinsic bias in a structure where racism was once clearly institutionalized.

Jail, then, has become an element of everyday life for those who dwell in these neighborhoods, and has, by extension, percolated into the world of hip-hop. Kitwana explains, “...it’s often indistinguishable where hip-hop ends and prison and/or street culture begins” (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 3). Moreover, it is not just prison culture or random violence that threatens these neighborhoods. A more sinister brand of criminality and violence is central to

gang life, which is rampant in minority-populated, impoverished areas. Looking at the problem as a whole, Kitwana concludes,

As the line between street gangs and prison gangs blur, so do the distinctions between prison culture, street culture, and Black youth culture. The blurring can be observed in the evolution of hip-hop music. As hip-hop culture became more commercialized in the late 1980s and early 1990s, primarily through the success enjoyed by rap music, aspects of prison culture became more apparent in rap music and Black youth culture, from the use of language and styles of dress to extensive commentary on crime and prison life. With so many Blacks entering and exiting prison this influence is inescapable (Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*, 77).

In hip-hop, that translates into lyrics that allude to life in prison, but also add to the generally violent, hostile, elements at the core of the genre. Unequivocally, the male-centric aspect of hip-hop also serves to further conflate the issue of violence.

### Hypermasculinity

The incidence of poverty and unemployment discussed earlier preclude many males in the urban enclaves from becoming bread-winners. This inability to support their families translates into failure to fulfill their role as a head of household, which is still often perceived as the mandatory responsibility of a 'real' man. Elijah Anderson explains, "The lack of family-sustaining jobs denies many young men the possibility of forming an economically self-reliant family, the traditional American mark of manhood" (147). The incapability of performing this duty can be the source of a deep sense of emasculation in many young men. Add to this already precarious situation the dearth or sheer lack of male role models—often boys grow up in a female-

led single-parent home and father figures are absent due to incarceration or premature death—and the conventional speculation that a poor minority man’s future involves some sort of untimely violent death or a stint in prison, and you have a recipe for a gender identity disaster. A young man’s masculinity, subsequently, becomes an issue that is up for debate, and it is the youngster’s burden and duty to prove he is man enough. The next step, then, is for a male to figure out how to assert his masculinity.

William Oliver comments that, “Routine adherence to the code of the streets is generally expressed through the enactment of masculine identities that are valued among males who center their lives in street culture” and he identifies three of the most important roles as “the tough guy/gangsta, the player, and the hustler/balla” (928). These street characters’ definitions are not without ambiguities and definitely not mutually exclusive; all these roles entail a level of involvement in illicit affairs and the use of violent means—and other generally undesirable elements—to achieve wealth, power, and/or status (Oliver 928-30).

Perhaps the most controversial persona that emerges from these circumstances and epitomizes the pathological view of the male is that of the pimp, whose masculinity is glorified and glamorized in the ghetto. George explains, “While obviously an exploiter of women and male sexual desire, the pimp has been, in the mind of many men and more women than would admit it, a figure of fascination, a certain awe, and suppressed respect” (35). The pimp embodies the notion of power and respect by affirming his financial clout, his aggression, and his disdain for and exploitation of women. George goes on to stress, “In a warped and unhealthy way the pimp’s ability to control his environment (i.e., his stable of women) has always been viewed as a rare example of black male authority over his domain” (36). Rappers often refer to themselves as pimps, without it necessarily having to denote that they collect money from prostitutes they

manage—although some do admit to having dabbled in the sex trade. Yet, the attitudes and values attached to the moniker still apply, even if the word appears less destructive. The popularity and misleadingly apparent innocuousness of the term is evident in its casual use, even as part of MTV's show Pimp My Ride, in which older, beaten-up vehicles are refurbished and made to look glamorous.

There is a sense of smugness to these male roles, which is replicated in the hip-hop personas of many rappers. Nelson George points this out: “For African American males, this pride can be an aggressive manifestation of identity. [...] and it's the essential swagger that underpins hip hop” (50-1). Yet, despite the bravado, from a psychological perspective, when it comes down to it, hypermasculinity remains largely a defense mechanism. It is perchance a misguided attempt on the part of the men in these communities at reconciling their reality with what society expects of them. Above all, it seems to be a means for these men to assert their substance and stake their claim to the masculinity of which they feel they have been stripped. Conceivably as a means to commiserate about his situation, “...the black man craves a context for that style, one that often comes as part of a male-dominated collective. It may be at a barbershop, a political campaign, in a church, or a hip hop crew” (George 52). Ironically, this male-to-male bond has often brought up questions about sexuality and sexual orientation. George points to this: “There was, and remains, a homoerotic quality to hip hop culture, one nurtured in gangs and jails, that makes women seem, aside from sex, often nonessential” (186). Because of their inability to support a family and fulfill the role of husband and father, men are further alienated from the females in the community, who are relegated to the position of sexual conquests. Nonetheless, reproduction is also viewed as essential to masculinity and, as Elijah Anderson reflects, “... many young black men form strong attachments to peer groups that

emphasize sexual prowess as proof of manhood, with babies as evidence” (147). The end result are single mothers struggling in a poor neighborhood to raise children that develop without a paternal influence and who are often doomed to repeat the same cycle as they grow up.

Writer Joan Morgan seems terribly saddened by the status quo and offers some perspective: “Since hip-hop is the mirror in which so many brothers see themselves, it’s significant that one of the music’s most prevalent mythologies is that black boys rarely grow into men. Instead, they remain perpetually post-adolescent or die” (Morgan75). Taking hip-hop to task over what passes as a chosen lifestyle that exudes masculinity and exalts living dangerously, she concludes: “For all the machismo and testosterone in the music, it’s frighteningly clear that many brothers see themselves as powerless when it comes to facing the evils of the larger society, accepting responsibility for their lives, or the lives of their children” (Morgan 75). In a way, it is ironic that a woman would offer this standpoint, when females are often the subject of misogynistic representations, insensitive commentary, and ruthless ridicule both in the ghetto and in hip-hop.

### Negative Portrayal and Over-Sexualization of Women

The objectification and demonization of women in hip-hop are not random elements disjointed from the other factors; in fact, they are a reaction to the figurative male castration caused by disenfranchisement and joblessness within the culture, and it meshes perfectly with the culture of aggression and hypermasculinity that would see the vulnerability that it takes to have a healthy relationship as weakness. Elijah Anderson reflects, “...the hostility toward women is related to the dominant cultural formula that equates male economic stability and one’s capacity to be a family breadwinner with masculinity, thus making black men’s increasingly permanent



position at the bottom of or completely outside the job market a sign of emasculation, dependence, or femininity” (171). The need to demand respect and the aggression that comes with the forceful reclaiming of the male’s territory in whatever way possible have in turn taken a toll on the relationship between the genders, which is governed by the urban system of rules as much as anything else within these communities. Tricia Rose sees it as a need “... to reinforce the male sexual domination of black women and confirm and sustain the construction of black women as objects and status symbols” (Rose 103-4). Anderson further elucidates, “Their [young males] outlook on sex and pregnancy, like their outlook on violence, is strongly affected by their perceived option in life, and their sexual behavior follows rules very much shaped by the code of the street” (Anderson 142).

Feeling unworthy and alienated, men take their estrangement out on the women; they work out their feelings of insignificance and sense of oppression by belittling and subjugating the only group over which they feel they might still hold some authority. Anderson points to urban youth’s misogynistic tendencies: “To the young man the woman becomes, in the most profound sense, a sexual object. Her body and mind are the object of a sexual game, to be won for his personal aggrandizement. [...] The goal of the sexual conquests is to make a fool of the young woman” (Anderson 150). As there are fundamental male stereotypes in the ghetto, so are there caricatures of women: the ho, the gold-digger, and the chickenhead, to name a few. The unifying themes behind these terms are the female’s heightened sexuality—not as a demonstration of feminist self-liberation, but as a service to men—and the notion of pregnancy as a means to trap a man into commitment, even if only financial. As an example, Bakari Kitwana offers a definition: “‘chickenhead,’ a derogatory expression used to describe a woman who—lacking any brains but equipped with lots of deviousness—uses her good looks and sex to gain access to a man’s money

and accompanying lifestyle” (115). In fact, the term is rumored to stem from the manner in which the way a chicken moves its head as it walks resembles the movement involved in fellatio, which is often decontextualized from its place within the range of sexual acts between consenting adults and posited as a denigrating service a woman provides a man.

The blame for this objectification cannot be put squarely on the males’ shoulders, nor is the use of sex as a tool purely a figment of their imagination. A fact that complicates and compounds this already complex situation is that, “Sex has long been the bartering chip that women use to gain protection, material wealth, and the vicarious benefits of power. In the black community, where women are given less access to all of the above, trickin’ becomes a means of leveling the playing field” (Morgan 77). This points to women’s participation in their own subjugation although it is unclear whether the choice is out of their own volition or forced by circumstances. Morgan once again lends a new perspective when she points out that “We live in a world where strippers out-earn women with college degrees and antiquated alimony and child-support laws guarantee some women higher standards of living than most 9 to 5’s ever could” (217). Again, this solidifies more levels of disenfranchisement for this group of people.

As trends sometimes do, hip-hop can at times act as a helpful barometer for the state of gender relations in these urban neighborhoods, and possibly among the youths of our country. Kitwana points to this fact; he explains, “Due to its role in shaping a whole generation’s worldview, including our ideas about sex, love, friendship, dating, and marriage, rap music is critical to any understanding of the hip-hop generation’s gender crisis” (Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation* 87). In the absence of role models, hip-hop fills the gap, packing into the void its own brand of education, which is often misguided.

Bakari Kitwana points to the blatant misogyny in hip-hop, remarking that “Album after album was littered with rap songs referring to Black women as bitches, gold diggers, hos, hoodrats, Chickenheads, pigeons, and so on. Music videos with rump shaking, scantily clad young Black women as stage props for rap artists became synonymous with rap music” (The Hip Hop Generation 87). Bringing us back to the concept of art imitating life imitating art, Joan Morgan reminds us “...rappers meet ‘bitches’ and ‘hos’ daily—women who reaffirm their depiction of us on vinyl. Backstage, the road, and the ‘hood are populated with women who would do anything to be with a rapper sexually for an hour if not a night” (77). It is unclear what came first, whether the rappers were rhyming about their experiences with women, or if women felt the need to embody the mythical sex vixens about which rappers wrote. Either way, however, the end result appears to be the same: confusion about sexual identity, gender roles, and seemingly irreparable rifts between the males and females.

Nelson George sums it up clearly with this comment: “There is an adolescent quality to hip hop culture that makes it clear that most of its expressions are aimed to please teenage boys, and this usually excludes women from the dialogue. [...] hip hop’s typical narrator is a young, angry, horny male who is often disdainful of or, at least, uninterested in commitments of any kind” (184-5). Yet this negativity toward women in hip-hop is not just the domain of men. Women at times sanction or contribute to this representation. In her book, hip-hop writer Joan Morgan underscores the complexity of the female perspective on hip-hop’s misogyny by stating, “And how come no one ever admits that part of the reason women love hip-hop—as sexist as it is—is ‘cuz all that in-yo-face testosterone makes our nipples hard?” (58). Even those women who might not be particularly attracted to or even attuned to the messages hip-hop sends out have not necessarily done that much to indict hip-hop either. “Interestingly, Black women intellectuals of

the hip-hop generation have not launched a concerted public attack on sexist Black men (not even rappers) to the extent that the previous generation did” (Morgan 93).

It’s not just consumers that get caught up in misogyny. Tricia Rose asserts that often female rappers not only “defend male rappers’ sexist speech in a larger society that seems to attack black men disproportionately but their lyrics sometimes affirm patriarchal notions about family life and the traditional roles of husbands, fathers, and lovers” (150). Rap artists such as Foxy Brown and Lil’ Kim, to name a few, have been notorious for straddling the female vs. male fence, often ridiculing weak men, talking about playing guys for their money and then objectifying themselves in photos and videos or representing themselves as part of the male-centric hip-hop world. Whether these positions are taken as a way to fit into the rap game or not, the sometimes hyperbolic and incongruent words and images further confuse women and men and do little to answer questions about the reality of male/female relations.

While men and women fight it out on the battlegrounds of the street and of the hip-hop scene, Joan Morgan reminds us of the grim reality:

Black America is quickly becoming a nation of fatherless daughters. The hip-hop generation is the product of that one-out-of-two divorce rate. We comprise the two-thirds of black children who are born to single parents. The statistics do not begin to tell our stories—the daughters who’ve had violence, imprisonment, illness, addiction, depression, or abandonment rob them of fathers—both physically and emotionally (122).

This is not to imply that the current state or the fate of these communities depends on what a rapper says or does. However, the pathologies that are recycled and repackaged for consumption must have some sort of impact, especially, since they are not only consumed by these neighborhoods, but by the broader hip-hop audience. Even if the listeners who are removed

from the realities and fantasies touted through hip-hop might not ultimately be inclined to reconstruct those lifestyles in their own locality, at the very least, they are buying into a particular representation of the black population and its way of life, the elements of which might be decontextualized and unduly glamorized. This means that we begin to equate a specific location and ethnicity with the negative, hurtful stereotypes. This cannot be healthy for racial politics in a country that is already fraught with racial tension based on a past that institutionalized racism through slavery and Jim Crow laws.

### Hip-Hop Vernacular

One of the cultural markers of hip-hop that reflects the long-standing segregation of black people through institutionalized racism is the use of a vernacular that is particular to that segment of the population. Language is a very intricate facet of African American culture, and it is laden with historical connotations tied to slavery and institutionalized oppression. Nelson George places the language of hip-hop as “a particularly active subset of the African American linguistic tradition” (208). In his book The Psychology of Hip Hop, Terence McPhaul explains, “There are some African Americans who actually believe that there is something wrong with not being able to speak standard hip hop on the job. Furthermore, those African Americans who do use the English language are said to be ‘trying to be white,’ ‘not keeping it real,’ or they are ‘uncle Toms’” (2). Because of the implications of the choice of lingo, AAVE or African American Vernacular English, also referred to as Ebonics, has often been central to all things Hip-Hop. In turn, the Hip-Hop lingo has percolated into the mainstream quite heavily. Words that many Americans perhaps considered lowbrow or simply unintelligible at one time have now become part of their daily lexicon. Hip-hop speak can be seen and heard in comedy clubs, movies, radio

stations, television shows and commercials, or from the mouth of Americans of any race, young or old, just going about their normal day. Some of these instances are real manifestations of the hybridization of language, while others are more likely to be misguided quasi-comical attempts at ‘hipness’ through the use of trendy catchphrases. Forman corroborates the latter in The ‘Hood Comes First by noting that “Today, it is not uncommon to hear individuals who are quite distant from hip-hop as either fans or consuming audience members erroneously referring to their upscale or gentrified enclaves as “the ‘hood,” dipping into hip-hop’s linguistic as a sly display of urban chic” (343). Either way, the use of the hip-hop argot points to the extent to which the genre’s vocabulary has infiltrated American English. Its misuse might reflect both the lack of understanding of the culture surrounding hip-hop and the unintended and unforeseen effects of the culture’s impact on language, the outcome of which can be quite whimsical.

### Mainstreaming Hip-Hop

If hip-hop has such a strong connection to the urban neighborhoods of the continental US, and it bears the imprint of the experiences of the street lyrically and culturally, then why have so many individuals—from devoted fans to casual listeners—who are so far removed physically from the strife and the places where the music and the culture are rooted, come to identify with the genre?

Hip-hop is unique in that it bestrides invisibility and limelight, the ghetto and the high life; rappers sporting high couture and expensive watches spit rhymes about food stamps and prison terms, topics that their audiences may very well be familiar with, either on a personal level, or as markers of what afflicts our society. As Tricia Rose explains, “Rap music is a social form that voices many of the class-, gender-, and race-related forms of cultural and political

alienation, and it voices this alienation in the commercial spotlight” (184). Of course, not everyone in the hip-hop ‘game’ engages those significant social issues. Yet, even the most superficial lyrics are still rooted in the discourse of the culture that gave them a platform. In the end, it is this duality, its ability to serve as a conduit for ideology—and perhaps a starting point for a dialogue—and its flashy persona, that has made hip-hop thrive and become a standard staple of our culture.

Tracking the trajectory of hip-hops’ journey to its current focal position in our culture would entail a nuanced account of economic, historical, social, and musical circumstances that would not necessarily advance this exploration and perhaps even take us on an unwarranted detour. Though somewhat simplistic, for our purposes, it suffices to say that the mainstreaming of hip-hop did not happen overnight and was not without struggle. Various elements played key roles in its ascendance to prominence—or notoriety, depending on whom you ask. However, this shift took place in two quite distinct manners, which deserve examination: firstly as a grassroots movement that blossomed due to hip-hop’s inclusiveness and its ability to serve as a voice for the voiceless, and secondly, as a marketing scheme to capitalize on a trend.

If we trace the emergence, and subsequent ascent, of hip-hop through the last decades, there is something decidedly organic about the way in which it surfaced and flourished. Kitwana serves up an explanation for the genre’s popularity. On this subject matter, he writes, “Part of the reason the culture is so influential among today’s youth is that most young people who identify with hip-hop, unlike rock and roll and other musical genres, identify with more than music” (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop Kitwana xii). Similarly, Andrew Bennett argues that “...rap’s appeal for young people is firmly linked with the way in which rap can be used as a means of engaging with and expressing dissatisfaction at the more restrictive features of

everyday life in globally diffuse social settings” (89). In this sense, hip-hop could be seen as a tool, as even if the ethnic or racial plight might be displaced, deemphasized, or completely expunged, hip-hop might still serve to articulate dissent—whatever dissent might mean to that particular community at that specific time.

As we have seen, hip-hop was born out of disaffection and that essence remains at its core. While that sense of isolation and hostility was once a reality for only certain strata of the population, a faltering economy, decreased opportunities, and other socio-economic elements of modern life in America have created a perfect breeding ground for dissatisfaction. While these feelings of estrangement are certainly not exclusive to Caucasians, Bakari Kitwana makes a specific case by explaining, “First and foremost among the reasons white kids love hip-hop is the growing sense of alienation from mainstream American life they experienced in the 1980s” (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 23-24). Clearly not everyone turns to hip-hop for the same reason. “Significant numbers of whites channel this intensifying sense of alienation into a fascination with hip-hop. Some are drawn to hip-hop’s escapist messages. Some are caught up in the contemporary climate of pop culture that makes hip-hop the flavor of the month” (Kitwana, Why White Kids Love Hip Hop 36).

This last motive for consumption points to the less spontaneous side of hip-hop’s evolution into a mainstream genre—a side that reflects the commodification of a subculture. Kitwana reflects this notion when he says, “What is popularly known as hip-hop expanded beyond that definition by the early 1990s mostly due to the commercialization of rap music” (Why White Kids Love Hip Hop xii). Murray Forman also sees the resonance of hip-hop with a significantly larger audience as less of an organic reaction and more as the result of a far less benign force. He explains that “hip-hop’s ascendance into the popular social consciousness is



not the result of an accident. Although it initially emerged with apparent spontaneity from a series of distinct cultural conditions and social contexts, its popularization has involved a complex process of institutionalization that is not remotely spontaneous” (Forman 18). It is important to recognize that the commodification of hip-hop is not an isolated event. In fact, “Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing well into the 1990s, media and entertainment corporations rediscovered Blackness as a commodity. This marketability was signaled by the heightened visibility of Black fashion models, entertainers, and athletes” (Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation* 123). Kitwana offers a different perspective as well by positing that “Another reason for its wide acceptance is that consumerism has become an American value. And hip-hop, as part of the American entertainment industry, is now for sale to all buyers.” (Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop* xiii)

Hip-hop’s broad audience base makes it the marketer’s cash cow. Because hip-hop captivates more than just the African-American community, “... advertisers, magazines, MTV, fashion companies, beer and soft drink manufacturers, and multimedia conglomerates like TimeWarner have embraced hip hop as a way to reach not just black young people but all young people” (George IX). In this globalized world, certainly the scope of hip-hop’s influence does not end at the United States’ borders.

### Going Global

Let us picture America as a voracious octopus in the tempestuous currents of politics, economics, and culture—at least the popular variety: ostensibly enigmatic and even awe-inspiring in its magnificence and its resilience; still, a ravenous cephalopod with far-reaching tentacles that attach with implacable strength and a viciously sharp beak.

In the revealing book Mediated, Thomas De Zengotita explains that authority, power, and control at times "...took the form of naked conquest and exploitation, genocide, slavery. More recently, less overtly, the imposition of lopsided trade arrangements, environmental degradation, inequitable subsidies" (226). And while travel, technology, and migration have all contributed to the putatively multidirectional nature of globalization, "...in the aggregate, over the course of time, the primary direction of influence is clear—and determined, of course, by overwhelming imbalances in various power relationships" (De Zengotita 226). While the U.S. has had much to offer other cultures through its impact, "Other influence just make us cringe—Rambo's worldwide popularity, Seinfeld in the outback, Starbucks, the Plague of the Yellow Arches, etc" (De Zengotita 226).

At this point, the way that hip-hop as cultural import will be labeled is uncertain. Yet, its pervasiveness is not disputable. "In the United States, the national community of hip hop insiders is called the Hip Hop Nation, but in the millennium over 25 years since its inception in the South Bronx, I have come to recognize this subculture as the Hip Hop Globe" (Osumare 173). The English author also points to that when he writes, "Black American culture bestrides the world." (Neate 254)

Thanks to advances in technology, our culture is beamed out for international mass consumption every day. "Even countries that have consciously tried to isolate themselves from Western youth-culture, such as India and China, have been invaded by MTV video satellite signals" (Osumare 174). Television has been a useful and reliable vehicle for hip-hop. Nelson George furthers this notion, stating, "Of everything that has affected the evolution of hip hop [...] nothing is more important than music video. Through its images, the attitude and obsessions of urban America have been broadcast around the world, igniting fascination and

fear, indignation and imitation, in the minds of youth on the other side of the globe...” (97). Further technological innovation only allows for further channels through which audiences may consume hip-hop. As Murray Forman puts it, “Benefiting from myriad globalizing forces, including the Internet and worldwide media distribution systems, hip-hop is more than ever situated within the global nexus and what might be defined as the contemporary hip-hop industrial complex.” (342)

So what is the impact of this massive deployment of hip-hop into the world? Roger Ritzer’s book entitled The McDonaldization of Society deals with the famous fast food chain’s impact on the world. It posits that McDonald’s is everywhere; even if not in the flesh, so to speak, McDonald’s, or rather, what McDonald’s stands for, has permeated an assortment of areas of our society. Based on Mr. Ritzer’s thoughts, a parallel can be drawn between McDonald’s and Hip-Hop, and society and the world. Just as McDonald’s has trained us to expect certain things from it, so does hip-hop have a formula on which it relies. However, at the same time, just as nations across the globe have taken the McDonald’s menu and adapted it to their local needs or tastes, so have people around the world taken hip-hop and made it their own. This is quite significant since “After all, the presence of American imports could simply be a manifestation of an invasion of isolated and superficial elements that represent no fundamental threat to, or change in, a local culture. But the emergence of native versions does reflect an underlying change in those societies...” (Ritzer 182). From rap songs in French to Japanese MCs, the world is taking a page from the hip-hop manual and reformatting it to fit their own culture.

Examples abound. In Global Noise, a compendium of essays about hip-hop outside the United States edited by Tony Mitchell, the editor explains in the introduction to the book that, “The rhetoric of the hip-hop nation has enabled hip-hoppers in more remote parts of the world to

express a sense of belonging to a global subculture of breakdancing, graffiti writing, MCing, and DJing whose U.S. roots and origins are often, but not always, acknowledged” (33). In a sense, what the author points to is that there is a U.S.-originated cultural diaspora that is interconnected, despite distances and differences, because of shared elements of hip-hop. Notwithstanding this widespread sense of unity that is buttressed in commonalities, hip-hop is still a tool for reasserting the home turf. Mitchell points out: “Hip-hop practices also become vehicles for reconstructing the ‘roots’ of local histories,” and “in the process, ‘glocalization’ takes place as local activities interact with the global form of rap and particular histories of different geographical senses are constructed” (32). By all accounts, hip-hop appears to be capable of both rendering some borders less visible and invigorating the meaning of the local. Both of these aspects of hip-hop are patent in the ways in which each area, be it a country (or more likely regions within different nations since this phenomenon is unlikely to be even) either adopts or adapts hip-hop (or indeed does both). The ways in which these trends occur are as unique as they are diverse. Hesmondhalgh and Melville cite the following examples that embody this multiplicity:

“...b-boys struggling with the hyperconsumerism of Tokyo youth culture, Italian poses promoting hardcore Marxist politics and alternative youth culture circuits, and Basque rappers using a punk rock-hip-hop syncretic to espouse their nationalist cause and promote the rights of ethnic minorities globally. Rappers in war-torn Bosnia declare their allegiance with the violent lives of gangsta rappers in South Central Los Angeles, and a rap group in Greenland protests that country’s domination by the Danish language (1).

While each case is quite idiosyncratic and certainly remarkable and fascinating in its own right, the United Kingdom is of particular interest, not only because of the lack of language

barrier, which creates a particular set of cultural circumstances, but because of the socio-political and financial ties between the U.S. and the U.K. Indeed, the U.S. and the U.K. have long had an enduring bi-directional symbiotic musical relationship, and hip-hop is the latest iteration of this transactional liaison.

### Zooming in on the UK

Hip-hop is certainly not the first–nor will it be the last–musical genre to make the transatlantic leap to the United Kingdom. Looking back, “Popular music served as a vehicle of cultural imperialism between the United States and Great Britain from 1943 until 1967. During this period each country took a turn at dramatically influencing if not dominating the other’s popular recording industry” (Cooper 61). The reciprocal influence did not end after American rock shook the United Kingdom, and in turn, Beatlemania swept the U.S. To this day, perhaps due to the socio-political and financial bonds these countries have, and prodded along by the lack of language barriers, the U.S. and U.K. still trade artists constantly: Their Spice Girls for our Backstreet Boys; their Franz Ferdinand for our The Killers. Regardless of the origin of the musical style and where the artists fall in the spectrum of both popular and critical acclaim, the U.S. and U.K. have contributed artists to the world stage in most genres.

Yet the symbiosis seems not to be as applicable to hip-hop. It is quite apparent that hip-hop has done more than carve a niche in the U.K., miles away from the inner city neighborhoods where it was born. In Where You’re At, an account of the hip-hop experience around the world, Patrick Neate remembers with a sense of nostalgia when he first listened to hip hop at a birthday party in a village outside of Chippenham, Gloucestershire, UK., and points out that one can’t get much farther from the American ghettos than that (1). Neate even posits that “American hip-hop

has arguably been appreciated more in London than any other city outside of the United States...” (Neate 9). He goes on to reflect, “On my London street, the local liquor store...has become a meeting place for the neighborhood kids. [...] African-American slang predominates and they’re all dressed head to toe in hip-hop gear” (Neate 254-5). Yet, despite the genre’s popularity, it is noticeable that “Surprisingly, England has never produced a real powerful hip hop MC...” (George 204). The same seems to apply to the rest of the United Kingdom, which was counted among the earliest adopters when it came to the genre.

How this music is being appreciated by audiences and produced by acts in the U.K. is a complex subject and opinions appear divided. UK-based lecturer Andy Bennett is a proponent of the notion of reterritorialization, which he explains by pointing out that, “taking the basic tenets of the rap style, young people of differing ethnic backgrounds in cities and regions across the globe have reworked the rap text in ways that incorporate local knowledges and sensibilities, thus transforming rap into a means of communication that works in the context of specific localities” (93-4). In his view, American hip hop has been used as a blueprint for the creation of homegrown forms. UK-based journalist Patrick Neate doesn’t quite agree. While he doesn’t negate the fact that there is indeed local talent in the UK, he appears concerned about the odds of their success given the market. The way he sees it, it has “always been tough for British emcees to break through. Rapping in the same language as their American counterparts and, frequently, about similar subject matter, they’ve struggled to secure industry support. [...] why would a record company back local products that immediately attract [...] comparison and have little to no hope...” (8-9). This view of the commercial struggle of UK-based hip-hop seems grim. Bringing us back to the idea of conglomerates dominating the landscape, professor Murray Forman reminds us that the genre’s “...international reputation and popularity and its global

distribution are enabled by the transnational entertainment industry, which is dominated by only a handful of major corporate labels” (67). That there might be less incentive for corporations to foment the locally-produced hip-hop flavors seems sensible from a business standpoint. The cost of production and marketing associated with new acts might seem not only daunting but pointless to smaller labels when they can piggyback the success of established American acts.

Thanks to the ever-expanding media technology deployed by the United States music industry, the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean was rather immediate. As David Hesmondhalgh and Caspar Melville point out in their essay “Urban Breakbeat Culture” in the book Global Noise, “Almost as soon as it moved from the street corner to the recording studio, hip-hop, along with rap, found a sympathetic audience in the United Kingdom” (90). Even though the American music style captured the imagination of the British public and there surely were more than enough hip-hop media products to import and make sure their hunger was fully quenched, there soon was a push for local musicians to begin to experiment with the music style on their own terms. It is generally acknowledged as axiomatic that imitation is the greatest and most sincere form of flattery. When it came to hip-hop in the U.K., this proved true. As they were trying to figure out the inner workings, the implications, and the boundaries of rap music and its attendant culture, replication was, more often than not, par for the course. This was not surprising. Not only were songs from the United States essential as blueprints for those trying to grasp how to make hip-hop songs, but there was a sense that the American style was due its share of respect. Yet, this deference may have worked against the genre in the U.K., and not everyone agreed with the importance or the benefit of following the United States pattern. Hesmondhalgh and Melvin explain that “British rap has been marginalized and to some extent impoverished by an overreverential attitude toward the U.S....” (87). The authors go on to describe some of the

intricate deliberation that is likely to have taken place among those who were attempting to delve into the world of U.K.-based hip-hop in its nascent stages:

From the beginning there was a lively debate within U.K. hip-hop regarding the extent to which U.S. rap should serve as a model. This issue was two-fold; a question of accent (style) and one of content. Should a British rapper adopt the U.S. drawl of the Brooklyn badboys (an enterprise doomed to failure) or stick to an English accent that might sound strange? Should a U.K. rapper adopt the Uzi- packing, carjacking, bitch-smacking lexicon of U.S. rap or develop a ‘vocab’ more in step with the British context, where guns are rare, few youths can afford cars, misogyny is perhaps slightly less acceptable, and the prevailing British diffidence renders public boasting (or ‘bigging yourself up’) relatively uncommon and frowned upon? (91-2)

Despite appearances, the differences in culture between the U.K. and the U.S. are anything but negligible, and many of the points of contention hinge quite clearly on cultural markers which reflect locality. It is reasonable that local acts would want to and seek to make their music something to which their immediate audience can relate. Straying from the prototype, especially a successful one, can be tricky, and the result in this case was an uneven hip-hop scene, where some music still harks back to its U.S. roots and has American culture overtones while some is radically different from the imported kind and markedly British in both its style and content. Unfortunately, neither of these brands of homegrown hip-hop garnered the success for which local U.K. acts hoped, and even though the U.S. became aware—albeit marginally—about hip-hop from across the pond, this phenomenon inspired curiosity, but it was taken as anecdotal information and it never translated into the financial windfall some artists and producers may have imagined would follow. Notably, however, the incursion of hip-hop into the



U.K. had some unforeseen consequences, like its influence on other music. Hesmondhalgh and Melvin posit, "...in terms of British production, rap was one of a number of styles that could be fused eclectically to make new genres, rather than constituting a goal in itself" (94).

Nonetheless, while in our globalized world we tend to think about a musical genre's or a particular artist's popularity in terms of units sold not just nationally but worldwide, the fact that U.K. rappers have not attained intercontinental acclaim does not take away from their potential local recognition. What is fascinating is not just whether U.K. hip-hop is able to transcend its borders, but the fact that there is a U.K. brand of hip-hop at all and how different it might be from the original. It is important to distinguish whether consumers in the U.K. are adopting hip-hop in its indigenous form, or adapting and reworking it, and even producing locally in the UK. Perhaps it is a combination thereof.

Consequently, if we find that a vast amount of the intake of hip-hop in the UK is indeed of the original American form, or at best, a quasi-retooled version thereof, it still remains to be seen whether that consumption is a brand of simulation, in the sense theorized by Baudrillard; that is to say, does UK hip hop become a simulated culture of a copy without original, one that is thoroughly decontextualized and ahistorical? Is the notion of ethnic pride lost in favor of the blinding light being reflected off the diamonds encrusted in the platinum pendants that adorn the bare muscular chests of gangsta rappers on videos looped on MTV? This is a complex issue, as Osumare points out:

Otherness and the representation of the meanings of blackness, already complex within the historic, context of American racism, encompasses even more convoluted subjectivities within the global context. International meanings of black identity, signified

through hip hop, compound issues of race and power relations when filtered through various other countries' issues of marginality and difference (179).

Again, this is particularly paradoxical because hip-hop is highly concerned with the notion of authenticity, or "the real," which Foreman describes as "an ill-defined expression referring to combined aspects of racial essentialism, spatial location, and a basic adherence to the principles and practices of hip-hop culture" (xviii). Therefore, if the concept of the real is so central to the genre, ironically, UK rapper's attempt at legitimacy might be, by default, considered inauthentic, a mere replica of the genuine article, and those who consume it might be dubbed posers.

Questions remain, then, as to whether U.K.-based hip-hop fans are deliberately cloaking themselves in a cloth of otherness, or whether they have some handle on the homegrown messages in the American hip-hop ideology. Do foreigners who might not be privy to American history and the nuances it reveals recognize any hints of political struggle in hip-hop, or do they just see the systematically objectified, scantily-clad women? While to some, their commitment to hip-hop and their adherence to the hip-hop code might seem an illusion, or sheer artifice, it may be that U.K. hip-hop fans find a way to define and frame their own concerns through hip-hop. Perchance their own socio-economic circumstances conflate with the inclusiveness, the sweeping ubiquity, and the popularity of the genre, to allow youth in the United Kingdom to experience this music and the way of life attached to it as their genuine culture.

## CHAPTER THREE: FROM THE STREETS TO THE SCREENS

In Chapter One, we explored the basics of hip-hop, including some of its history, its tenets, and its mainstreaming as it has taken over much of America's entertainment and seeped into American culture, and consequently into the world's culture. The globalization of media is a phenomenon with which we are very familiar, if not fully at ease. However, the transplantation of culture, in this case the hip-hop scene, to computer servers and screens is not as straightforward a shift, and it deserves further examination.

Undoubtedly, it was the community in which hip-hop originated that bestowed upon the genre its idiosyncrasies, its attitude, and its flavor. To this day, despite the meteoric rise and mushrooming spread of hip-hop, it is still that unwavering bond with the streets that infuses the music and culture surrounding it with its essence.

Given this undeniably solid and stable connection, the present study considers whether the ideologies that pervade hip-hop can also be brought into being, cultivated, nurtured, and transmitted within the online realm. More specifically, this chapter asks whether these ideologies can take root within an online community, particularly one that is based outside of the U.S., making it, in effect, further removed from the source.

Certainly, it appears that what problematizes the seemingly straightforward proposition of a hip-hop online community is the importance of the local and the real in hip-hop culture. As we have learned, hip-hop emphasizes and privileges locality as a chief element of its culture and music. In his book The 'Hood Comes First Murray Forman points to this nexus, stating that, "the issue of space and place remain central to hip-hop, whether it emerges from Los Angeles, Long Beach, Houston, Atlanta, New Orleans, or the boroughs of New York" (9). This relates not only

to the provenance and cultural history of rap artists, but to the style of hip-hop that has emerged from and is specifically tied to different areas, and the references to locations that materialize in songs and videos. The narratives about location are strong in terms of associations not only to geographical regions of the U.S. but to the micro-level of representation of the spaces of the cities. In relation to this phenomenon, Murray Forman notes that, “the ghetto, ‘hood, street, and corner all surface as representation of a particular image inscribing and ideal of authenticity or ‘hardcore’ urban reality” (5). Descriptions of space and location have both a tie to the geographical and to the socio-political, especially to the metropolitan dystopia with its discontents and its perils.

Hip-hop is also invested in the idea of authenticity, which is often referred to as simply “the real.” Hence, if hip-hop has such a strong connection to the notions of genuineness and locality and this link manifests itself musically, lyrically, visually, and culturally, how does that imprint translate when transplanted into the milieu of an online community? This translation should be an especially problematic one when the online community is UK-based. Even if the members of said community have come to perceive American hip-hop as part of their own culture, the concern with genuineness could still be a major obstacle to the survival of these kinds of groups.

Despite these concerns, a cursory search of the Internet yields proof that such virtual hip-hop communities not only exist but actually thrive online. Surely, in seeking out a rationale behind the prosperity of these assemblies, some might single out the Internet’s ability to function as a novel, fast, and very comprehensive vehicle for music and trends. Indeed, it is quite a fantastic medium for content dissemination, the utility of which didn’t go unnoticed either by the hip-hop marketing machine or hip-hop aficionados. Pointing to this fact, Murray Forman states,

“In the mid- to late 1990s, the Internet was also established as an essential force in the delineation and mapping of the virtual hip-hop nation. The relatively new medium was taken up by rap fans and by independent and major corporate labels alike as a new means of communication” (283). The Internet was uncharted territory that held unique potential given its promise—perhaps more perceived than explicit—of democratization of the media; it became the Wild West of media, a place to conquer and on which to stake one’s claim, an opportunity on which hip-hop capitalized quickly, in the midst of its incredible growth everywhere else. In his essay “Beat Streets in the Global Hood,” music enthusiast and academic Halifu Osumare even points to the Internet as another putative location of hip-hop. He reflects, “From global street culture to the World Wide Web, hip hop culture is not difficult to locate. The Internet provides copious sites across the map where one can travel to diverse international hip hop scenes at the click of a computer mouse in the comfort of one’s own home” (Osumare 173).

It is rather unproblematic to imagine that a new technology—particularly one with such unprecedented and unparalleled international reach and usability scope—might be harnessed—and perhaps even exploited—by one of our most prolific industries to market and sell its most successful products and used by consumers to gather information about or purchase said products. Studies about usability and e-commerce abound. Nevertheless, the emergence of the Internet as a site of reification of culture and of the self remains comparatively unexamined and unexplained.

The answer may lie in the ability of websites to provide a sense of place, a locus of identity negotiation, and a space for communities to develop and thrive. Of course these aspects of Internet use cannot and should not be fully understood as the result of some magical intrinsic elements of the medium itself, but rather should be appreciated as the outcome of a powerful

combination of technological advances coupled with changes in socio-economic, political, and cultural trends in the world as well. Nevertheless, the technological possibilities that the medium offers should not be underestimated.

It is clear, then, that in order to make inroads into this discovery of how online hip-hop communities may work, it is necessary to take a step back from the world of hip-hop online and consider the Internet as a medium or mediated space and its role not just in the dissemination of content, but in the creation and propagation of ideologies. It is equally necessary to consider the renegotiation of the self and of relationships, as well as the inner workings of online communities and their ability to become a site of identification and creation of meaning and discourses.

### The Internet as a Medium

We live in a time when, increasingly, more aspects of our lives are likely to be or become mediated, either partially or completely. Theoretically, what does this mean? As renowned author Thomas De Zengotita posits in his book Mediated, “At the most general conceptual level, mediation means dealing with reality through something else” (8). This is to say that there is an intermediary—more often than not a technological go-between—that represents reality or allows us to experience it by proxy. This representation is often also referred to as simulation, which entails the replication of reality. Yet, beyond theories, the ramifications of the acceleration of mediation and the changes it has fostered in our very existence are vastly more complex. Most of the corollaries of our adoption of the newest technologies are only now beginning to emerge with any real clarity, and it will take time and dedication to study them in depth and understand their fundamental nature.

The processes and advances through which our lives and reality have become mediated have been fairly gradual, even when we factor in major technological innovations that may appear, at a cursory glance, like sudden eruptions. Indeed, the vertiginous rate at which the developments seem to be happening in our own lifetime might make us suffer from historical amnesia. Lauding these instances of rapid advancement as technological revolutions is largely a constructed notion fueled by scientific ignorance and a less than accurate account of facts and events leading to various advances in communication. In fact, technological development has been the result of a much slower and steady evolution anchored in trial and error. It has been progressive, the result of costly research, the failure of prototypes, and the subsequent iterations of numerous devices and software. It is also important to remember that, as consumers and users, we have often only gradually warmed up to new technologies. Once we accepted one type of gadget or medium, taking to new ones, which likely emulate or improve upon earlier models—or remediate them, as Jay David Bolter would propose—became an evolutionary process of sorts.

At this juncture, mediation is omnipresent. De Zengotita invites us to reflect, “Ask yourself: is there anything you do that remains essentially unmediated, anything you don’t experience reflexibly through some commodified representation of it?” (9). Certainly, our senses have become used to surrogate realities. We have become habituated to and no longer really question or mistrust the act of hearing and seeing through technology. Visual representation, in fact, has a particularly strong hold on us. The twentieth century saw the advent of the image as sovereign, an occurrence invigorated by technological advances in the areas of photography and film. No longer a mere substitute, representation and simulation became normalized and our fixation with the image as reality and even model of self was realized. Psychiatrist Jacques Lacan wrote at length about the mirror stage in infants, a time when a child identifies with her or his

own image as reflected. This likeness is where the archetype of self is then located and the individual will continue, through adulthood, to chase this immaculate image, as it is then reflected in other people's eyes. Yet, she or he will never realize that vision in her or his own corporeality.

In modern times, that mirror image has been promptly replaced by an even more unachievable, seamless, pixilated reflection: that of the digitized photograph and video. This further compounds our chase for flawlessness as we are taunted by technology's trickery. In Life on the Screen, Sherry Turkle alludes to this phenomenon when she writes, "We come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine" (10). Some might argue that this profound identification with the two-dimensional has caused us to feel a genuine and incredibly visceral repudiation of the three dimensional, which is inherently unkempt and imperfect. The hegemony of the image is indeed pervasive. In his book Interface Culture, author Steven Johnson argues, "We are fixated with the image not because we have lost faith in reality, but because images now have an enormous impact on reality, to the extent that the older image-reality opposition doesn't really work anymore" (30). Perhaps we have ceased to see representations as such altogether and now identify them completely as part of our reality—or even just as our reality. De Zengotita goes on to propose, "...there is no going back to reality just as there is no going back to virginity. We have been consigned to a new plane of being engendered by mediating representations of fabulous quality and inescapable ubiquity..." (11). Undeniably, mediation is an active ingredient of our daily existence—one which we often take for granted or upon which we fail to reflect. Like the old adage that conceives that a fish does not know it is wet because water is such a part of its habitat that it cannot see it, we have become so accustomed to mediation that we hardly question it. De Zengotita points this paradox out,



claiming, “The problem with trying to comprehend the process of mediation is that you can’t get outside it” (26). In a sense, it is like trying to explain language through language, when, in a Derridean way, we are always already in it. In Connecting, Mary Chayko reflects on mediated communication and points out, “Though the triad has three components or “sides” (two people and the mediator), we tend to forget or take for granted the side representing the mediator, because technological mediation occurs constantly in our society” (42). This putative invisibility of the mediators, this absence when it comes to the mechanisms at work in our own mediated communication is what makes it harder for us to focus on how the technology might have an impact on the actual communication.

Yet, some theorize that the Internet, often mythologized as a quantum leap of sorts in technology that we have yet to grasp fully, may just offer us a glimpse from the other side of the looking glass. In the essay “Into Digital Borderlands,” researcher Johan Förnas argues that, “On one hand, the Internet promises transparent connections between minds and text, on the other, it leads to an explosion of technological tools that inevitably make people aware of the processes of mediation as such, thus making the media insistently opaque rather than invisible” (14). It is quite possible that because the Internet is still in its emergent stages in many respects—despite the vast advances made in such a short time—it is a technology in which we may still be more keenly aware of the medium, not necessarily over the message—in a McLuhanesque way—but certainly alongside the message.

Nevertheless, it is important to bring back the human component to the discussion and to remember that, as Förnas puts it, “Mediated communication is not only about complex techniques for transmitting fixed packaged meaning-contents from senders to receivers, but also social interactions in which people gather around meaning-inviting texts to develop

interpretations, experiences, and relations” (8). From a purely humanistic perspective, technology ultimately boils down to its uses and its effects, and our ability to watch and document trends in the Internet might yield important nuggets of information about how we are interacting with and through this novel technology and what the impact of those applications might be. Therefore, the Internet may present an unprecedented opportunity to track these developments. As users, we realize the Internet is quite evidently distinct from other media in many ways. This new technology brings with it promises of a more bidirectional, democratic media that eschews long-standing oligarchic media systems and allows for the blurring of the antiquated line between producer and consumer. Together with the possibilities it opens up, however, the Internet also serves up a fair dose of apprehension that does its part to temper the unbridled optimism that surrounds the medium. Such anxiety often surrounds not only issues of privacy, anonymity, and the many ways in which the new medium might be used for inappropriate, unconstructive, immoral, antisocial, or illegal purposes, but the angst about whether the medium is, will, or even can live up to the emancipatory, equalizing expectations we have placed on it.

### The Yin and Yang of the Internet

One of the chief—if not the major—modes of differentiation between the Internet and other media is in the way we interact with the technology. It is widely accepted that, historically, practically all other mass media that existed before it are fairly one-sided. In fact, as academic Hans Magnus Enzensberg postulates in his essay “Constituents of a Theory of the Media,” “In its present form, equipment like television or film does not serve communication but prevents it. It allows no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver; technically speaking, it reduces

feedback to the lowest point compatible with the system” (63). Here, Enzenberg suggests that it is the feedback aspect of communication that is lacking in television and film, two of the most pivotal communication and media technologies in our time. This lack of feedback translates into a mandated passivity born out of the lack of opportunity to interact or respond, which is a feature of both television and film. Of course, it may be argued that there have been media, such as radio, which may have permitted two-way communication and, keeping such technology in mind, then the passivity of users and audiences could not be solely attributed to a reaction to any intrinsic trait of the actual medium but may be tied to the particular politics of the social and economic formation of the users at any given time and place. Nevertheless, even as we try to sidestep technologically deterministic traps, it is undeniable that the level of bidirectional communication afforded by the Internet is unrivaled by most mass media.

While this points to the issue of user participation, it also leads us to the notion of the production vs. consumption divide, where consuming refers to information flowing toward the user, who is a passive receptacle, engaging inactively, perhaps even submissively, whereas producing entails a creative input, a purposeful active contribution, where the user does not have to necessarily stop being communicated to, but he or she can also be the originator of messages, the creator of content, or the sender of feedback. Enzensberg might disagree with this divide in part when he points out that, “It is wrong to regard media equipment as mere means of consumption. It is always, in principle, also means of production and, indeed, since it is in the hands of the masses, socialized means of production” (70). However, one would be hard-pressed to identify these older media as anything other than major loci for consumption, especially when compared to the ever-growing opportunities for production that the Internet serves up. T.V. audiences might be able to cast someone off a reality show by calling or texting in their vote, but

they still do this in a completely anonymous way and in uncoordinated collaboration with other spectators. Internet users can film themselves speaking about a person cast off their favorite show and within seconds have their videos on YouTube for millions of people to watch and propagate. A *New York Times* reader might be lucky to have his or her letter to the editor printed, but a blogger can count on being published for the masses to read at any time he or she wishes to be. A listener might get through after hours of dialing up a call-in show, and be part of a segment; someone with the right computer software and access to the web can put together his or her own show and stream it or upload it as a podcast for anyone to listen to or download. The chasm is immense, ever-expanding, and, most likely, unbridgeable. The multi-channeled, multi-sensory, collaborative, participative, immediate, and democratic aspects of the internet simply dwarf any attempts at avenues of production that any older media offered its users. This is new territory, which researchers have only recently begun to survey. Sharon Mazzarella, referring to teenagers, many of which have not known life without the existence of the Internet, points out that "...it is not enough to understand how they, in their role as media consumers, negotiate the mass-produced, mediated messages targeted to them. New media, such as computers and the Internet, enable youth to be producers as well as consumers, and it is this newfound role as producer that warrants scholarly analysis" (142).

Mazzarella is not alone in her enthusiasm about the possibilities engendered in this new technology. Since its inception, the Internet has been hailed by some as the central constituent in a definitive movement toward a democratization of media, where consumers and audiences can just as easily shed those titles and roles in order to become producers and talent. Perchance this is a bit of an overstatement. To begin with, it still holds true that only a few mammoth conglomerates control, fairly uncontested, the production and distribution of the vast majority of

what we consume in terms of mainstream media. Despite unaffiliated rogue bloggers breaking a few good stories, and unsigned bands amassing a following through self-promotion on networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, the masses haven't quite fully harnessed the power of the Internet as a production tool just yet. Some people see this lag as a prophecy. Susan Harewood, in her essay "Exploring Dora," reflects on this fact: "Usage and deployment of the Internet follow many of the same trajectories as other forms of communication technologies. Despite their original interactive potential, they end up as commercial, centralized transmitters with many receivers/consumers who are, at most, engaged in a reactive form with the medium" (88). Given the relative infancy of the Internet, whether Harewood's verdict is accurate or fair might be a question to be answered in the future, when we have settled into a more comfortable relationship with the medium and our judgment is less obfuscated by thoughts of the Internet as either a liberator or a den of perdition—extreme characterizations that are fairly commonplace today. Yet, even in her pronouncement, Harewood leaves room for an admission, that "The Internet, despite its over-foregrounding of commercial messages, may still contain a space for interactive participation" (89). In her view, however, it is the user that hasn't realized the potential of the technology, not that the Internet is not conducive to these applications.

Another Internet-related apprehension is that whereas this technology gives the impression of equality, the rhetoric surrounding that notion belies the inherent inequality of disproportionate access. In "Cyberbodies: Writing Gender in Digital Self-Presentations," Jenny Sunden explains this phenomenon:

Under the erasure of the illusory equalizing interface, in which those skills and requirements necessary for participation are wiped out, everybody seems to have the same access to online means of representation. But under this surface, a wide range of

knowledges and cultural belongings are hiding; these include English language skills and technical knowledge that are indispensable to partaking. Participation in online cultures demands access to computers and computer networks, which efficiently excludes an overwhelming majority of the world population. Furthermore, concrete access is evidently not sufficient, but knowledge of how to engage with the technology and an understanding of online cultural codes, is crucial (100)

Whilst it is accurate to say that anyone can access information or produce content, in the sense and to the extent that the Internet is indeed open to all, one must not forget that the term “anyone” is not without complications. Firstly, the most obvious area of disparity is that not everyone in the world is wired. Not every city in every country has the infrastructure or money to support being connected. Even in regions where connectivity is not a battleground, not every resident has access to a computer, or to an internet service provider. The differences in accessibility are also a concern. It is not the same to have access in the privacy of one’s home than to have to resort to using someone else’s computer or even visit an Internet café. Even with proper access to a computer and connectivity to the internet, not everyone has the necessary software to create content, or even the knowledge or access to education to maximize their ability to use a computer. Not to mention that socio-political issues, such as government surveillance and censorship can also limit the amount of information reaching or originating from certain areas. Even the prevailing language of the internet can become a barrier to real democratic representation. Förnas alludes to this matter, stating, “The Internet reaches out globally but unevenly. Real-world geographical borders can still be traced online in the form of identity markers, including language use, where the global dominance of Anglo-America is strong...” (12). Therefore, when making claims about how democratic, inclusive, interactive, and

collaborative the Internet may be, we should not ignore the much talked-about digital divide. Likewise, when we think about the division of producer/consumer, we must also take into account how geography, economics, and even culture figure into this dichotomy. Maybe this disparity not only further entrenches the existing inequality but virtually reifies the roles of cultural conqueror and cultural colony that certain countries still play.

That the Internet could fail to be the redeemer in practice that it promised (or was hyped) to be in theory is not the only concern surrounding the technology. As with any new major technological development, there is a level of apprehension and distrust that stems from ignorance, untested limits, and unknown implications. Even as we marvel at the possibilities before us, we ask ourselves: What does this new medium mean? What detriments does it bring with it? What are the ramifications of its existence and its use? In dealing with the unfamiliar, reservation and fear are common responses meant to protect us and those around us. Much of the chagrin over the Internet has derived from concern over children and young adults, who are often regarded as more intrepid, more trusting, and less sagacious. Mazzarella indicates, “In some cases...adults (including parents, the media, academics, and politicians) have expressed concern about the Internet as a force in the lives of young people. If it is not the Internet’s potential to enable adults to prey on young girls that has generated moral panic, it is the fear that youth will be ‘seduced’ by the technology itself and/or fall victim to the harmful messages contained therein” (141). The Internet became this resistant final frontier, a virtual terrain to be occupied, controlled, and demystified. We wanted this new world sanitized. This drive to sterilize is not Internet-specific. In Media, Gender, and Identity, David Gauntlett refers to how researchers in particular have had a penchant for reducing media to a threat and underestimating youth. He posits, “The media effects studies position children exclusively as potential “victims” of the mass

media and (rather cruelly) allow young people no opportunity to express their critical abilities, intelligence, or free will” (Gauntlett 30). While the protective instinct is not necessarily inappropriate, and the caution to young people to be vigilant and prudent is not frivolous, it is imperative to appreciate the irony in that most children are often more adept at navigating the online realm than the adults proffering admonitions about it.

The fears surrounding the Internet, nevertheless, are not circumscribed to the safety of children. A concern many adults share is that the Internet provides a level of anonymity that might be conducive to transgression and illegal activity. The discussions surrounding that anxiety have often hinged on the question of whether technology itself is capable of driving anyone to do anything he or she wouldn't have done had the technology not been available. Jeremy Crampton seems to think that humans, not technology, are still in the driver's seat. In his book The Political Mapping of Cyberspace, Crampton notes, “Subjectification should not be thought of as a passive event. Cyberspace, as a particular domain of the world, does not cause waiting subjects to be in one way or another” (15). Here, Crampton underscores that agency is still a human domain and that technology does not somehow assault an inert human subject and instill in him or her deviant desires. However, it is inescapable that this technology does provide the means for carrying out certain activities privately or secretly. There is a level of insulation and anonymity. If someone has qualms about purchasing a pornographic movie at a local store, he or she can easily download such a film to his or her computer without having to worry about prying judgmental eyes. Being able to consume legal products that some might disapprove of in a discreet manner may be a relief to some. By the same token, however, child pornography seems to have flourished on the Internet. Anonymity might give some people the added incentive, perhaps the sensation of safety, to engage in behavior they might have otherwise been



too scared to attempt. However, does this mean the Internet is normative or formative in any sense? Is it not just a tool, a means to an end, neither positive nor negative intrinsically but used with positive or negative intentions for constructive or destructive goals?

Ironically, while there is certainly a degree of anonymity associated with the Internet, and this inscrutability is cause for alarm to some, this medium also causes distress in a diametrically opposite manner. Anyone who spends time online is liable to experience some level of apprehension when it comes to his or her privacy. For instance, whereas documents such as home titles, marriage certificates, and the like have always been public records and available to anyone who wishes who peruse them, prior to the Internet, someone seeking this type of information would have had to take a trip to an office and request the information. Today, this information is readily available, indexed, and searchable online. Anyone with access to the Internet has the ability to scrutinize this information. Again, it is important to discriminate: availability does not have to translate into misuse. However, in a society where information is power, where the exchange of sets of data is the predominant economic activity, this immediacy and accessibility is no small matter. Every time we browse, buy, or complete surveys, companies record, compile, classify, and store our personal data, our preferences, and our payment information, some of which they will then sell to people who have something to market to us. And so the cycle goes.

Nonetheless, despite our trepidation about someone stealing our identity, or using our personal or financial data to our detriment, we also voluntarily share our information in a myriad different ways, becoming acquiescent participants in the exchange of information in the highly voyeuristic virtual world. Indeed many appear to be wary of the over-sharing and self-disclosure that the Internet seems to elicit or at least make feasible.

We flock to networking sites, we build websites, and we publish web logs—commonly referred to as blogs. We connect with others, we self-disclose, we confess, and we share. We post pictures of our vacations, we upload videos of ourselves or of family members and friends, and we blog our most intimate thoughts for almost anyone to see, download, and read given the little control we have over our audience or privacy in some of the sites we visit. Many sites, however, have begun to give users the ability to control their own privacy settings, perhaps as a reaction to this vulnerability to would-be predators.

There are some who argue that a portion of users' eagerness to plaster our likeness and our data on site after site on the Internet stems from the fact that the medium presents itself as the ultimate conduit for people who crave attention or fame and who ultimately use the new technology available to them as an instrument of self-promotion. After all, we live in a society still very much obsessed with the powerful, the famous, and the rich, as well as with the tantalizing possibility that we might become another one of those overnight sensation stories. Indeed, rags to riches narratives seem to fit the Internet quite well. As evidence, one can look at people who have become "Internet Celebrities" due to their videos, blogs, etc. Some of these people have managed to parlay their online fame into an offline career, but the vast majority drowns in the sea of faces and self-aggrandizing antics that make up some portions of the Internet. Yet, the existence of the fame-chasing minority does not quite explain what appears to be a far more generalized online behavior, except that we understand that people tend to use technology to satisfy an instinctive imperative: to connect with other others in any way possible.

While it is true that many of our behaviors, hopes, and qualms while online are clearly an extension of some of our most basic human fears and needs and even cultural norms, there is evidence that the medium might lend itself specifically to these activities. In her article "Making

an About-Face,” Debra Merskin explains, “Web sites have a narrower focus compared with the broader view of other media. The Internet facilitates an intimate, transactional, informational relationship” (57). This is to say, that perhaps there is something inherent to the way the Internet works that facilitates these activities; this realm seems to be essentially conducive to this attachment, this purging, and this constant exchange of information. Some theories point to how we regard cyberspace as a place.

### The Question of Internet as Space and Place

It is quite possible that the way in which we have taken to cyberspace anchors itself in the way we related to computers originally. Steven Johnson, in his book Interface Culture, notes, “The enormous power of the modern digital computer depends on this capacity for self-representation. More often than not, this representation takes the form of a metaphor [...] Every age comes to terms with the latest technology by drawing upon imagery of older and more familiar things” (Johnson 15-6). Since the computer came to occupy a central technological position in the workplace, the language of computers began to reflect that connection to the world of the office. We work on our desktops, put documents and files in folders, open and close windows, look for spreadsheets in our file cabinets, write ideas on notepads, and throw what we do not want in our workspace in the trash. This familiarity of the vernacular and the verisimilitude of the computer tools to those in our reality were central to our further ease toward and endorsement of the device and its various programs. From the imagery of the office tools, we have moved to words that clearly reflect, increasingly, that the Internet is a place, and represents a more extensive space. Johnson points to this: “We [...] have moved beyond the two-dimensional desktop metaphor into more immersive digital environments: town squares,

shopping malls, personal assistants, living rooms. As the infosphere continues its exponential growth, the metaphors used to describe it will also grow in both scale and complexity” (18).

Indeed, the nomenclature again reveals how we view and make use of the technology. We build web sites, with a home page; we enter chat rooms and discussion forums; we surf the web; we explore cyberspace; we visit portal sites; we follow links; we own domains or addresses; we use navigation to get to different sites. Everything screams location, despite the fact that this locale does not take up any space, other than data space in a server. Johnson points out, “For the first time, a machine was imagined not as an attachment to our bodies, but as an environment, a space to be explored. You could project yourself into this world, lose your bearings, stumble across things. It was more like a landscape than a machine” (24). Surely, one could point to video games as an immersive spatial interface. However, the dynamic is completely different. In a game, one is a character or observer in a finite world constructed by someone else and one is only free to roam within that restricted space, which is visually constructed to appear as an actual terrain—be it outer space or a haunted house. Not to mention that there is no productivity attached to most video games, despite their use for training purposes by the military and other institutions. By most accounts, we play video games as a means of diversion, for entertainment purposes, and the simulacra is quite patently clear. What happens when one logs on to the Internet may be mediated or still depend on representation, but at that point, the paradigm has been unquestionably altered. We are somewhere that does not necessarily look like a place but that certainly feels far more like real space than other more visually oriented representations. Johnson points out what he calls a paradox: “...we live in a society that is increasingly shaped by events in cyberspace, and yet cyberspace remains, for all practical purposes, invisible, outside our perceptual grasp” (19).

This concentration on vernacular that implies spatiality and location brings up the question of how we define, conceive of, and relate to space in the first place. From a definitely philosophical perspective, Jeremy Crampton ponders, “What is the spatial essence of this world, and how we are ‘in’ it? Are we really in the world in the sense that the water is in the jug, or is there some other, more authentic way we are oriented with the world?” (81). These questions are a subtle nod to the concept of the duality of physicality and mind which Descartes explored in his writings. Theorist Hubert Hermans alludes to this dichotomy when he says,

Space [...] is rather localized in the outside world or in the body, but not in the self.

People who adhere to such a conception are often not aware they are articulating a

Cartesian conception in which space is considered to be an essential property of the

material world (*res extensa*), whereas the self is seen as a thinking matter (*res cogitans*).

In this conception, space is outside of the self. (Introduction: *The Dialogical Self...* 297)

Crampton’s partial answer to his own inquiry is that, “Social life is inherently spatial.

This does not only mean that our experiences ‘take place’ in a spatial way, but that fundamentally we are spatially. As existing beings we live in, open up, shape, and are shaped by spaces and places” (1-2). This proposition elevates the spatial element to an inherent condition of existence, and one to which we not only are tied but with which we interact, and to which we contribute. Considering that we don’t relate to space just as individuals but also as a group of individuals, Murray Forman expands on this definition, explaining, “Seen as a social product, space is also more easily understood as political and ideological, and the interrelationships forged within space are, accordingly, politically or ideologically laden” (4). This view augments the position of society in the definition and moves the characterization of space beyond the obvious physical realm into the dominion of ideas. In Modernity at Large, Arjun Appadurai also

further removes place from its material attachment, and posits, “I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial. I see it as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts” (178). It is interesting that in his description of a matrix-like imagining of place, Appadurai includes technology as a major variable within the equation. This shows a departure from other theories and moves us closer to understanding space as something that can also exist through and within technology.

So where does this leave cyberspace? The idea of the Internet as a location problematizes the notion of space as we know it. Does this non-physical site satisfy the conventional requirements of place? Do we exist in it? Create it? Imagine it?

As a point of departure, Crampton posits cyberspace as “...an area of geographic knowledge that sits equally between society and technology” (6). However, this explanation might prove to not be quite sufficient as it is not the first time that society witnessed how a technology could intertwine itself with the notion of location. Telephones allowed our voices to travel to a different, often distant place. Radio shows took us to a different mental place, and we could even conceive that we were listening to someone in a different location—a studio. With the advent of television, technology offered a porthole into a place we could regard voyeuristically. What makes the Internet different in that sense? In her book Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub, Lori Kendall compares how space is conceived differently in the Internet than in television: “Rather than merely viewing a space through the electronic window of television, many people feel that when they connect to an online forum, they in some sense enter a social, if not a physical space” (6). This points to how Internet users see other people ‘in’ the forums as occupying the same space, at least in a socially-oriented manner. She goes on to explain, “The

variety of material available on the web exceeds that found on television, and the experience of choosing links to follow may provide an ever greater sense of going somewhere” (6).

Moving away from the comparisons drawn to other media or devices, in “Cyberlove: Creating Romantic Relationships on the Net,” Malin Sveningsson draws an extended analogy of the Internet as a city and proposes,

The Internet, with all its arenas for social interaction, may be compared to a metropolis, a big city with countless meeting places, open 24 hours a day for those who want to get into contact and socialize with other individuals. One could then compare each chat room to a street or a public square. The difference is that because of the opportunity to keep several windows open on one’s screen simultaneously, one can be in several places at the same time, or at least can shift between them much faster than it would take to move one’s physical body around a city (50).

Sveningsson not only redefines the metaphor but also points to one of the main areas of contention when looking at the Internet as space: the lack of bodies. After all, we are embodied beings, and the Internet is not merely composed of technology, but beings as well. Förnas reminds us of the human variable by suggesting, “Internet cyberspace is at base an intersubjective, cultural phenomenon, even though it is constructed through various technical manipulations” (5). This yet again continues to open up the definition to encompass more of the human interactions taking place within the technology. Nevertheless, as previously noted, it is the human aspect of cyberspace, namely the notion of the human body as necessary for the concept of being in a place that problematizes the notion of space the most. Jenny Sunden submits: “The Internet is often presented as a disembodied medium, a space in which bodies have ceased to matter. Even though our bodies are intimately related to who we are, how we

experience ourselves, the dream of transcending this body and achieving immortality persists and is now being remapped in the virtual worlds” (Jenny Sunden 81). Indeed, the Internet bestows us with a glimpse of a different existence, one that allows us to move beyond whatever limitations our embodiment imposes on us—or the ones we might perceive it inflicts on us. Moving through cyberspace may feel akin to teleportation, as we can jump from one place to another instantly. It may also allow us to experience a sense of multiple selves or being cloned, as windows or tabs in our browser allow us to be in different places at the same time. These are fantasies humans have indulged in mentally, which they can now live out in a more physically oriented manner. Despite the seduction of that offer, reality falls a bit short. As Lori Kendall reflects, “...each participant has a physical body that remains involved in experiences separate from the interactions occurring online” (7). This means that we are never entirely disembodied beings; a part of us always stays behind when we enter the online realm. Kendall points out how this duality causes us to separate the worlds we inhabit. She suggests, “This split attention between two experiential worlds or places introduces a problem with viewing cyberspace as a separate sovereign world. Nobody inhabits only cyberspace” (8). Crampton echoes Kendall’s concern with the demarcation of cyberspace as discrete; he alludes to this when he states, “By delineating a separate sphere called ‘cyberspace; we run into trouble since it objectifies a realm of meaningful activity which [...] is folded (and manifolded) in the physical as part of our world” (Crampton 11). Crampton continues to explain, “There is often a two-fold maneuver when cyberspace is objectivized, as we might expect; it is privileged as a separate domain, as an object of analysis which is knowable as a thing, and second, it is cast as artificial, or virtual. These maneuvers result in a strange tension, where cyberspace is simultaneously privileged and deprivileged” (Crampton 11). This begins to unravel how complex our relationship to the spatiality of the online realm truly is. Lori



Kendall approximates a compromise of sorts in how we view cyberspace. She writes, “People who choose to enter social online spaces do not leave their offline world behind when they do so, but rather begin a process of weaving online communication and activities into their existing offline lives” (Kendall 16). Jeremy Crampton’s idea of the online realm resonates with Kendall’s. He posits, “Cyberspace is not a separate ‘other’ placeless geography distinct from the authentic physical world. It is part of the place we find for ourselves in the world—it is everyday life—and is no more or less authentic than the rest of it” (Crampton 83). In this sense, cyberspace is one more place we inhabit, rather different in some ways, but not completely unlike the rest of our spaces in others.

Even as we continue to grapple with the definition of cyberspace, what happens in it or through it does not wait for such characterization. Even as we wrestle with the notion of finding the correct nomenclature, people are logging on and tuning in. The ramifications are already taking root, whether we have fine-tuned the vernacular or classifications or not. Human beings are populating the online realm, making it their own, and interrelating with it and with one another. As Crampton posits, “If characterization of the terrain of cyberspace is problematic, then no less so is that of the subject or agent who interacts with it” (15). Therefore, let’s turn our attention to the people who inhabit and use the Internet.

### The Self, Identity, and the Internet

The awareness and significance of our own individuality, personhood, identity, and self is a major distinction between humans and other animals, a pivotal feature of our designation of our own humanity, a universal thread that runs through each and every one of us, regardless of our differences. In “The Usage of Space in Dialogical Self–Construction,” Van Halen and Janssen

put it succinctly: “It is a sense of self that we all have in common, and it underlies all our actions” (391). Surely we could characterize our selves, for example, by what we believe in, by our occupation or vocation, by our cultural heritage, and even our gender. However, once we strip ourselves of those attributes, which might be a part of our personhood, but not necessarily encapsulate its essence, we still ponder who we are, what we are. Indeed, despite the centrality of these concepts to our lives, in spite of how fiercely we defend our individuality and strive to express our identity in various ways, the definitions of these ideas, their essence, and their origins have always been heavily contested, historically and even at present—often becoming the foundation for entire schools of thought within both philosophy and psychology and a battleground between warring factions within the disciplines—and our grasp of their borders and make-up remains quite imprecise. We quarrel over dissimilar answers to questions such as: Where does the self reside? Is the self the physicality, the mental processes, or a combination thereof? Is it the much-celebrated—yet also confusing—idea of the soul?

In “Introduction: The Dialogical Self in a Global and Digital Age,” Hubert Hermans states, “When you ask people to localize their ‘self,’ they will point to their body and tell you that it is somewhere ‘inside’” (297). This ambiguous quasi-response reflects our utter inadequacy when it comes to attempting to explain our own personhood in any meaningful, logical manner. The idea of self seems too abstract to pinpoint and too intricate to isolate or disentangle. Our vernacular fails us, the concepts seem elusive at best, and our mind struggles to pin the idea down. Identity and selfhood may just be the type of notion we can sense and believe in but not quite elucidate upon intellectually. When pressed for an explanation or a concrete answer, we are reduced to gesturing to a hazy area inside of us. As much as we are sure that the self resides somewhere within us and that it possesses certain characteristics, our identity can also be defined

by absence; that is to say by what it is not in comparison to others. Indeed, without the recognition of others—and otherness— would there be an identification of self at all? In her essay “Cyberbodies: Writing Gender in Digital Self-Presentations,” Jenny Sunden posits that “Identity is experienced simultaneously as ‘self’ and ‘other’ in embodied and imagined spaces” (80). This statement points to the social aspect of the self and to its putative dependence on a counterpoint to its own existence as a reference. Since humans are social beings, could our selves be anything but at least partially defined or conceived out of socialization and collectivity, which are such vital human features? Yet, beyond the act of merely recognizing our selves by opposition, we also emerge as individuals as a result of our interactions with others. In her seminal book Life on the Screen, Sherry Turkle posits, “...one’s identity emerges from whom one knows, one’s associations and connections” (258). Indeed, whatever role others play in the materialization or recognition of our selves, the fact remains that “The historical relativity of self and identity is often bracketed together with the claim that even such a deep psychological domain as our own personhood is strongly intertwined with the prevailing social practices and ideologies in contemporary society” (Van Halen 389). This quotation points to the notion of the processes that intervene in the socialization of the individual and the role different institutions have in the branding of the self. In her essay “IM Me,” Shayla Marie Thiel clarifies, “From the moment of birth, humans mark themselves (and are marked by others) as they exist within cultural ideologies (such as the family, educational system, politics and government, religion, etc.),” which means that, at its core, “Identity is a complex social construction created and sustained by a subject’s location within a culture and society” (181). However, the notion of society inevitably brings up, once again, the concept of location, which also resonates with Sunden’s notion of identity as crystallized in a site. The idea of culture as tied to or determined by place,

especially in a physical sense, has been thoroughly and increasingly complicated by the erosion of borders and the fragmentation of monolithic location-bound cultural imperatives brought about by globalization. Hubert Hermans, in “Mixing and Moving Cultures Require a Dialogical Self,” points to that fact when he writes, “...equating culture with the geographic space of the nation does not fully capture the complex relationship between cultures in an era of unprecedented globalization. More than ever, globalization has led to the hybridization of cultural practices and meanings resulting in the creation of multiple identities...” (26). We can no longer assume that birth or residence in a specific area necessarily translates into specific set of cultural norms since the amount of influences from outside sources has multiplied and strengthened.

Yet, this distilling of the nuances in how the self originates or how it might be experienced does not necessarily argue with the location of the self or what it might encompass. In his article entitled “Mixing and Moving Cultures Requires a Dialogical Self,” Hermans outlines William James’ notion of the social self, which is “...not a ‘thing in itself,’ not a self-contained entity, separated from the environment in a Cartesian-dualistic way, but a relationship,—often very intense—between a person and those parts of the environment which have a personal value and affective significance” (26). What Herman points to, using James’ theories, is that what we consider to be our identity is not just made of some ethereal intrinsic essence, but rather it involves extrinsic objects, people, places, etc. with which we have a certain affinity. Therefore, despite our initial pointing to the physical body as a self-contained package or receptacle for our personhood, “...the self is not simply ‘within the skin,’ but rather extends to the outside world” by virtue of our relationships and how we appropriate that which matters to us (Hermans, *Mixing & Moving*, 26). This extended definition brings the self more fluidity, more

options, and more reach. Here, personhood is tantamount to an essence that lives not within a body but within its connections and is not something held in place, but rather a growing entity.

Compounding that innate drive to understand what makes us who we are and the impulse to extend our perceived internal self by appropriation of that which we feel is somehow ours, modern society has come to deem that "...the construction of identity has become a *known requirement*. Modern Western societies do not leave individuals in a doubt that they need to make choices of identity and lifestyle" (Gauntlett 248). This changes the dynamic of identity formation and negotiation from an occurrence that moves away from the more instinctive or natural to a social directive mandated by the whims of late modernity. Furthering this concept of social prescription, Gauntlett reflects that in fact "...self-identity becomes an inescapable issue. Even those who would say that they have never given any thought to question or anxieties about their own identity will inevitably have been compelled to make significant choices throughout their lives, from everyday questions about clothing appearance and leisure to high impact decisions about relationships, beliefs and occupations" (96). Perhaps then we have become so used to being the constructors and administrators of our selves that we no longer recognize some of the processes in which we are involved when engaging in building our identity piecemeal. Decisions that just feel like part of living our lives are in fact pronouncements on our very identity. Yet, this picking and choosing of identities was not always the norm. There were times when who we were, at least as social beings, was not as flexible. Who we were was dictated by our birthplace, our place in society, our gender, etc. Gauntlett points to the change: "Whilst earlier societies with a social order based firmly in tradition would provide individuals with (more or less) clearly defined roles, in post-traditional societies we have to work on our roles for ourselves" (Gauntlett 96-7). So how do we begin to process our own identity? Gauntlett proposes

that identities are better seen as a biographical tale—or compendium of anecdotes—of personhood rather than a compilation of characteristics. “We create, maintain and revise a set of biographical narratives—the story of who we are, and how we came to be where we are now,” and “Self-identity, then, is not a set of traits or observable characteristics. It is a person’s own reflexive understanding of their biography” (Gauntlett). Yet, clearly, this story of us needs to be demonstrated in some way. How do we do this? Gauntlett points to our purchasing power and the choices we make when consuming. He reflects, “Consumerism is one of the clearest ways in which we develop and project a lifestyle. Again, this is a feature of the post-traditional era: since social roles are no longer handed to us by society, we have to make choices...” and when we are ready to make those decisions, “Advertising promotes the idea that products will help us to accent out individuality [...] The project of the self is redirected, by the corporate world, into a set of shopping opportunities” (Gauntlett 102). We are left to make choices on what we want our story to be like, and the media is not shy when it comes to providing suggestions of how we might go about this task. In fact it serves up a steady stream of samples through images and stories, from those we see on television and film, starring our favorite celebrities, to the ones told in a short commercial that endorses a certain product or service that can get us closer to the prototype of self we seek to achieve. As Gauntlett suggests, “Television programmes, pop songs, adverts, movies and the Internet all also provide numerous kinds of ‘guidance’—not necessarily in the obvious forms of advice-giving, but in the myriad suggestions of ways of living which they imply. We lap up this material because the social construction of identity today is the knowing social construction of identity. Your life is your project—there is no escape” (249). Media is bursting with options; it can sell us a blueprint to construct our best self. Gauntlett focuses on this idea of archetypes: “Lifestyles could be said to be like ready-made templates for a narrative

of self. [...] So a lifestyle is more like a genre [...] we—as ‘directors’ of our own life narratives—can chose a metropolitan or a rural lifestyle, a lifestyle focused on success in work, or one centered on clubbing, sport, romance, or sexual conquests” (102). These theories certainly make the creation and maintenance of self appear far less organic, as if people were able to—or were expected to—pick an identity combo from a value menu at an identity drive-through and then needed to constantly keep up their administration of self through decisions which involve monetary commitments that are often made as a consumer, not just a human being. Van Halen and Janssen agree with Gauntlett’s verdict. In their analysis, they claim, “The market orientation of our late-modern era requires a more strategic outlook on matters of personhood. It turns the social identity into a commodity; something that has to be actively managed” (391). One might be driven to believe that we might resent this assault of options, this bombardment of selections to be made at every turn about who exactly we choose to be. However, the truth is that we have become primed for this type of onslaught. De Zengotita, anchoring his elucidations on the self in the notion of mediation, claims that our self has now become flattered, as is it constantly interpellated, always stroked, always focused on. He explains, “Everything is firing messages modules, straight for your gonads, your taste buds, your vanities, your fears” (De Zengotita 21). To his mind, we are dealing with “...a flattered self, a self that exists in its very own field of representation, that constructs its own identity, chooses what it wants to be,” and in this self-importance, “a mediated self, and the alchemy of mediation, the osmotic process through which reality and representation fuse, gets carried into our psyches by the irresistible flattery that goes with being incessantly addressed” (De Zengotita 105, 7). Not only do the media address us to advertise products, it is also a repository of images of what our lives are supposed to look like. What is the effect? Van Halen and Janssen propose, “People start to mirror themselves in the

strategic impression management that they see in today's media. As a consequence, the inner criteria of personal unity are being replaced by the more transactional criteria of flexibility and expressiveness" (391). Whether the mechanisms involved in the process of identity creation and negotiation are more or less mechanical or human, voluntary or unconscious, etc., there appears to be a consensus on the increasing malleability of the self.

So what happens to this increasingly fluid personhood when it comes in contact with technologies that could potentially multiply the available options of lifestyles and products exponentially? In her book Connecting, Mary Chayko recognizes this, as she reflects, "The self has always been a dynamic entity with the potential for great change, but never more so than in modernity, when technology quickened the pace of societal change and of self-development" (147). Narrowing it down to the experience of the computer interface, Sherry Turkle explains, "Windows provide a way for a computer to place you in several contexts at the same time. As a user, you are attentive to only one of the windows on your screen at any given moment, but in a sense you are a presence in all of them all the time," and "...your identity on the computer is the sum of your distributed presence" (13). This leads to the conclusion that "...windows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed system" and since "Experiences on the Internet extend the metaphor of windows...", the Internet, by extension, then becomes a venue for the decentering and the multiplication of the self (Turkle 14). Thiel advises,

Because of the sharp increase in computer-mediated communication and mediated technologies in general in the past decade or so, it becomes important to examine how identity construction has become increasingly complicated through its articulation in the uses of these communication technologies. Disembodiment, like that afforded through



online communication, exists in a fast-paced, multi-networked environment among different races, genders, classes, religions, and across vast geographic location, provoking myriad questions about how the lack of a body may shape and color one's perception of culture and one's location within culture (181).

Let us tie it all together. Even as we struggle with our ability to grasp the concepts of self and identity fully, we recognize their perceived internal quality and their ability to reach outside of the embodied person to co-opt those items, people, ideas, locations, and so on, that we identify with, care about, or to which we have a particular affinity or connection. To this foundation, we append the progression from a traditional society where roles and identities were rather unambiguous to a postmodern one where identities are volatile and where humans find it necessary to construct their own self-narratives, an occurrence that Van Halen and Janssen refer to as a "shift in the social identity from an ascribed identity in premodern times to a so-called "managed" identity in our late-modern times" (390). Add to this state of affairs that the self has become the focus of the consumerism-driven media, and that the technology privileges the notion of a multifaceted, multiple self. All of these factors conflate to make the Internet a perfect site for identity negotiation. If we habitually incorporate into our notion of self-identity those things outside the embodiment that we identify as ours, and, at the same time, the media, particularly the Internet, is an extension of our world, mentally and maybe even physically, then it is not farfetched to imagine that we may assimilate—or amalgamate—into our multi-voiced, flexible, Frankenstein self whatever may strike our fancy as we explore our extended mediascape and virtual realm, especially when, online, our identities are now susceptible to interpellation by a previously inconceivable array of positions, both individual and cultural. It is like a veritable smorgasbord of options. Moreover, if we accept or agree with Gauntlett's notion of self as

consumer-driven narrative, what better place to exercise this than in a highly text-based medium where the exchange of information and the purchase of goods and services are the main constituents?

The Internet, then, becomes a great metaphorical assembly line or workshop where we can construct ourselves repeatedly. Echoing this metaphor, Sherry Turkle describes the Internet as "... a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create" (181). However, the perception of anonymity and disembodiment, the notion that what happens online does not have to necessarily have a consequence also makes it the "perfect playground for putting into practice certain part-identities that are not quickly appreciated in real life" (Van Halen and Janssen 397). This is to say, the virtual realm becomes a site of negotiation and of discovery. Yet, that same space that allows for mutability by definition also permits performance, artifice, and deception. While some people might be inclined to take certain less popular parts of their identities for a test-drive, some might be trying on identities that are absolutely incongruent with their offline persona. While this might seem innocuous in principle, when one takes into account that people do not exist online in a vacuum and that they are likely to interact with others who might be unaware of their ongoing experimentation, the ramifications are many. Sherry Turkle articulates this problematic, stating, "What are the social implications of spinning off virtual personae that can run around with names and genders of our choosing, unhindered by the weight and physicality of embodiment?" (249). She cautions that while "In the physically embodied world, we have no choice but to assume responsibility for our body's actions," when it come to the online realm, "The possibilities inherent to virtuality, on the other hand, may provide some people with an excuse for irresponsibility, just as they may enable

creative expressions that would otherwise have been repressed” (254). This is reminiscent of the tropes of books such as *The Invisible Man*, the 1897 classic by H.G. Wells. In a modernized and loose literary adaptation, the 2000 film *Hollow Man* touches on the same notion of accountability and conscientiousness as a burden of the embodied, one that can be shrugged off in a liberating sense once we can no longer be held answerable. Its tag line, “What would you do if you were invisible? How far would you go?” plays on the same apprehension that the Internet arouses. This notion of lack of responsibility for the havoc disembodied, anonymous selves may cause is fuel for doomsayers. Whereas dishonesty is a possibility, “Recent cybercultural studies...show that while people sometimes act in fanciful disguises on the various Internet arenas, they still tend to retain some idea of identifiable personal agency with relative stable coherence” (Förnas 34). In fact, “Traditional boundaries...are stunningly tenacious. They are underpinned by a combination of technical, physiological, institutional, social, and cultural factors that have accumulated a great offline strength that tends to be reproduced online as well” (Förnas 11).

Also, while cyberspace allows for identity play, this figuring out may not all be fun and games, so to speak. There is evidence that whilst people tend to maintain a certain level of identity coherence while still testing out boundaries, sometimes this experimentation does become more of a real negotiation that “not only offers an opportunity to extend the self-space beyond the ordinary and usual, but also has the potential to undermine existing power structures in the self” (Hermans Introduction: *The Dialogical Self*, 312). Once those structures are destabilized, the self is more susceptible to manipulation or influence, and the same system that caused the weakening is also a repository of people offering up new and interesting opinions, ideas, norms, etc that can replace our old ones. It is perhaps because of this immediate and transactional aspect that Van Halen and Janssen refer to the internet as “a newly emerged form of

mediated *in vivo* self-construction” where people “use the transmitted reactions of real, albeit distant, others to mirror themselves” (397). Again, this ties back into the Lacanian mirror stage, except that we are identifying directly with others and perhaps pursuing our own creation in their image—even if there might not always be an image to speak of in this highly textual medium. Hermans explains, “Increasingly, the voices of other people, groups, communities, and cultures become part of our private worlds” (Introduction: The Dialogical Self, 304). These voices represent more available alternatives to choose from in our identity management: choices that have the power to connect us to others. Indeed, “Lifestyle choices then, can give our personal narratives an identifiable shape, linking us to communities of people who are ‘like us’—or people who, at least have made similar choices” (Gauntlett 103). Sherry Turkle offers a different but not contradictory look at how our negotiation of self leads to seeking others. She proposes, “As we sense our inner diversity we come to know our limitations. We understand that we do not and cannot know things completely, not the outside world and not ourselves. Today’s heightened consciousness of incompleteness may predispose us to join with others” (Turkle 261). Whether either reason resonates more with us or a combination thereof is appropriate, the fact remains that once we began to migrate at least part of our lives online, it did not take long for us to find one another and begin to congregate.

### Communities and the Internet

Ironically, scholars have pointed to the Internet as both a force behind the wearing down of physicality and borders and a solution to the need to recreate a sense of place or being part of a community. Personal computers, and later the Internet, as did most forms of entertainment and technologies that made it possible for the world to come to us instead of asking us or forcing us

to seek what we needed in the outside world, provided an additional reason to stay in the comfort of our home. Yet, despite the similarities with other mediums and devices, there is something about computers that is more engaging than its technological predecessors were. Sherry Turkle explains, “The computer’s holding power is a phenomenon frequently referred to in terms associated with drug addiction. It is striking that the word ‘user’ is associated mainly with computers and drugs” (30). The Internet multiplied that power exponentially. Somewhat apocalyptically, De Zengotita asserts, “more and more people prefer dealing with automated phone services for the same reason they prefer ATMs to bank tellers. They want to avoid the little psychic shock that necessarily accompanies any engagement, however fleeting, with another human being” (175). He goes on to explain that when you are online, “Not only are you free to be just the way you are, and free to change as well, but everything around you also reflects that. Interacting with digital entities contributes to the construction of that portable bubble so many of us are getting accustomed to living in” (176). This freedom is also compounded by the ability to tailor much of our computer and online lives to every one of our whims, preferences, etc. Online, we only need to be aware of that of which we want to be aware, we can change our environment, even our reality in some ways, and it can keep us away from that with which we would rather not interact or be confronted. In his book Globalization and Culture, John Tomlinson reflects that, “some developments in the ‘customizing’ of media technology to suit individual lifestyles might appeal to or encourage an insular, self-centered cultural outlook” (175). Real life is not as pliable. We are forced to contend with other people, their choices, and their views. Hence it might seem far less appealing a place to inhabit. Insulation from others and repudiation of human contact and reality are not the only putative corollaries of our fascination with the cybernetic that cause some people to be uneasy about.

Luddite fears about the erasure of human beings and the rule of the machines are hardly novel. Yet, despite their admonitory tales of the imminent overthrow and expiration of humanity or, at the very least, the impending cessation of life as we know it, the process of mechanization has been a protracted one, and cyborgs have yet to take over our planet. Indeed, there are other variables at play. Group identity, which is crucial to the sense of community, is also under threat by other forces. As described in the Introduction to this project and in Chapter One, Arjun Appadurai uses the neologism *ethnoscape* to refer to different phenomena. He explains that he intends the term to point at certain issues about the modern world with which current research methods, like ethnographies, need to contend, especially “the changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity. As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic projects, the ethno in ethnography takes a slippery nonlocalized quality” (Appadurai 48). Here, Appadurai points to reasons for the breakdown of community that are not necessarily or directly related to technology, even if technological advances, both in communication and transportation, may have had a hand in the process of migration and regrouping. Appadurai points out that today “The landscapes of group identities – the ethnoscares—around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous” (48). This points directly to the notion of the deterritorialization of some groups and to just how complicated a pattern the formation of community and group identity can become with so very many elements factored into the matrix. Despite these complex dynamics, we cannot dismiss our dependence on and what at times could only be described as infatuation with technology in its various forms as an ingredient that belongs in this concoction. It is no accident, then, that Appadurai pairs up the notion of *ethnoscape* with that of *technoscape*,

by which he means, “the global configuration, also ever fluid, of technology and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries” (34). To Appadurai, the notions of motion and mediation intertwine to create a new set of circumstances, where “we see moving image meet deterritorialized viewers. These create diasporic public spheres, phenomena that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social change” (4).

Whether technology has played a significant part in it or not, it is undeniable that the fabric, even the very notion of community has been forever altered. Perhaps the loss of the familiar sense of community that seems quite widespread in much of the Western world is an occurrence of a cyclical nature and all humanity needs to do is wait for the pendulum to swing back the other way. The advent of the Internet, however, might be an unprecedented ripple in this sequence that might shift the process altogether. As Sherry Turkle articulates in Life on the Screen,

Many of the institutions that used to bring people together—a main street, a union hall, a town meeting—no longer work as before. Many people spend most of their day alone at the screen of a television or a computer. Meanwhile, social beings that we are, we are trying (as McLuhan said) to retribalize. And the computer is playing a central role. We correspond with each other through electronic mail and contribute to electronic bulletin boards and mailing lists; we join interest groups whose participants include people from all over the world. Our rootedness to place has attenuated (178).

This quotation singles out the likelihood that even in our endeavor to refurbish a sense of community, we further corrode our attachment to our source and continue to sever our bonds to a site where we belong.

The truth is that far more than just a mere extension to our ability to communicate, the Internet is a relatively new arena where we renegotiate notions of community and self—a place where we can forge relationships, produce meaning, and cultivate ideologies and identities. Kendall echoes Turkle’s idea, and posits that “the need for community and perceptions of a lack of community [...] drive people to create new kinds of community online” (201). Could it be, then, that in this globalized world, where national and personal identities are in flux and borders are eroded or seemingly less relevant, the local and our sense of belonging could be resituated in the digital world? And if so, what does that mean?

Some theorists and researchers have argued that the putative community-building aspect of the Internet has been undeservedly overstated and many attribute what they consider to be misplaced enthusiasm and sheer inaccuracy to people’s nostalgia and their unfulfilled desire to find a panacea to the crumbling of society as they once knew it. As Turkle posits, “In an age where we feel fragmented as individuals, it is not surprising to see the emergence of popular mythologies that try to put the world back together again” (265). Clearly, on the somewhat more skeptical side of the fence, Turkle points out the irony of the situation: “Technological enthusiasts think that computers will reverse some of this social atomization, touting virtual experience and virtual community as ways for people to widen their horizons. But is it really sensible to suggest that the way to revitalize community is to sit alone in our rooms, typing at our networked computers and filling our lives with virtual friends?” (235). Her scathing perspective



on the paradox stings, and she is not alone in this view. De Zengotita's mocking tone is tangible when he argues,

Incidentally, remember when people thought that the Web was going to build bridges between communities and inspire cross-cultural understanding, etc.? Hah! The multiplication of niches has been so intense that the word fragmentation doesn't begin to describe it. What with these search worms and filters and custom advertising hooking you up with stuff you're already interested in—why, you can spend your whole life online and never leave your own head. (199)

Despite the morsels of truth in this contention, it might be too much of a reductive argument. After all, the fact that the Internet allows for us to isolate ourselves does not necessarily mean it is more conducive to segregation than it is to any other activity or situation that it might facilitate. In a sense, making that assumption is tantamount to accepting the same line of reasoning that presupposes that just because the Internet might be a place to create a sense of belonging it necessarily follows that it certainly will. So, as much as those who decry the Internet fault those who celebrate it, they often make the same mistake as those they criticize. Turkle concludes: "...it is sobering that the personal computer revolution, once conceptualized as a tool to rebuild community, now tends to concentrate on building community inside a machine" (Turkle 244). Yet, here, the use of the phrase "inside a machine" seems to deride the virtual world and privilege the real.

Luckily, others have managed to retain a far more impartial view despite the ongoing polarization and do not feel the compulsion to overplay the dystopian or utopian suggestions. Indeed, the fact that individuals have taken to populating the Internet and communing with others in that newly-found location is hardly surprising. After all, as social beings, we have a

tendency to seek others out and to congregate in the places where we find ourselves. Inevitably, we come back to the notion of space. Once a geographic site is conquered and colonized, civilization moves in, and people go about the business of being human, part of which involves communicating, communing, collaborating, and associating with one another. Coming together, grouping, and regrouping in various ways are all actions that are part of the normal progression. From there, culture, norms, and ideologies emerge. Cyberspace is not that different, in that sense. Murray Forman suggests that while “Individual and collective identities are connected to place...” it is “...rarely to a single place and, owing to contemporary influences such as increased travel and global communication technologies, never in a pure or unmediated way” (30). Therefore, with mediation not being a cumbersome obstacle to place, we become freer to interact with people in more remote sites in a much more expressive manner, to the point that interacting with them plays a stronger and much more direct part in our notion of our social spheres. Indeed, Forman explains, “The cultural apparatuses that organize our individual and collective senses of social belongingness are being altered by the newly emergent global-local nexus” (32). What facilitates this phenomenon is that even though there is a tie to location, community is not just about place. In fact, Forman argues that “Community is organized around a much more complicated and long-standing structure of interrelationships, a relatively strong sense of common cause (whether it is ever enacted or visible in concrete practices), and at least a modicum of localized cooperation that exceeds geosocial, place-bound affiliations” (29). Surely, the fact that people still struggle with the notion of the Internet as place can complicate matters. When people consider the virtual world a quasi world, a mental world, the idea of sharing that space seems even more removed from the real. However, as Mary Chayko points out, “This ‘space’ is more than just a construct. As people feel that they are in it, that they are in some

invisible but tangible and real way connecting with another person, they come to feel a sense of presence with or proximity to the ‘other’” (31). If we think of the groups that we consider communities, we probably think of them in a spatial manner; among the most prevalent ones, there is our home, our neighborhood, our workplace, our city, and so on. However, despite the obvious location-driven aspects of these collections of people, their underlying unifying elements are less about the space. In fact, the space is sometimes a corollary, subordinated to the motives for assembling. People in communities generally have something else driving their affinity; they may have a common history, common goals, or a combination of those and other elements. People come together for specific reasons, form different types of relationships within the group, and come up with and function according to group-specific guidelines. Förnas uses the example of a subculture to highlight how shared space can be rendered unnecessary when there are other overriding correlations. He explains, “A subculture need not be thought of as an imaginary community only because many of its individuals never actually meet” (Förnas 36). People who identify with a subculture can be spread out across the world and never actually be in the same physical space, yet, the bond that fuses them in their interest, allegiance, beliefs, and behavior may be far more intense and resilient than their relationship to other people in their immediate vicinity who are not associated with that group or sphere of influence.

This is not to negate the significance of space—whether physical or not—as a facilitator for bonding, but simply to deemphasize it as a constraint, since it has proven not to be the prerequisite it was speculated to be. If we stop wrestling with the notion of communities as inevitably tied to location and accept the premise of the online realm as a possible space, what becomes of more interest are questions about the processes by which these communities form,

their nature and norms, the quality and attributes of the relationships among participants, and the ways in which meaning is made, and ideologies fostered.

Clearly, one of the reasons people flock together is a joint interest, hobby, or pursuit. As Mary Chayko points out, “In modern times, social relations tend to depend more on the sharing of ‘common ideas, interests, sentiments, and occupations’ than on the sharing of literal space” (Chayko 7). Beyond the cohesion based on these commonalities, the connections we form become sustainable because, “When we believe that we share some social attribute(s) or status characteristic(s) with someone else, we may come to feel connected on the basis of presuming that the other is the “same type” as we are” (Chayko 54). This inclination to associate with and be fond of those who share our interests is also characteristic of subcultures, and of fandom, which some people have come to characterize as a brand of subculture. In her essay “What if the Main Character Looks Like Me,” Kimberly Gregson points out that “Community is a big part of any fandom culture...” (34).

Another reason for people to amalgamate is a shared feeling of alienation from the mainstream. Chayko suggests that often “Strong bonds also are engendered when the people involved feel threatened and/or marginalized, thus yielding a heightened desire or need to feel a sense of community with one another” (Chayko 105). It makes sense that those who inhabit the fringes of a community would want to form their own group where they can find affinity and relish in the sense of belonging that humans crave. Incidentally, being a fan—whether that label is branded on by others or self-chosen—can be a reason for segregation. As much as they might bring some people together, the intensity of their interest is sometimes off-putting to the mainstream, which is why, as Paul Theberge writes in his essay “Everyday Fandom: Fan Clubs, Blogging, and the Quotidian Rhythms of the Internet,” many theoreticians “...have tended to

celebrate fan practices as a kind of oppositional culture” (487). Nevertheless, with so many products and interests all vying for our attention—and our wallets—today, “...being a fan has become an ever more common mode of cultural consumption,” declare Jonathan Gray and his co-authors in the introduction of their book Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World. The authors address the incredible ubiquity of fans, which seems to have exploded online. In fact, they estimate that “Today, with many such communities’ migration to the Internet, the thousands of fan discussion groups, web sites, and mailing lists populating the Web are only eclipsed in presence by pornography (which, of course, has its own thriving fan base)” (Gray et al 7). Certainly, the Internet’s vast landscape and easy access lend themselves as a solution to the problem of finding others with interests similar to ours, especially if our pursuits do not align with—or even run counter to—the mainstream. In their article “The Usage of Space in Dialogical Self-Construction,” Van Halen and Janssen refer to this phenomenon, pointing out, “It is now possible to connect to individuals of the same mind that one could not have found in any other way. This way, the Internet houses numerous virtual communities that are devoted to a very specific interest or concerns” (397). This argument goes a long way to support the idea that that it is very likely that a fascination with hip-hop would be sufficient to pull diverse people from various countries together in an online community.

Whereas the notion of people flocking to the internet to commune with others for the reasons noted above makes online communities appear quite grassroots and organic—despite their cybernetic constitution—not all this congregating is as spontaneous as it appears. Indeed, virtual groupings “are built by careful design. [...] Audiences are sought for products, services, and ideologies.[...] Corporations and other businesses have a commercial interest and investment in seeing “clusters of interest” coalesce around their products and services” (Chayko 62). This

quotation refers to the idea that sites are sometimes being created with the sole purpose of being warehouses of information for consumers as well as storefronts for media products and other related merchandize. Even when the sites have already been formed less artificially—by fans for example—and without the meddling of parties who have a financial stake in pushing a product or service, media outlets seek to home in on the location of said online communities and learn about their operations. In their essay “Customer Relationship Management: Automating Fandom in Music Communities,” Tom McCourt and Patrick Burkart focus on this practice as related to the music industry and report: “Since consumers face an ongoing avalanche of products in the form of recordings, videos, and texts, it is imperative that marketers steer the right items to the right consumers at the right time. Discovering affinity groups, and tapping into their searching and sharing operations, has become a lucrative business” (261). This technique is not circumscribed to one industry, however, and as much as it might appear exploitative, the fact is many of these groups, especially fans, are actively seeking products to buy as well. In a sense, it might be a very symbiotic relationship between consumers and producers.

Despite how keenly people have flocked online or how groups may have thrived in the virtual realm, many still question and even cast aspersions on the quality and validity of affiliations created and maintained online. Our attachment to what we deem as more immediate, material, or tangible seems rather obstinate, which is ironic when we try to reify relationships, which are rather abstract in nature. Förnas points out “...mental and symbolic constructs cannot be said to be pure illusions. The real world consists of much more than what can be seen or sensed. In an important sense of the word, symbolically expressed and intersubjectively shared meanings belong to human reality even though they cannot be measured in length or weight” (Förnas 30). In order to explain these relationships formed between people who do not share the

same physical space, Mary Chayko, in her book Connecting, introduces the notion of “Sociomental bonds—bonds between people who cannot or do not meet face-to-face...” and explains that for these connections to form, three things are needed, “a mediator (often technological) to facilitate communication and connectedness among physically separated people, individuals whose minds are similar enough to permit the creation of a connection, and a ‘space’ in which the connection can be said to ‘take root’ and ‘grow’” (2,8). In her research, she has found that the Internet acts both as the technological mediator and the space where the bond can flourish. The other location that acts as an incubator for the relationship is a person’s mind. When we identify with someone, or like them, we become mentally oriented to them and we make them part of our day by thinking about them, which also helps cement our bond. Chayko explains, “Possessing an “intermediate” degree of reality—with both real and fantasy elements—sociomental connections can help us build a bridge between the world “out there” and the world in our heads, for such connections are the province of both” (118). And with increasingly more people seeking rapport with others in the online realm, sociomental bonds “have never been more prevalent, more central to people’s lives, and more critical to an understanding of the times and of the social order” (2).

Indubitably, some of this rejection of relationships that are completely or primarily managed online stems from people’s natural but misguided tendency to contrast online relationships to their non-virtual, shared space counterparts. Yet, as Mary Chayko instructs, “There is little to be gained by comparing sociomental structures with face-to-face forms in some attempt to find them “better” or worse” in any significant way” (Chayko 144). However, it is hard not to make such a judgment, when our so-called real life—or ‘RL’ in shorthand internet speak, curiously not used as a way to trivialize the online realm, but just to clarify which realm is

being referenced—is all we have to go by as far as experiencing relationships. Yet, it would be detrimental to do so, especially given the trend of virtualization the world seems to be experiencing. At one point, privileging the real over the virtual will no longer work. Turkle points to this development when she writes, “As more people spend more time in these virtual spaces, some go so far as to challenge the idea of giving any priority to RL at all” (Turkle 14). Furthermore, if one insists on making any declarations of the validity of online relationships in comparison to our non-virtual world, it would also hold true that “...online relationships demand more involvement and engagement than do offline relationships, since it would be so easy to just ‘let go’ and not respond” (Sveningsson 73). For online relationships to subsist there must be a keen interest in keeping the relationship alive. It cannot survive without proper dedication whereas in real life, some relationships persist more out of inertia or due to elements other than true significance. One example that illustrates this theory is that of the bonds we form with those with whom we work. These are people with whom we might spend more time on a weekly basis than with those people who are part of our primary affective relationships. Yet, we often lose all contact with coworkers once we switch jobs, which means that our attachment was transient and contingent upon the whimsical convergence of commonplace and common goal, as derived from employment by a specific company. We realize that, at work, conversing with people, attending functions together, and being a member of a group are more of an exercise in behavior that is *de rigueur*, a function of following mainstream social guidelines. Our connections are more circumstantial rather than born out of any real sense of involvement or affinity. Another example could be a romantic relationship where one or both parties are not quite committed to the relationship but are tied together out of fear, complacency, or even sexual satisfaction. When online, you cannot just coexist, and there is no mandate to congregate at a certain place and time.



Online relationships are maintained out of the sheer interest of those involved and many times despite the barriers that lack of shared physical space and synchronicity may pose.

In the introduction to the book Virtual Methods, editor Christine Hine points out that, “Mediated interactions have come to the fore as key ways in which social practices are defined and experienced” and that “Counter to the stereotype, online interactions can be socially rich interactions” (Hine 1, 17). In fact, all signs point to the depth that can be achieved through online contact. Perhaps as a result of the anonymity afforded by the online realm, people are more prone to confession, and to delving into topics they would not breach so soon—if at all—in a face-to-face relationship. This immediacy, this putative acceleration of intimacy in an online setting often becomes evident when people who have met online decide to meet in real life. Kendall posits, “The discomfort people feel when making the transition from an online to an offline relationship suggests that although online relationships may not feel as close as offline relationships, they inspire the kinds of disclosure usually reserved for closer relationships” (165). Apart from anonymity fostering revelatory behavior, another reason for the highly confessional nature of online interactions is that sharing deeply personal information is a way to demonstrate faith in someone else, and being trusted with intimate details is proof that the ensuing relationship is bona fide and profound. Sveningsson suggests, “Trust toward and between individuals is no longer dependent on common ties within the local community or kinship; instead it is constructed through both parties revealing information about themselves” (53). It makes sense that in a medium where face or voice are not the norm, and we might feel we are missing out on cues on how to read others’ intentions, people would seek to share and to be privy to some personal information as a sort of token of their connection with one another.

Then, where are these gestures exchanged? How are these relationships formed on websites? Many websites today offer areas such as forums and chat rooms where visitors can gather and talk about their interests, news, or whatever aspect of life the site is geared toward. Chat rooms are synchronous text-based conversations that generally appear as scrolling writing on the user's screen. There are generally various threads of conversations being maintained simultaneously and anyone can jump in and contribute. While some site administrators might keep logs of the chats, the information contained in the streams of text might seem ephemeral, as it disappears once it is off the screen. It is very much like daily conversation, in that sense. Many chat programs also allow participants to speak privately, without sharing their conversation with the rest of the chat room, through an instant messenger application. Moving from a more public setting to a more personal venue might signal an increase in intimacy between users. Forums, on the other hand, are mostly asynchronous—although they allow for synchronicity as well—conversation threads, where a member posts a message which remains in place and others can read the text and respond to it. Responses are also saved and, in turn, responded to by other participants. Forums tend to be less chaotic, as the threads are generally posted under clear headings in areas designated for particular topics, and the information contained in the forums does not disappear. Of course, another tool for communication is the ability to email other members. Often, sites offer members the ability to create a profile, where they can share basic information about themselves, including their personal email so that others can reach out to them. All of these features are certainly the type of online elements that allow for more instantaneous and bidirectional connections. Chayko points out, “Responding to e-mail messages that have been posted on a message board or discussion group some time in the past is a more modern manifestation of quasi-synchronization. Again, both the minds of the writer and the

reader are brought together as the message is read and responded to. Of course, when people chat in “real time” it is even easier to synchronize rhythms and feel resonant with another person” (69). It should be noted that this overview of sites’ components is far from comprehensive and it seeks only to examine relationship-building tools in sites that are not created with the sole purpose of bringing people together. Web sites that have come to be known as networking—such as Myspace, Facebook, Bebo, and WAYN—fall in a completely unique category and most of their applications are driven by the imperative to communicate and congregate.

Up to now, it is clear that people populate the Internet, that they correspond and converse with others, and that they sometimes form lasting bonds. Yet, does the practice of people frequenting the same online space and interacting with others with whom they have some sort of common ground necessarily constitute a community of any sort? It is the combination of behaviors that people exhibit while in groups and the norms that they create and abide by that really reify the sense of community properly. Do online groups fulfill these requirements?

Sveningsson’s research points in that direction as it shows that when it comes to the Internet, “Despite the fact that that is an unregulated and strongly informal arena, there still seems to be a need for rituals” (54). Patterns of behavior and guidelines by which participants abide are markers of a more organized grouping and they also help people feel more in tune. Chayko reflects, “Rituals help us become fully involved in an experience of sociomental bonding in an ongoing fashion,” and “As technologically derived rituals provide order for the individual, they also provide a sense of comfort and stability” (89, 95). As an example of a ritual, Lori Kendal, who spent time researching an online community called BlueSky, cites the practice of hazing. She reflects, “Hazing provides a ritual barrier. People have to make it through the initial

harassment in order to become a part of the group” (134). Whereas hazing is often associated with sororities and fraternities, where newcomers tolerate humiliation and endure constant aggravation in order to prove their allegiance to the group, this type of testing is part and parcel of many group’s system of indoctrination. That online groups would take to taunting newbies—online speak for new members—as a rite of passage speaks volumes of how much like offline groups online communities can be. Another practice that allows people to coalesce is the use of symbols, which Chayko explains “...can serve as focal points that large numbers of people can ‘rally around’ and use to identify one another as members of the community. In cyberspace communities, people use a wide array of special textual symbols that are continuously invented and disseminated through online networks. These help in communication and in the construction of personal bonds and also give communities their own special identity” (83). These symbols can be ways in which people address each other, inside jokes, or patterns of behavior. Groups tend to even adopt particular linguistic markers to code who is an insider and who is not.

While some of these practices may have to do with behavioral patterns or guidelines, one of the main ways in which people create a sense of constancy is related to the chronological aspect of commitment. Paul Theberge articulates the absence of the question of time in many elucidations about the online real: “In popular discourse, the Internet is often discussed through a variety of spatial and temporal metaphors, but too often it is the spatial ones that dominate” (487). He goes on to explain that as Rhiannon Bury posits in his work, “...the very notion of ‘community’ means very little in relation to the Internet unless it is understood as resulting from a series of consistent, sustained engagements in specific communal practices over time” (Paul Theberge 487). Indeed, consistency in being present is an incredibly important aspect of creating bonds. Seeing the same people over a period of time, learning how they communicate, what

interests them, etc. is a vital part of creating cohesion, especially in a world where it is so easy for people to come and go, as nothing ties them to a place or schedule. The act of being there is further complicated online, as it takes more than presence; it takes actual participation. Lori Kendall explains,

As in offline social groups, if a participant fails to show up and regularly interact, he or she risks being forgotten or becoming marginal to the group. In a physical social setting, participants can often show up and merely ‘hang out.’ Those who speak little may still have a strong presence in the group. But in a social forum with no physical presence, maintaining a sense of presence and connectedness requires frequent, ongoing participation. Without periodic textual contributions, you are all but invisible online (24).

Another aspect of websites that engenders the sense of being a part of a group is the practice of setting up a membership requirement. Many sites allow people to peruse their content, but “To get full access to a Web site with certain interactive elements, there is generally required some kind of membership with a user name and a password. This harkens back to procedures within traditional organization or associations” (Förnas 36). This sets up an ‘us’ and ‘them,’ outsiders vs. insiders dichotomy that reinforces the sense of belonging for those that have made the choice to commit to a group by becoming members. Membership often comes with the perks of full access to all the areas of the site and the ability to create a profile and become recognized by other members. This is especially important in communities centered on a common interest as “Being in the company of like-minded people also has the advantage that they are the kind of audience you want recognition from. It means that you matter in the eyes of the proper persons...” (Van Halen and Janssen 398). When it comes to sites where fans of a media product come together, knowledge plays a big part in their value to and standing within

the community. Gregson explains, “Fans take pride in the amount and variety of knowledge they master about the object of their fandom. A fan’s stake in the community can be enhanced through learning and creating new things for the community” (Gregson 134). Mazzarella agrees with this and adds, “One way in which fans can gain popular culture capital is through knowledge acquisition. The fan [...] who is the first to break the latest ‘news’ on the favored celebrity is afforded more status within the fan community” (Mazzarella 150). In fact, fans use these types of methods so that they may “...distinguish between which fans are considered ‘true fans; and which are not” (Mazzarella 152). These practices then result in the stratification of the membership according to seniority, skills, etc. Within the membership, not everyone is the same. Just as in most communities, there is a pecking order, there are alliances and cliques, there are disputes, and there are people in charge of keeping the peace. The same patterns are apparent in online communities, where some people—perhaps due to their knowledge, their charisma, etc.—who are very popular, where some people find more affinity with specific members and dislike others, and where administrators—those who own and/or manage the site, often also referred to as moderators or wizards—have to sometimes act as adjudicators when it comes to violations of rules or codes. In her research on multi-user domains—text-based chat programs often referred to as MUDs where people often play role-playing games or just congregate to chat—Lori Kendall found that “How a wizard administers a mud affects the social norms of the group,” and that “Several forms of sanction are available to wizards against other characters on muds. The ultimate sanction is character destruction”(64). Clearly, as in RL societies, online communities must have ways of dealing with undesired and pernicious behavior. It is especially important for online groups to have harsh penalties because, “Online groups in general are vulnerable to outsiders. A bully bent on harassing a particular group is difficult to stop and can make the

environment so unpleasant that it loses its value as a social space” (Kendall 126-7). Expulsion from the group, deletion of a profile, banning of an IP, and other such solutions are only so practical, as perpetrators can come back under different names and from new locations. This is not the only dilemma online groups face when it comes to their survival. The fact that their ability to congregate is contingent upon technology not failing means not being able to always rely on their community being accessible. Kendall explains this when she writes, “The problem of database maintenance suggests one of the ways in which online relationships are vulnerable to offline interference. The existence of a coherent social group [...] depends on the continuous and consistent existence of a forum in which the group can interact” (Kendall 66). This means that if the computer where the server resides experiences a problem, the community can disappear briefly, or even permanently. Weather conditions, power outages, or even the owners of the domain’s decision to pack it all up can instantly undo all the effort and time spent building a community, and since the relationships are real, so is the loss and the grieving.

### Bringing it Back to Hip-Hop

The theories and examples outlined above are of particular significance when researching how members of and visitors to UK-based rap websites consume, represent, espouse, and maybe even reterritorialize hip-hop music and culture. Starting with the notion of personhood, it is vital to note that, as Nelson George explains, “The most consistent element of hip hop has been a captivating, yet ever mutating, sense of self” (175). Indeed, “Rapping is an extrovert’s art in which projecting a self-created identity is essential” (McPahul 109). This identity, which used to be derived in great part from the location of birth or residence, is now negotiated, increasingly, through the media, especially in the online realm. As Turkle points out, “In the story of

constructing identity in the culture of simulation, experiences on the Internet figure prominently, but these experiences can only be understood as part of a larger cultural context. That context is the story of the eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual...” (Turkle 11). Hip-hop fans are not populating the Internet as individuals seeking their own identity in a vacuum; they are communing with others who have resorted to the internet to find people with similar interests with whom to connect. Clearly, as Murray Forman posits, “The growth of this technological sector facilitated the formation of multiple virtual communities focused on audience tastes and affective fan identification derived from hip-hop, producing a context for fan chat and other interactive activities.” (283-4)

Since hip-hop is not indigenous to the UK, its UK-based consumers and enthusiasts cannot always experience it at the “street” level or at what we would refer to as the “scene” level. This need for a like-minded community can then be met by the creation of online communities that focus on hip-hop. Distance and lack of synchronicity no longer present themselves as insurmountable obstacles in the pursuit of interests. Furthermore, while initially sites focused on selling products, “...these sites are attempting a more comprehensive content-based approach to the medium, moving rapidly away from basic e-commerce concepts of pitching commodities and embarking on more holistic approaches that emphasize hip-hop lifestyles and cultural knowledge, of which material goods are only a segment” (Forman 284). This means that hip-hop sites are evolving from storefronts to real meaning making and ideology propagating hubs. This shift is critical, as these communities are now even more significant because as Chayko suggests, “It is in groups and communities that our minds become structured in a manner similar to others. We learn to sense, perceive, classify, interpret, model, and think about the world in groups...” and “As we learn to assume the attitudes of the groups of which we are part, or to which we are



oriented as reference groups we begin to build a kind of “framework” upon which the self is constructed” (20, 147). If this is so, could it be that the websites these fans create and populate, where they interact and form bonds, where they discover and invent themselves, have become their reality, their community, their global-local nexus hub? The only way to begin to unravel the tangles of those answers is to delve into a virtual hip-hop community and explore it from the inside.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION**

### The Basics of the Project

As it should be apparent from the first two chapters of this dissertation, my project weaves together several themes and draws on diverse disciplines, namely cultural studies, new media studies, sociology, gender studies, and rhetorical studies. Certainly, the breadth and the depth of this venture demands that I employ a multilayered approach and diverse research methods.

As I established in the introduction, this study is unique in that, to my knowledge, there were none in existence that I could replicate or on which I could base my decisions as far as research methods. For this investigation to be successful, I am grounding my work not only in secondary research in the shape of theory, but also in primary research, both quantitative and qualitative, by utilizing the methods of visual ethnography, content analysis, non-participant observation, and discourse analysis.

### Rationale

The somewhat embryonic stages in which Internet research finds itself make choosing a methodology a veritable challenge. This complication is further heightened when the Internet is not just a means of getting information for the purpose of research but the object or subject of the study itself in the sense that the medium is has become a the field for this fieldwork of sorts.

Moreover, there is indeed a palpable tension between the drive to break new ground and attempt new approaches, on the one hand, and on the other the need to stick to academically acceptable and proven methods of gathering and analyzing information. We find ourselves in

somewhat uncharted territory and much of what is necessary or even suitable is up for grabs. While academia strives for conquering new ground and thrives in pushing the boundaries, there is still a level of mistrust when it comes to studying the Internet, and there is a sense of suspicion surrounding research methods that have not yet been accepted as part of the canon.

Another patently dichotomous part of this research is the decision whether to embark in quantitative or qualitative research. While a strictly qualitative approach to research, specifically the exploration and analysis of textual and image-based narratives found on the website seemed the most germane and effective kind of method here, I also recognized that reflecting on trends without any regard to how the data stacked up statistically might be a disservice to this project, and a potential challenge to the possibility of continuing to research beyond this process.

With those somewhat divergent notions, needs, and urges in mind, I settled on a hybrid approach to my methodology. To begin with, it was clear to me that this project necessitated a solid basis of secondary research before I could branch out into primary research. The rarity of this project demanded an extensive review of literature to set up the vastly intricate theoretical design that frames the issues at hand, as well as to prove the connections between the different facets.

Secondly, I decided that I should narrow my research to one website that epitomized the kind of site I was interested in targeting and use that as a case study. I concluded that I would rather sacrifice variety for the opportunity to get more depth out of the analysis of one particular site.

Thirdly, I chose to integrate both quantitative and qualitative methods to maximize the impact of my research and allow for the most breadth in my examination of the data. While this combination can sometimes result in an uneasy alliance, I surmise that the benefits outweigh the

risk. On the one hand, my hopes are that the due diligence paid to the numbers will facilitate the rational validation of what might otherwise be considered anecdotal, vague information.

Conversely, the flexibility and human centeredness inherent to qualitative research will temper the rigidity and afford interpretative explanations for the numbers yielded by the quantitative research. The majority of my analysis, however, was based on qualitative reading of entire threads and conversations. The quantitative aspect of the data served as a means to support certain points.

Fourthly, I elected to apply traditional academically sound research to the online environment. This means that my research and its results of my research will ride the line between the conventional and the experimental. My expectation is that the more traditional approach with a few online-related twists will help bridge the gap between the expected and what might become the standard as this field grows. In a way, perhaps my attempt to re-imagine these approaches and fitting these methodologies together could be my contribution to the constantly developing world of research. Indeed, my hope was that, given the dearth in specific methodologies for online studies, the particular methodological approach that I created by juxtaposing different modes and tools could become a model of sorts that could then be applied to the study of other community-based, fan-based, subculture-based web sites, or any other site where the space as well as the communication and the interactions therein contained are to be examined.

### Three-Layered Methodology

There are three layers to my research, which serve as anchors for my investigation: **(1)** a review of theories and prior research that support the various concepts pertinent to my project,

namely globalization and cultural imperialism, techno-culture, hip-hop music and culture, among others; **(2)** an exploration of the content of a UK-based Hip Hop online community that provides media downloads, information, forums, chat rooms, and so on, as well as an ethnographic-type exploration of the online communities and the people who populate them, through observation; **(3)** a reading and interpretations of the findings of my research through the lenses of the theories explored earlier.

Layer number one, the review of theories and prior research, was laid out through chapters one and two, and was based on textual analysis of selected textbooks, high theory books, articles from peer-reviewed journals, and magazine and newspaper articles. This secondary research provides a strong platform from which to begin my own investigation and a matrix of context through which I can better understand my findings.

With this foundation in place, I moved on to the primary research phase of my investigation. Layer number two, the exploration of the media, was conducted through content analysis and visual/virtual ethnography. My intention was to carry out various incursions into this online hip-hop arena to gauge trends. As a part of the visual ethnography, I reviewed and collected data including web pages layouts, images adopted or produced by the community, forum posts, and chat room conversations. The trick here, if one can call it that, was the will to engage in full immersion and yet manage to circumvent the desire, which can sometimes seem like an imperative, to participate. I had to think of the site as a site in the archeological sense when it came to understanding the space, but I also had to think of it as an anthropological site where I conducted my fieldwork. Soon, it became obvious that beyond being a record-keeper, present to document the look and feel of the place and the content of the forums, I was truly

more of a silent witness to a dynamic web of relationships that made up the living, breathing fabric of a real (if virtual), thriving community.

Lastly, layer number three consists of evaluating the data, which really means trying to see what it all means. In chapter four I investigated how these narratives, images, and web design reinforce or problematize the assumptions or hypotheses made based on the literature review and theory matrix of the first two chapters. In some cases, the first layer, instead of setting up suggestions, remained quite impartial, only attempting to set up questions to be answered by the research. Layer number three began to answer, albeit perhaps not thoroughly settle, those queries.

Layer number one was accomplished in the span of my first two chapters, which discussed the intricate matrix of theories within which this project lies. Layer number three is accomplished in my last chapter, where I review my findings. This chapter outlines the rationale behind and the steps involved in step two, as well as the ethical concerns surrounding the study, and the limitations that might hinder it, and that would need to be addressed before embarking in further research beyond the scope of this project.

### Data Collection and Classification

For the content analysis/visual ethnography section of this investigation, I gathered evidence by collecting screen shots of the home page and the different sections or pages of the selected case study website, rapcentral.co.uk. I then explored these captures as cultural artifacts, paying attention to not only the explicit messages but also the attendant subtext and keeping in mind that this part of the website, the “official” aspect of it, is created not by the user but by the people who put together and profit from the site.

For the virtual ethnography section, I immersed myself in the online community, not by taking an active part in their chat room and forum discussion, but by observing and recording information. In this case, I again collected screen captures of the areas where user interaction took place, namely discussion forums, chat rooms, and where users created their own section of the website, namely the profile area. The screen shots also served as transcripts of different threads within discussion forums and chat room activity.

Because of the sheer amount of traffic and activity, especially posts in the discussion forums, and for the sake of pragmatism, I chose to look at one month's worth of discussion posts and one month's worth of news headlines. I chose different months for each of these sections so as to get a better spread of data. Both months were chosen entirely randomly. For the discussion forums, I only included threads that were started that month, as opposed to encompassing messages started in other months to which responses were added in during the sample month.

In addition to those two areas, I also collected screenshots of every section of the website (home page, news page, etc.), to explore their image and textual components. I also collected screenshots of member profiles and of the chat room area. While I anticipated I would spend quite some time reviewing chat transcripts, in all actuality, the lack of participation in that area indicated that it didn't merit a full month's worth of information.

Once I collected the information, I decided to plug each individual piece of data into a spreadsheet. I then labeled each piece of information as image or text, logged the description and the location of the item, as well as the date it was added, if available.

I then tagged each thread by employing a data coding method I devised using an Excel spreadsheet. I listed images and text and then labeled them according to markers that correspond to the questions I am trying to answer.

## Mainstream Media, Site Created, Member Created

The elements I am exploring might appear as part of mainstream media products, that is to say songs, pictures, or other ingredients created by media producers, or as part of information generated and shared by the website's administrators, members, or users. While all of these types of data are equally valuable, whether these images and words are provided by the media, selected by administrators, or contributed by the users is far from anecdotal information. A very interesting aspect of this area is that the Internet democratizes the ability to create material and so problematizes the creator/audience and producer/consumer dichotomies that are still pervasive in mass-produced, mainstream media. So as to keep track of those differences, I used two labels.

- Mainstream vs. Site Creation: This label helps me identify whether the material I am cataloguing was created by professional media producers or whether it came to be as part of the particular website I am exploring.
- Administrator vs. User Creation: This marker helps me figure out, once I have decided that the material I am exploring was created for this site, whether it was the administrators or the users that can be credited with the generation of the elements.

## Americanization

One of the main questions my project seeks to explore is whether the fact that this website deals with hip-hop has created an environment conducive to Americanization. Three tags help gauge the level to which America is privileged in the website.

- Reference to America: This tag was used whenever an image or text denotes some connection to the United States. By no means was this reserved for explicit mentions of



the U.S. Indeed references to America ranged from pictures of American rappers to use of American English, and so on.

- Reference to the UK/Britain: This label was applied to images or text that represented a correlation to the UK/Great Britain. Again, this was not exclusive to specifically overt allusions, but was applicable when images, posts, etc. suggested a link to Great Britain as well.
- Reference to a Geographical Other: This marker was devised to indicate those texts and images that point to a location or culture that is neither American nor British since the website can be accessed from anywhere and hip-hop has had an impact that spans the world. As in the cases before, a direct mention of the location and culture are not necessary.

### Community, Place, Space

Another area that my project investigates is the idea of the Internet as a location and the development of virtual communities. In order to explore the notion of the online realm as place or space, and to measure whether or not and how the people who populate the website act as a community, I used three two labels.

- Reference to Place or Space: This tag identifies images and texts that point to the conception of the Internet as a place. Examples include nomenclature used to denominate areas in the website and verbs employed to denote actions performed on the site.
- Reference to Community: This indicator serves to classify images and texts that suggest that this website is seen as a community. Some of the examples are actions taken by the members, guidelines, and so on.

## Hip-Hopization

The third and last theme of my project is to investigate whether the values of hip-hop, as discussed in Chapter One, are represented in the website. With the intention to evaluate the pervasiveness of these beliefs and attitudes, etc., I have created a slew of tags.

- Reference to Hip-Hop Slang: Since hip-hop has a particular vernacular, this label identifies those parts of the text, and images that include text, that make use of the vocabulary that is considered a part of the hip-hop culture.
- Reference to Sex or Hypersexuality: This tag is reserved for text or images that are heavily sexual or overtly sexual in nature. For women, this might be particularly obvious in pornographic overtones while in males it might be a reference to virility, and so on.
- Reference to Misogyny: This marker identifies elements that show dislike, contempt, or hatred for women. Misogynistic tones can take the shape of direct verbal attacks or words or images that denote objectification.
- Reference to Hypermasculinity: This identifier points to instances where the attitudes, beliefs, or actions that are considered to be solely, mostly, or archetypically male are emphasized or exaggerated. This can manifest textually in posturing or through images that depict men as strong, dominant, etc.
- Reference to Violence: This tag identifies those elements that suggest a heightened level of aggressiveness and or outright violent attitudes and behavior. Hostility can take a lot of shapes, and this might include arguments among users, images that signal the glamorization of brutality, etc.

- Reference to Drugs: This marker sets apart those instances that make allusion to the use or the business of dealing of drugs.
- Reference to Legal Issues or Prison: This tag identifies images or texts that are in any way related to legal matters and/or jail, which are clear themes in hip-hop culture. Some examples include song lyrics, discussion points, and news headlines about rappers' legal cases.
- Reference to Money and Materialism: This label identifies images or text that are linked to the notions of consumption, possessions, and capitalism that seem to pervade the realm of hip-hop. Examples include gaudy displays of jewelry, cars, etc.
- Reference to Authority, Power, or Respect: This tag serves to classify those images or texts that suggest a preoccupation with being influential, strong, and looked up to or esteemed, or envied. This could manifest in the way that not only rappers but website users may act like braggadocios.
- Reference to "The Real": This marker helps single out the instances when images or text refer to the authenticity of certain rappers, or certain types of hip-hop, which are sometimes called into question since legitimacy is central to the ethos of the music and the culture that surrounds it.
- Reference to Fandom: This identifier points to images and text that demonstrate the preoccupation with celebrities within hip-hop. It also signals those instances where website users discuss their favorite rappers, show off their knowledge about rap stars, and defend the merits of specific musicians or styles, etc.

In all, every piece of data is analyzed for 23 separate markers. While the labels are quite specific, many of them are interconnected intricately. Therefore images and texts are often not confined to a single classification. In fact, much of the data fits into more than one category. Instead of attempting to decide which aspect of each piece of data should take precedence, I have opted for allowing for multiple tags on each element.

For the purpose of quantitative research, I tallied the data in a few different ways, such as the total amount of pieces of information, the percentage of elements that with references to Britain as opposed to America, the amount of references to violence in the news, etc. The sorting feature of Microsoft Excel allowed me to take stock of the data at a glance. These numbers were central to figuring out trends, but didn't figure in as much into the actual analysis. For the purpose of qualitative data, I then explored the data for the rich subtext and the meanings and reasons behind the trends. This was indeed the most important area of my analysis. The tags provided a reminder of the main questions answered so that my discourse analysis could be framed by the theories I studied.

### IRB and Ethics of the Study

Originally, I intended on embarking on an ethnographic-like research path based on virtual interaction. It was my initial design to take part in the online hip-hop community by becoming a part of the community, and taking part in their world, participating in discussion forums and chat rooms. I proposed to come to know some of the website members and be able to interview them about their relationship to hip-hop and to the website to which they belong. However, after careful consideration and a review of the IRB requirements and further

exploration of ethnographic research where the researcher becomes an active participant, it became apparent that those avenues presented a number of roadblocks.

Firstly, before I began the process of submitting my project for evaluation to the Institutional Review, I had reservations about the practical aspect of participating in the website. Becoming a member presented no real problem, but the notion of interacting with other users brought up ethical as well as research-related concerns. When deciding upon a course of action in regard to observation versus participant observation, it was clear that the two available options were to make my presence known or to remain invisible—at least to an extent since gaining access to the most important areas of the website required membership and hence I could never be fully undetectable, but I could be inconspicuous by sheer lack of action. While being able to intermingle with the users appealed to me from the point of view of access to information, I knew that it would have been disingenuous and unethical to interact with people on the website without disclosing the legitimate reason for my presence.

The other option was, then, to divulge my academic researcher status and the fact that I was using their site as the case study for my project. In fact, it would have been appropriate or necessary for me to request permission of some sort. This full disclosure, while the correct ethical choice in many ways, would have presented two setbacks. Firstly, it might have been possible that upon sharing my purpose, the website's owners, administrators, or even users might have looked unkindly upon their community becoming the object of such scrutiny and would have requested that I find another website for my research, and I would have had to oblige. Since I had already spent considerable time exploring the website and I had found it to be a very archetypical website for my purposes, changing websites at that point would have been devastating to my research. Secondly, even if no adverse reaction had followed from my

disclosure, I would have been faced with a change in the way in which the community perceived me and hence interacted with me. My role as an academic researcher might have created an asymmetrical relationship where I might be identified as an “other,” an outsider with an agenda, a persona non grata to be avoided or at the very least never trusted. That type of vigilance or antipathy would have clearly crippled my research. Even if no hostility had ensued, other repercussions could have unfolded, such as researcher-induced reactivity, where people in a chat room or a discussion forum might alter their normal behavior, either consciously or unconsciously, because they are aware of someone watching them and probably recording their actions and their conversations for further examination.

Part of me was willing to risk the negative repercussions brought about by the revelation in favor of a transparency and the hopes of good will from the website’s creators and users. However, upon relaying to the IRB committee my intentions to interact with people on the website, and in the course of taking the required training, it became quite obvious that there were other concerns I had not even begun to consider. One of these was the fact that speaking to people would require all manner of forms and waivers to ensure that I would not be liable for disclosing information gathered without consent. This standard procedure for research that is conducted in real life is problematized by the fact that my research is online. To begin with, there is the issue of anonymity. Although people might indeed reveal plenty of information in profiles, posts, and other communications, they often do so under the blanket of a pseudonym or screen name. Requiring someone to disclose his or her email address and then his or her name in connection with their online alias might push them to decline participation in the project altogether. Apart from that, there is the issue of how those forms are sent and retrieved and the sheer amount of participants whose forms I would have to secure. Since I would be participating

in forums and chats openly, anyone's information would be likely to become the object of my scrutiny. Hence, I would have to obtain forms for as many people as possible. Forms would have to be emailed or otherwise made available on a site for download. Either of those methods, as well as more sophisticated means, such as creating a form online, would require a certain level of commitment and interest from the participants, which wouldn't be even across the board and might leave me able to only speak to or gather information from a certain subgroup. Not only that, I would have to keep track of new members and acquire a signed consent or waiver form for each of them as they join. Added to those complications is the fact that this process is only applicable when the participants are of age. In cases where the actual subject is a minor, this process must be carried out with his or her parent. This opens a whole other set of problems, as it requires another step and the involvement of a parent or guardian, who might or might not approve of the minor's participation or who might or might not even be aware of the minor's online activities. It is easy to see how these various complications would have the ability to make the process quite intricate and perhaps severely arrest or derail the progress.

Given these concerns, I resolved to simplify the project by removing the source of all the challenges. Despite the feeling that I would be missing out on an incredible opportunity to gather more in-depth and personal information, I decided against interviewing people and participating in the chat rooms and discussion forums. Instead, I would limit myself to recording only the information I could be privy to through non-participant observation, such as website text and images, profile information, chat room conversations, and discussion forum posts.

Of course, even after making the appropriate modification to the project, the question of confidentiality of the material I would be collecting and analyzing remained somewhat open. It was clear that rapcentral.co.uk users might be revealing and sharing personal information in their

interactions, or on their profiles, and that they would be unaware that someone was recording the information for academic purposes.

However, given the public nature of the website, there is a realistic assumption of accessibility. Although it is necessary to become a member of the site in order to access profiles, most of the forums, and the chat area, membership is open to anyone who wishes to become a member. Therefore, the information posted is readily available to anyone who wishes to log on to it or to become a member. Users post messages and share information of their own volition and at their own discretion, fully aware of the ease with which anyone can access the data. Perhaps as a result of the laxity in security or because they wish to remain anonymous, most users don't disclose their real name or other information. Instead, they use a handle or screen name. Their profile, if they chose to have one since filling it out is not in any way mandatory, might disclose more information and include pictures. The same is true about handles, which can include avatars and signatures, which are often used by members to stand out and be recognized.

The consensus here is that if someone voluntarily posts and shares private information on a website which is considered largely public or, at a minimum, easily accessible by non-members, he or she ostensibly understands that there are perils involved and has assumed those risks of his or her own accord. Therefore, since there cannot possibly be any assumption of privacy or confidentiality on the part of the users, my observing and recording the information they have divulged freely cannot constitute a violation of their privacy.

Despite the fact that those people who share information on this website do so freely and under no pretense that their information is in any way secure, I still thought it would be important to do my part in keeping the information as safe as possible. To that end, any data that I accessed, collected, and analyzed, has and will remain in my computer, which is password-



protected and any printed transcripts and/or screenshots will remain under lock and key in the file cabinet in my office. When integrating the information into my project, I will attempt to minimize any possible impact on subjects by omitting real names, and avoiding, when possible, matching handles to email addresses. If user images are included in signatures or profiles, I will attempt to blur recognizable features as well.

Based on the parameters I set for my research, the study was exempted by the UCF IRB on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008. The official letter comprises Appendix I.

### Limitations

#### Online Research as an Obstacle

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, it should be noted that fieldwork in the online realm has been fraught with apprehension. Some of the same concerns and anxieties about the online realm that I discussed in Chapter Two have extended onto the idea of online research and research about the online realm. Researchers recognize the potential that lies within the Internet. In her book Virtual Methods, Christine Hine posits, “Just as the video camera revolutionized observation methods, so the Internet is fundamentally changing the ways in which we can observe, measure and report on the human condition and societal structures” (21). Despite this realization that the online world has opened up a vast and often very promising new area for conducting research, the unfamiliar territory is one many academics tread lightly. In Digital Borderlands, Förnas offers some insight into this reluctance when he writes, “Internet practices and Internet research have both crossed established boundaries and opened up new frontiers in between areas that seemed previously securely separated. In such ambiguous spaces, strange

things may happen” (1). Again, academia takes risks when it comes to innovating, but there is often still an instinct to respect tradition. Pioneering comes at a price at times.

In Chapter Two, I also highlighted the fact that many concerns have been voiced about the legitimacy and depth of online interactions and that some of the reservations about the online world might have stemmed from misguided attempts to compare and contrast them with face-to-face or other mediated contact. However, as Christine Hine explains in her introduction in Virtual Methods, “perceptions that the medium is too restricted to promote true sociality [...] have increasingly come into question, thanks to the compelling descriptions of sustained online interaction and the formation of social structures” (7-8). Also aiding in the process of undermining these notions is evidence that “Online relationships can be highly potent ways of conducting research. Contrary to previous doubts, effective qualitative research relationships can be forged online. Online presence can be a means to enhance understanding, both of CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) itself and of the broader cultural domains that exist in and through it” (Hine 19).

Yet, while that particular brand of uneasiness has been alleviated considerably, there are still worries about the methodology used while doing research online. In fact, “...there is considerable anxiety about just how far existing tried and tested research methods are appropriate for technologically mediated interactions” (Hine 1). Therefore, some of this research might integrate different approaches in an experimental manner. In Virtual Methods, Hine clarifies some of the concerns when she explains, “Methodological solutions gain much of their authority through precedent, and it is not clear as yet just how far the heritage of research methodology applies to new media and what gaps in our understanding are still to be exposed” (1). Nevertheless, the way in which the Internet has become such an inextricable part of people’s

professional and personal lives, and given the rate at which online-base studies are being conducted and published, those fears are starting to appear archaic. As researchers have come out in support of online research, the malleability and applicability of traditional methods has been highlighted. Förnas tackles the adaptability of qualitative methods when he suggests, “Interviewing and observing chatting users on the Net would offer researchers as close contact with them as the users normally have with each other. If ethnography implies taking part in a cultural community on its own terms, just participating in online interaction should qualify as ethnography” (38). Hine appears to agree. She posits, “Participant observation and explicitly ethnographic approaches have increasingly claimed online contexts as field sites in their own right” (Hine 7). As research evolves, this is only bound to become more standard.

Indeed, increasing numbers of researchers are finding that their anxiety is unfounded and that if they wish to remain current, they will soon be unable to ignore the crucial role that the Internet plays in our lives and the place it is carving out for itself in the annals of research.

### Other Limitations

As I mentioned in the IRB section, the decision to not pursue the participant observation route for my ethnographic research made sense for a lot of reasons. However, that decision also imposes its own set of limitations. For one, not being able to interact with people renders me powerless to pursue further elucidations on interesting posts or attempt to delve deeper when I see promising topics being broached. Furthermore, I cannot propose that users discuss issues that would be of interest to me. Nor can I ask for information, such as demographics, which might help solidify my hypotheses about trends I observe. Interviews would afford me a more intimate

knowledge of the subjects and the ability to stir the conversation to areas that would be fruitful. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for just observing without manipulating.

Another substantial limitation is the fact that, as previously explained, I can only access material that is voluntarily posted by users. Therefore, I am relying on self-disclosure, which is not without its own limitations. Self-disclosure is fairly tricky. Certainly people have a tendency to portray themselves in what they might consider to be the best light, or in the way they want to be perceived. While this is helpful in its own right, as it lets me know what people consider important about their identities and adds to the notion of identity negotiation, it can also become an obstacle to understanding the nature of those with whom I deal, and whether they are being straightforward with their identity or not. It is virtually impossible to vouch for the validity of any of the information posted. However, it is also true that people can lie on face-to-face or phone interviews. However, there are basics that can be surmised just by looking at someone. That ease is eliminated online, except for when people post pictures. Even then, though, there is no accounting for the honesty of the pictures. From posting someone else's photo to abusing the tools available in programs such as Photoshop, there are many ways in which a picture can lie, or at least not tell the whole story. Indeed, trying to understand a particular subject may very well involve some deduction work and putting together the big picture by piecing together smaller bits of information gathered at different times and places. The only real solution to this is to gather as much information as possible, to check for contradictory information posted on different areas, and to take everything at face value, with the understanding that there might be discrepancies.

Linked to the notion of self-disclosure as a barrier is the fact that information that could be vital to uncover certain trends—such as personal information that would be crucial to

determining the specific inclinations of a certain demographic—might just not be available because many members neglect to fill out profiles. Besides, as stated before, the conclusions are only as valid as the data provided, and there is no reliable way to corroborate the veracity of the information.

Last but not least, it is worth to mentioning what might not necessarily be a limitation, but a challenge. My access to the website and the information therein contained was and is dependent upon servers being up. Also, information can be removed by users and administrators, access can be further limited by a request for an upgraded membership, and, finally, the site could be discontinued. In that sense, when it comes to continuity and availability, I am at the mercy of other people's decisions except for the information that I have already captured through screen captures.

Some of these concerns are particular to the medium that I have chosen, yet others are common to most inquiries. No research project is devoid of limitations, and as clear as these particular constraints are to me, I am also very aware that they are in no way crippling.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CASE STUDY: RAP CENTRAL (WWW.RAPCENTRAL.CO.UK)**

Beyond the speculation of what might or might not take place in UK-based hip-hop online communities, the only way to answer the questions with which this inquiry began was to delve into the actual virtual world and find a UK-based hip-hop website I could use as a case study.

Of course, even at this stage I encountered a hurdle, as this seemingly simple proposition presented a semantic ambiguity with deep implications. Here the nomenclature betrays us. What does it mean to say that a website is based in the UK? Does it mean the site is hosted there? Does it refer to the notion that the servers, the actual physical hardware where the information we access online is stored, are located within United Kingdom? Does it point to the fact that the people who own it, who have bought and registered the URL or even those who act as administrators, are in the United Kingdom? Does this label require that a certain percentage of the users connect through I.P. addresses that are within the UK? The conflation of these questions and their possible answers means that assigning a website a real location is not unproblematic. As discussed thoroughly in Chapter Two of this dissertation, the notion of place as related to the Internet is nothing if not complex. Yet, for the sake of simplicity, and for the purposes of my inquiry, the deciding factor of whether to consider a website as indigenous to the UK, so to speak, was their decision to identify as one by their choice of URL. That is to say, I only considered websites which used the ending ‘.co.uk’ in their domain name, as this is the country code top-level domain for websites in the United Kingdom. In order to find these sites, I decided to do a search using the UK version of the ubiquitous search engine Google

(Google.co.uk), which allows a user to choose if he or she wants the search to return results from the entire web or from the UK only. I conducted my search by choosing the second option.

As mentioned in Chapter One of this project, hip-hop has become a well-established genre in the United Kingdom, boasting a significant following, which seems to be steadily on the rise, and even some local acts that have achieved a level of international recognition. Therefore, it was not surprising that there should be more than a handful of UK-based web sites from which to choose.

In my Google search of UK hip-hop websites, Rap Central ([www.rapcentral.co.uk](http://www.rapcentral.co.uk)) was listed number 8 on the results page. It was the second listing from an actual hip-hop website. The first two links returned by the search belonged to aggregator sites, which are repositories of information, but not actually content-based websites. These sites merely list and link to other websites. The third link was for Figures of Speech ([www.figuresofspeech.co.uk](http://www.figuresofspeech.co.uk)), a site much like Rap Central but far less user friendly at first glance. The next link led to a page for BBC Radio's 1Xtra, their black music station. The last two links before Rap Central's were again listing sites.

Certainly, the landscape of the Internet is an ever-changing one, with new sites being built constantly, old sites being abandoned or recycled into new iterations, and levels of popularity of particular websites fluctuating depending on user preference, maintenance and upkeep, or even revenue. When one repeats the initial search I conducted originally today, a few years after my first attempt, Rap Central is the third site after two sites that focus solely on UK-based hip-hop. If one is to pass judgment on Rap Central's success based on Google's algorithms, which purport to present sites in order according to popularity (in the sense of how many times a site is accessed through Google after a search), then Rap Central has enjoyed a fair

level of success and growth despite the competition and the sometimes-fickle loyalty of audiences and especially of Internet users.

Rap Central appeared to be quite comprehensive, professional looking, and well maintained. The fact that the site offered a membership and the possibility of creating a profile, as well as the presence of discussion forums and a chat area were critical, as I was searching for a community rather than a site that is defined by the volumes of information it can provide its visitors. It was clear the site counted with many members and that the forums were lively, with new posts added daily. It seemed to me that Rap Central offered exactly the type of environment where I could observe the goings-on of a UK-based hip-hip online community.

#### Partial Rap Central Description

Because the website, as a space, even if a digital one (and even if it is changed and redefined by how it is used by its members and visitors), was created and designed by its owners, it is important to discuss the look and feel of the environment as the design itself may in some way contribute to the atmosphere and hence have an impact on the community as a whole. From a media literacy standpoint, no medium is without values. Therefore, it is to be expected that the website design might reflect the ideals of those who put it together and maybe even hint at the manner in which they intended the community to work or what they envisioned the community becoming in the long run. Indeed, the choices they make can even be prescriptive, in that they shape not only what users see or consume when they visit, but even what users are able to do while on the site. The elements chosen by the webmasters or site owners may indeed be very revealing, especially when looked at with specific markers in mind.



Rap Central uses the same design for most of its pages, except for the forums page, which is devoid of the outer frame or border that encloses the central panel in the rest of the pages. The frame design divides the main page into four sections that surround a larger central column. The top of the page features the RC logo and a ticker with advertising both about RC and for external sites and advertisers. There are also two drop-down menus to facilitate direct access to specific areas of the site and specific external sites that are somehow affiliated with RC. The next element on the site is a three-part photo panel featuring three rappers. While I cannot identify the man on the left, the other two are highly recognizable. The artist in the central photograph is Method Man, and the one on the right is Tupac Shakur. Both are very well known American rappers. Method Man is not only a recognized solo artist but he is a member of the Wu-Tang Clan, an iconic New York City-based musical group. Tupac Shakur, an extremely popular rap artist associated with the California and West Coast hip-hop scene in general, became a hip-hop legend when he passed away in a drive-by shooting. Until his premature death, Shakur was a prolific artist, delving into not only music but also becoming an actor and writing poetry. Both rappers would be considered old school rappers by this generation, which might signal the need for the website creators to assert their legitimacy. Next up is the main navigation section of the site, which consists of a set of buttons that link to the major areas of the site: Home, News, Artists, Reviews, Forum, and Media.

The thin side sections of the frame are laden with links and ads or in some cases, advertising space. The first section on the column on the left hand side counts with six subsections. The first one is labeled “Rap Central” and is a secondary navigational tool through which the main areas of the site are also accessible. This area, however, does not just include the links that the main navigational tool does. Rather, it includes a few other sections: a gateway to

affiliated sites that are owned by the same person that owns Rap Central; a link to the “Hip-Hop Honeys” section; a link to the page called “Werd of Mouf,” which is a hip-hop slang dictionary; a link to an area labeled “Opinion Polls,” which contains two polls from 2006 and seem to have fallen into disuse, and a link to a list of upcoming CD releases. The second subsection in the column on the left is labeled “Artist Menu” and it offers quick access to some of the most popular artists from the Artists Page. It also offers a link to the full list, which redirects to the main Artist Page. Following that segment, there is one called “RC Media Center,” which contains links to wallpapers, screensavers, avatars, and other downloads that members can use not only to decorate their profiles on Rap Central, but to outfit their computers, use in chat programs, etc. The next sector is called “RC Community,” and it offers links to: the registration page, the forums page, a page with forum F.A.Qs., a page that lists Rap Central team members, such as the administrators and moderators (this seems to be outdated), and a link to a page that lists the current vacancies. The next subsection, entitled, RC Website, provides a link to the site map and a link to the contact information for the site administrators, as well as the opportunity to link and bookmark to the site and advertise on it. The last segment is devoted to Google ads, a common way for most sites to earn money through ads that are matched to the site by Google. The last element on the column on the left hand side of the page is a picture of The Game. On the right hand side, this sector of the frame is divided into five subsegments. All but two are designated as advertising space. One is currently occupied by a Progressive Insurance ad. Another one is again taken up by Google ads. The third is not in use at present and is therefore occupied with a picture of a scantily clad hip-hop video vixen. On of the two non-advertising segments, entitled RC Forum Posts, offers links to forums from other RC-owned and affiliated sites. The other segment offers RSS and XML feed subscriptions for those who wish to have

updates on Rap Central to be brought to them directly, as well as links to sites that help bookmark and share the Rap Central content. Last but not least on the right hand side of every page, there are two Rap Central logos, one at the top and one at the bottom of the column. The bottom part of the frame consists of yet another advertising space which is currently being used by Rap Central itself to advertise their wallpapers. This section promises advertisers 30,000 daily views. Below this ad banner, there is copyright information as well as a broken link to the designer of the site.

The home page or main page is both image and text heavy but well organized. On the central panel, under the buttons, is Rap Central's welcome message, which serves also as a sort of mission statement. It reads

Nobody in the game covers the rap game like Rap Central. Updated daily, we bring the latest hip-hop news, rap album reviews, hip hop honeys, and free rap mixtapes and music videos on our Hip Hop Forum. We don't stop there, we cover every major artist in Hip Hop, offering biographies, album lyrics, audio, beef info, Hip Hop PC Wallpapers, pictures, and much more, for EVERY rap and hip hop artist. With thousands of members on our Rap Forum, a powerful unique network of artist sites, our grip on the rap game will soon be equal to that of Tupac Shakur (Rap Central)

After that, the central panel is composed of smaller quadrants that represent some of the major sections or areas of the site, such as: Hip Hop's Most Wanted, Latest Hip Hop/Rap News, Hip Hop News Feature, Hip Hop Album Reviews, etc. The main page changes often since it highlights different areas of the site according to what is going on in the hip-hop world. At the time of the writing of this chapter, for example, the main area of the home page is taken up by the news of C Murder's murder conviction and subsequent life sentence.

A section that remains constant is the Hip Hop Honeys/Rap Video Girls, Hip Hop models section, which features semi-nude pictures of women. Toward the bottom, there is a section that highlights Rap Central affiliates, followed by a sector called “Advertise With Us,” invites potential advertisers to find out more about what the site can do for them in terms of publicity. The “Learn More” link leads to a page where Rap Central sings its own praises and provides demographic data, ad maps, descriptions of advertising opportunities, and payment methods.

Visually, the design is aesthetically pleasing, done in a very clean and modern style. Despite the massive amount of information, the site does not appear cluttered. The organization is quite clear. The overall design makes the site quite intuitive and user friendly. There is plenty of repetition of links, which means that even casual users would be able to find their way around and not miss out on anything that the site has to offer. Also, there is enough information that is available to non-members that the site, despite being touted as a community can also be categorized as an information repository. The designers seem to have achieved a great balance.

### Observations

The goal of this inquiry is to explore the world of online communities as it pertains to hip-hop-related websites and to establish how it may be possible for these sites to act as a locus of identification, where fans are able to consume and even co-opt American hip-hop and its attendant culture. With that in mind, the following areas became important to the research: location, space, identity, sense of community, and use of rituals, as discussed in chapter two, as well as Americanization and hip-hop culture markers, including allusions to hypermasculinity, criminality, money, power, respect, the real, drugs, jail, among others, as described in chapter one. Following are my observations according to each segment. It is important that, otherwise

stated, the information about the threads in the forums corresponds only to the conversations started in June of 2008. Likewise, any of the news stories, unless otherwise indicated, were collected from the month of March 2008.

For the sake of offering an efficient manner in which to reference members quickly, below is the information on the Rap Central users who are discussed in my observations. I have identified them by their screen name, and added pertinent information that can be readily found on their profiles. The order of the information is: membership level, identified location, identified gender, occupation, and interests. It is worthy of note that many of the members of Rap Central have not specified a gender. This seems to be a common happening in this site where the default assumption is that everyone is male. At times, their chosen handles or screen name or the pictures on their profiles (photographs that one can assume to be of themselves and not rappers or other icons) would identify these users as male, or their discussion posts might indeed reaffirm the conjecture. However, it is virtually impossible to assert without any doubt that these members are of one gender or another. Yet, it seems the default gender is male and in fact it would appear the onus is on females to identify themselves as such either by choosing a gender, by having a picture, or by their choice of handle. The site creators specify their demographic is male, completely bypassing any percentages that might even hint at the inclusion of a female population on their site. Therefore, I felt I could identify most users as males unless there was a way I could verify otherwise. Also, I am only including in this section the information that these members have included in their profiles. However, through my exploration, I have found out members' locations, genders, and so on, and have included that information if and when relevant to the analysis.

Rap Central Members Featured in Discussions:

- **abilitee**: M.V.P member. Minneapolis, Minnesota. Male.
- **BigStallion**: Moderator. Detroit, Michigan. No gender identification. Producer and rapper.
- **Bloodiemurderer**: Site Administrator. Delaware. Male. 25. Me being me. Music Money Sex & Drugs.
- **[Braille<sup>TM</sup>]**: M.V.P. member. Southside Glasgow. Male. None.
- **Bristina08**: V.I.P. member. Gary, Indiana. No gender identification.
- **Calle**: V.I.P. member. Melbourne, Australia. No gender identification. MC. Destroying Mics.
- **Clear**: Moderator. Southampton. No gender identification. Working at Sainsburys atm. Music, Football, Fightinn
- **Dazzla**: M.V.P. member. WSM (Probably Weston-Super-Mare, UK). Male. 19. Win. Rap.
- **Elephant Man**: Moderator. No location identification. Male.
- **Elmer Fudd**: V.I.P. member. UK. No gender identification. Pimp.
- **Esoteric**: M.V.P. member. Montreal. Male.
- **God's Son**: M.V.P. No location identification. No gender identification.
- **HitEmUpRobbo**: Site Administrator. The Hull, UK.
- **Ill One**: RC Young Buck. No location identification. No gender identification.
- **josip-zgb**: M.V.P. member. No location identification. Male. 19. School. Nothing.
- **loenatic**: M.V.P. member. The Netherlands (born in Kurdistan). No gender identification.

- **lostsoul89:** M.V.P. member. Ireland. Male. 20. College student. Gorls, music, footy.
- **MadeNigga:** an M.V.P. member. No location identification. No Gender identification.
- **markb1:** M.V.P. member. Dublin. Male.
- **Maxted:** RC Young Buck. UK. No gender identification.
- **Mega87:** M.V.P. member. UK. No gender identification.
- **Novakaine:** M.V.P. member. Trinidad & Tobago. No gender identification. Hustlin. Muzic.
- **NyNe:** M.V.P. member. Palermo, Sicily, Italy. Male. 17. Student.
- **oNe:** Banned. No location identification. No gender identification.
- **Shenron:** Moderator. Liverpool, England.
- **Tupaki90:** V.I.P. member. St. Albans, England. No gender identification. Student.
- **CCT:** V.I.P member. No location identification. No gender identification.
- **lostsoul89:** M.V.P member. Ireland. Male. Student. 20.
- **Sawedoffthugsta:** M.V.P. member. Pueblo, Colorado. No gender identification. Muzik Mastermind.
- **skilltester:** RC Young Buck. No location identification. No gender identification.
- **ThaGutter:** M.V.P. member. St8 Outta ThaGutter. Male. Westcoast hip-hop, 2Pac, Bone Thungs-N-Harmony, Movies, Boxing.
- **Tha Mac:** V.I.P member. Another Stratosphere. Male. Getting' Money.
- **the\_voice:** RC Young Buck. No location identification. Nogender identification.

Lastly, given that online communication is not only plagued with mistakes in grammar, punctuation, etc., but it is also rife with Internet lingo, abbreviations, and the like, I have, in the

interest of efficiency and readability, forgone the use of the indicator to mark where mistakes were made by the subjects.

#### Americanization and Attachment to Locality/Place and Space

A cursory exploration of the site with an eye to determine the level of Americanization will yield the conclusion that other than the presence of the country indicator in the URL of the site, there is little about rapcentral.co.uk that would point to this not being a garden variety American site about hip-hop. Surely, if the site sets out to cover the world of hip-hop, it might very well be served by becoming more inclusive of hip-hop that comes from different areas of the globe. However, on the other hand, if the site merely sets out to hold up a mirror to the world of mainstream hip-hop, then rapcentral.co.uk is an accurate representation of the current status quo. Hip-hop, the one that matters in popular culture and in the realm of record sales, is undoubtedly American, and this site is teeming with Americanization.

To begin with, 100% of all acts that are listed by the creators of the site in the section dubbed “A-Z of Hi-Hop and Rap Artists We Cover” are American. This is a comprehensive if not exhaustive list of 129 acts (either individual rappers or hip-hop groups). It is interesting to note that the blurb on that page claims to cover “every rapper in the game” (Rap Central). Beyond the complete erasure of local musicians, who may indeed be more obscure, there is no mention of acts such as Estelle, M.I.A, or Lady Sovereign, rappers who no longer bear the burden of being labeled foreign hip-hop acts since they have managed to cross over into the American rap scene. Conspicuously absent is also rapper Slick Rick, a very famous British-born rapper who moved to New York City as a youngster and was part of the first wave of hip-hop in The Bronx. Based on these absences, one can no longer truly eschew the possibility that this site,



although not explicitly branded as such, may indeed have been created as an American hip-hop web site.

Interestingly, the demographics of the site reflect a skewed version of the truth. This set of data, which the site administrators have put together for marketing purposes, that is to say, to try to attract advertisers, only includes two segments of the population when it comes to visitors to the Rap Central site: United Kingdom and United States. The rest of the countries that might be represented in the actual membership and/or through unregistered visitors have been summarily dismissed without consideration, without so much as a generalized grouping labeled something indistinct such as “other.” Given that this area is not really meant for members, but rather intended to attract lucrative advertisement contracts to help fund the site and make a profit, it is possible that the information is not only inaccurate but deliberately slanted to reflect what the site administrations know to be the desired demographic for their possible advertisers. Unfortunately, without access to the actual raw data from a comprehensive I.P.-identifying web site counter and tracking system, tools that most sites—commercial or not—tend to employ, it is impossible to determine whether this demographic breakdown is really the product of careful analysis or a marketing ploy to lure advertisers. Based on my exploration, dozens of countries are represented within the membership alone. Why their presence was not of consequence to the administrators remains a mystery, especially given the fact that America finds itself in the throes of a recession that many parts of the world have avoided or are in the process of overcoming.

Whereas the official coverage neglects to mention UK hip-hop, the forums, which are largely the territory of the membership, where members are able to discuss what they will, could be a place for users to discuss this absence and rectify the situation by making their attachment to local acts known. Yet the level of Americanization on the site is not a topic of conversation

among the members. It is almost as if there is a tacit agreement that hip-hop, or maybe real hip-hop, is American hip-hop, and there is no point in discussing the fact that Rap Central, despite the fact that it identifies as a site based in the United Kingdom does not acknowledge or cover the UK hip-hop scene, or any hip-hop acts other than American ones. The American aspect of the site is taken for granted. The only time within my exploration of the site that I found some dissent about this was in a thread entitled “uk rap is shit” where member *the\_voice* writes, “sup niggers from uk grime lover and us gangster rap lover hate uk rap wanna be shite” (Rap Central). When member *MadeNigga* tries to figure out whose music he is referring to when making that pronouncement, *the\_voice* responds, “all there all shit wana be us rapers sounds all wrong” (Rap Central). A few things are interesting when it comes to this post. Firstly, this is *the\_voice*’s initial post after becoming a member and it is located in the “Introduce Yaself” area, which is meant for new members to become acquainted with the membership and vice versa. This antagonistic post is somewhat bold in that context and looking at it with the knowledge that this member never returned to the site, this may have just been an attempt to rile members up. Further evidence to support this conjecture is the fact the sole other post started by *the\_voice* is entitled “pop rap,” and it reads, “shit is big in uk know one know true rap in uk just pop rap who hates it i do” (Rap Central). The only response he gets to this post is one by Elmer Fudd, who, perhaps taking advantage of *the\_voice*’s poor writing abilities, simply writes, “WTF?” which is the acronym for the phrase “what the fuck?” (Rap Central). Yet, despite the possible harmful intention behind it, the fact is that an incendiary post such as this one could have started a longer dialogue about the lack of coverage of UK rap within a UK site. No such discussion occurs. Two members, however, do come to the defense of UK’s rap honor by defending it. *Maxted* writes, “not being funny but u cant just categorise UK hip hop because u have heard grime.... That is just

wrong. Grime is wack... UK Hip hop is where its at ” (RAP CENTRAL). *FLIPFLIP1* concurs with the previous post and writes, “THERES ACTUALLY ALOT OF TALENT/POTENTIAL IND UK...” yet he also admits and laments, “I JUS DNT KNOW WHAT IT IS ABOUT UK ARTISTS, THEY NEVER GET ANYWHERE” (Rap Central). Both of these members are located in the UK, and clearly have a sense of attachment to the local hip-hop. As far as the attacker, while I will assume he is a male, he does not give us a location. Nevertheless, his use of “shite” instead of “shit” could be a clue that he is not American, and begs the question whether an attack on UK hip-hop from a local may carry more or less weight or be more or less insulting than if the assault comes from an outsider. Yet, despite UK members’ endeavor to stick up for their local music and the fact that *the\_voice* was not able to provide much logic to his argument, what speaks far louder in this case is the fact that even on a hip-hop site from the UK, populated by a good number of UK-based members, UK rap is still missing in action for the most part.

In fact, the erasure of UK hip-hop is further reinforced by the fact that there is no official place for discussions about UK or world hip-hop to take place. Indeed, one of the most obvious demonstrations of Americanization of Rap Central is the manner in which the site creators organized the hip-hop forums. In a clear representation of how they view the landscape of hip-hop, the people who designed the site made the conscious decision to divide the hip-hop forums by American geographical areas to represent the different factions of the genre and the culture. The hip-hop forums, then, are broken up into: “East Side,” “West Side,” “Midwest,” and “Southern Takeover.” It is interesting that although this is not billed as a strictly American hip-hop site, the only real reference to hip-hop style, or to place is based on the American hip-hop scene. Nowhere are there forums that represent the diversity of UK geographical areas. Certainly, this could be the result of there not being clearly demarked styles of hip-hop that are

representative of different regions, the way that there are in the US. Curiously enough, neither of the two largest web sites billed as UK Hip-Hop (not in the sense of where the web sites emerged from but in the sense of UK-produced music of the hip-hop genre), UK Hip-Hop (ukhh.com) and British Hip-Hop (britishhiphop.co.uk) have included forums that allude to geographical locations in their respective discussion forums sections. Judging from that, there might not be a real need for those distinctions at that point. Nevertheless, that does not preclude the inclusion of a UK Hip-Hop forum or other forums labeled for different areas of the world. That the owners chose those names for the forums and completely disregard every other possible location of a genre that is seeing a great increase in popularity and local artists all over the world is very telling for reasons beyond the results of cultural imperialism and Americanization. Not only does the nomenclature reify in the most explicit way possible the notion of the Internet as space and place, but also it reasserts a central part of the hip-hop lore, so to speak, which is the weight allocated to a sense of belonging somewhere and that somewhere being attached to the original location of hip-hop. Perhaps, had they decided to include other locations, some of the authenticity might have been lost in their eyes. For what it's worth, no one seems to mourn the lack of local or world forums or, for that matter, even notice it.

Surely, there could be a far more pragmatic rationale for this decision about the designations for the forums. Surely, these designations are an easy way to foster people's willingness to congregate according to their allegiances or to their taste in hip-hop style. After all, each of these geographical areas of the United States has produced particular styles of music within hip-hop. These very diverse modes, which vary when it comes to the music, the rap flow or cadence, and of course tropes of local concerns, can be very divisive for hip-hop heads. Taste in music, if allegiance to place is a non-issue for people removed from the actual physical

locations where hip-hop has a street-level scene, can create a motivation for instant bonding. Within these forums, we see people who are local to those areas representing their neighborhoods and promoting local rappers. Nevertheless, much of the activity really comes down to people showing appreciation for the hip-hop style endorsed by the rappers from each area.

The patent level of Americanization and recognition of American geographical divides notwithstanding, there are still areas where we see tinges of other cultures and concerns for other locations. Indeed, despite the tacit understanding that the totality of artists covered officially by the site are American, and that the vast majority of the information, lyrics, videos, mixtapes, and so on the site are for rappers of the American ilk, there is still room for other nationalities and the locations to which members are attached to be represented.

For one, members are able to become a symbol for their own country by listing a location in their profile. While some choose to do this, many leave that area of their profile blank. This lack of location is curious. On the one hand, the absence could be construed as meaningless in that many people cannot be bothered to fill out a profile, which is an extra step beyond registering to be a member of a site and is not a mandatory action the way that choosing a handle is. While some may regard answering profile questions time-consuming and perhaps even pointless, others may prefer not to provide any more information than is needed for them to become members. In a medium hounded by tales of identity theft and invasion of privacy, the decision to supply the least amount of information possible seems like a normal way of protecting one's sense of confidentiality. On the other hand, however, there could be very significant motivations for this virtual crossing out of location. Since the medium allows for a certain level of anonymity, this site is a place where members can, perhaps even if only partially

or solely momentarily, forget their true location and whatever attachments that grounded physicality may imply and just become members of the hip-hop world which clearly means so much to them. There is the possibility of abandoning the sense of geography that might put them miles away from the source of the music and culture they have chosen to embrace. Perchance, their locality is not a source of pride, but a cause for shame. As exemplified by a thread by member *Ill One*, there are places that might get very little respect in the hip-hop scene. When *Ill One* joins Rap Central, he posts on the “Introduce Yaself” forum and discloses he is from Romania. In response, *Elmer Fudd* writes, “You have hip hop in Romania, dam didn't think you guys even had cars yet, or electric!” (Rap Central). While this could be interpreted as a slightly more senior member ribbing a newbie, the attack is quite personal and specific to his location.

Another way to demonstrate allegiance to a locale is the inclusion of photographs, icons, or other sorts of adornments in profiles. From animated flags to pictures of Olympic teams, or buttons in support of local sports clubs, members often outfit their profiles in ways in which they can pay homage to the towns and countries they call home. The same kinds of embellishments that members use to decorate their profile can also be used to adorn their signatures, which is a sign-off of sorts that appears automatically at the end of their posts, which is very much like the signature feature available in most current email programs. Again, here we see a variety of signage meant to show a personal touch and some of the signatures are at least in part devoted to showing pride for a locale.

Even before people set up profiles and signatures, they need to set up a user name, by which they will become known. Handles or usernames themselves can be a signifier for place. When I decided to join the site, the first nickname that came to mind, which I ended up using, was *FloridaShorty*. Without much thought at all, I chose a handle that pointed both to my

location and my gender. Similarly, some members of Rap Central express their connection to a place in this matter. Some examples of geographical location-based handles on Rap Central include: *America2k3*, *BmoreGangsta*, *ChiTown4Lyfe*, *ComptonThugsta*, *dade county*, *floridaboy*, *harlem street brother*, *london\_skiff*, *MastaDeeUK*, *Midwest*, *MIDWEST GANGSTA*, *MVP\_Poland*, *--PAC--UK--*, *tee-uk*, *txballer76*, *westkoastsoulja*, and *WestSide.4Life* among many others.

Nevertheless, despite this shout-out of sorts to their respective locations, there is nothing, short of an I.P. inspection, that can assure us these people are actually located in these places. A good example is member *ComptonThugsta*, whose name is a shout-out to Compton, a city in Southern Los Angeles, California. However, in his profile, he indicates that his location is Gotham, which complicates matters. Gotham could certainly also refer to the city by that name in Wisconsin, or point us in the direction of the village by the same name in Nottinghamshire, England. Then again, it could be neither of those since Gotham is also the most famous nickname for New York City. Surely, Gotham could also be a reference to Gotham City, the imaginary city that serves as the setting for the comic Batman. The fact that his profile and signature feature Jay-Z and The Wu-Tang Clan, two major hip-hop artists that are very tied to the East Coast and represent New York City specifically, could be a clue as to this member's real location. Yet, his favorite rapper is Lupe Fiasco, who is from Chicago and represents the Midwest. As it can be ascertained from this example, establishing a member's actual location in Rap Central is not without complexity.

Clearly, handles, profiles and signatures are not the only ways people can stake their claim to their location. Just like *Ill One* did, sometimes people disclose their locality in discussions. While many of the discussions that center on hip-hop take a clearly American bend

because of the subject matter, there is still some, albeit minor, representation of rap from other locales. For instance, *MeGa87*, in a thread entitled “Uk battles,” posts a link with two UK-based rappers battling it out through freestyle rapping. Another example is a post entitled “Hip-Hop in every language,” started by member Babel Rap, who is clearly promoting a website by the same name ([www.babelrap.com](http://www.babelrap.com)), where he claims, “...you can find the dopest artists from Iceland to Japan. This is hip-hop from all over the world. This is hip-hop without borders” (Rap Central). Given the multicultural aspect of the membership, it is not surprising that there would be a certain level of interest in other members’ cultures beyond the musical aspect. An illustration of this curiosity is *Novakaine*’s thread “Slang from round your way,” in which members from around the world share words they use in their everyday lives. Certainly, the words they share, following *Novakaine*’s example, are all hip-hop-related terms. Nevertheless, there seems to be a genuine interest on the part of the members in stepping outside of their own cultural space and into those of their friends. As it is also common when people from different areas get together and converse, there is a little bit of negotiation as inadequate knowledge of other people’s countries surface and people are trying not to be taken as ignorant and making sure they do not offend anyone else. Often, stereotypes are uncovered, rebuffed, or upheld based on these interactions. These kinds of cultural footwork, so to speak, can be seen in *JohnnieUpahats*’s comment, “I knew those ones already lol...got a couple Spanish friends myself, we call my buddy Dan Puerto Rican, he's Dominican it pisses him off 2 no extent but he calls me Italian 2 get back at me lol,” to which, *Nyne*, who is Italian, responds with a smile and an “ahem...” (Rap Central). Immediately, *JohnnieUpahats* adds

Nuttin against Italians...I really have no pro'lem wit 'em I've dated a few Italian guls  
(one wuz Sicilian, one wuz Naboledon (sp?) nd one wuz half Naboledon (sp?) nd half



Badese (sp?) . [...] Tha only rezun it gets on my nerves is bcuz I'm Irish but I got brown hair nd brown eyes...nd my name don't start wit Fitz, Mc or O' so eryl figgas I cnt be Irish...(Rap Central)

In this case, all is well that ends well and no one seems to feel offended. In fact, *NynNe* claims to have only been joking and *Markb1*, who is in Ireland and who apparently at some point and in another thread has called *JohnnieUpahts* a hater, upon realizing that the latter has Irish roots, takes back his insult (Rap Central). Not only that, the conversation veers to an interesting cultural issue, albeit briefly, when *JohnnieUpahts* ponders, “always wondered why or what made people who are a couple generations removed identify with their irish roots more than whatever country the come from? ,” to which *NyNe* answers, “I think it happens for every people that did mass immigration, irish , Italian, jewish , and the list goes on” (Rap Central). I think this thread demonstrates that Rap Central can be a locus for multicultural understanding, and that despite the level of Americanization of the site, many of the members are clearly attached to their heritage and to the locations where they reside and where they were born. It is also interesting as a reminder that America is a melting pot, and the result of immigration, so even in Americanization, there might just be a trace of the cultural baggage that has made the United States what it is.

It is not uncommon that when people disclose their location in a discussion, especially in the “Introduce Yaself” forum, that other members of that area will come over to say hello and show sincere joy to find someone else in their area that loves the genre. Sometimes, people who join the site have been introduced to Rap Central by a fellow hip-hop fan they know from their own area. Such is the case with *Ill One*, whose initial thread was discussed earlier. In his initial post, the way he discloses his location is through posting a short set of rhymes. Posting lyrics is a

popular way for new members to introduce themselves and establish some sort of reputation. *Ill One*'s rhymes included the lines, "As I represent Romania. Yo, shout out to my boy, Skilltester Western Europe, look out, here comes another giant from the East" (Rap Central). Here, this new member is staking a claim for his country and challenging the hegemonic western side of the continent. This is a typical move of hip-hop MCs and it is therefore fascinating seeing it translated into the virtual world of Rap Central. Another thing he is doing here is asserting his ties to a more senior member from the same country. Through the comments in the rest of the discussion, we find out that *Skilltester* is indeed from Romania and has posted links to Romanian rap, which people seem really interested in listening to. As discussed earlier, the thread became a tad bit confrontational, with some trash-talking on the part of a slightly senior member about Romania's status in the world. Even so, this is another thread that demonstrates that major conflict can be avoided, especially when members remember what they have in common: hip-hop. Nevertheless, not everything in Rap Central is multicultural heaven. Indeed things can turn ugly despite everyone's deep love for the genre. Geo-historical and geo-political issues can still resonate with members who share the space of the community. During an argument between *MeGa87* from the UK and *Markbl* from Ireland, which was completely unrelated to any political elements, the former unleashes a vitriolic assault on *Markbl* based on this ethnicity and his location. He writes,

but heres somethin for you to play with, your whole country leeches off of England ; without me, you would be nothin, dont forget that ive been to ireland , its all fields and cows, a far cry from hip hop aint it? yet you still harp on about your knowlege , you aint even livin , your jus googling everything you ever heard you support a english football team for christ sake, go an support athenry atheltic or somethin lmao. listenin to

american hip hop, what has your country given the world? Guinness ? that all ? your country is famous for being drunk losers (Rap Central)

This assault, at its core, deals with the years of hatred between England and Ireland over Northern Ireland and issues of not only politics but also religion and ethnicity. Not only does *MeGa87* bring up every available stereotype he can think of and any details about Ireland that he thinks might shame his foe, but he also calls into doubt *Markbl*'s hip-hop realness, commenting that Ireland is so far removed from the reality of hip-hop, which is an interesting tack to take when he himself is in the UK, which isn't much closer to the epicenter of hip-hop, either geographically or industry-wise.

Another area of attack for *MeGa87* is sports, calling *markbl* out for supporting a team that is from England, not Ireland. Sports are a central component to most societies and their cultures, and especially to the males in most of each group. Generally speaking, most people tend to root for their local teams and wins and losses are very personal. At Rap Central, the discussions about sports are rampant and they are as non-Americanized as this site becomes. For example, if one happens to go into the "Anything Goes" forum, there are myriad discussions about sports that refer to non-American teams or even to sports that are not at all popular in the United States. Americans are excluded from these conversations simply because they do not possess the knowledge of, and most of the time the interest in, those sports. In fact, there is a specific forum for sports. In there, one could easily forget that this is either a hip-hop web site or that there is anything remotely American about it. In fact, this is where the rest of the world unites over the love of a game that America is still struggling to appreciate: football, or soccer, as the United States insists on calling it. As people discuss football (soccer) and rugby statistics or discuss the latest player trades and match results, the colorfulness of the diversity of the

membership can be seen and the banter, despite the trash-talking, is fairly friendly, allowing for multicultural exchanges minus the ugliness of ethnocentrism.

### Materialism

Availability and indeed excess of funds and material possessions is an established trope within hip-hop. As discussed in Chapter One, some of this preoccupation with financial gain and the acquisition of goods harks back to the level of disenfranchisement, poverty, and lack of opportunity that are associated with the ghettos where hip-hop was originally engendered. Indeed, a display of wealth is proof of having transcended and cheated fate.

Surely, the appreciation for the material is emulated on the site. Members are indeed still surrounded by songs, lyrics, videos, images, and even news stories that demonstrate the weight attributed to wealth, assets, and belongings, not to mention the attachment to specific expensive brands. From the pictures of rappers showing off their expensive jewelry to links to sites that sell pricey hip-hop gear, the consumerist leaning of the genre is still quite palpable.

Yet, despite the importance that materialism has in hip-hop, the members of the site do not seem to engage this element much. In my time exploring Rap Central, I was not privy to conversation where members are engaging in a bragging contest over bank accounts, jewelry, or cars. In one thread, a member asked others what kind of clothes they liked, but no one seemed to boast about their belongings or their ability to purchase this or that pricey brand.

It also seems that while none of these members have taken a vow of poverty, some of them might have grown a tad bit leery and weary of listening to the formulaic bragging that has become part and parcel of hip-hop. In the thread entitled “The problem with hip hop albums,” *lostsoul89* complains about the hip-hop culture by declaring, “they all rap about it tho they got

the money, they got the houses, they got the bitches !!! in reality they got no money, they got a shitty house & they bitch probably gave them a STD, so why not rap about reality...” (Rap Central). In that quotation, and in the agreement from other members that followed that post, one can sense the feeling of disillusionment with the boastfulness so central to hip-hop. The same type of feeling that *lostsoul89* expressed can be identified in the thread “What do you think of hip hop bling?” where *BigStallion* explains he likes seeing expensive jewelry such as chains, rings, watches, but he doesn’t like it “...when rap artist flood their songs wit it” (Rap Central). Basically, *BigStallion* echoes the notion of moderation, which is what most of the other members that join the conversation, such as *loenatic*, *Dazzla*, *Esoteric*, *Shenron*, *Novakaine*, and *josip-zgb* seem to think as well. *Calle*’s opinion is that it is not merely a matter of going overboard or not, but that it is actually an issue of masculine aesthetic. He articulates this when he writes, “a watch a chain and an earring is acceptable, anything more and its a little overboard, its gay with all this new shiny shit” (Rap Central). Again, the others agree here as well. It is *markbl*, however, who makes the most insightful comment, when he posits, “the majority of the jewelery is cool, but it takes a certain person to carry it off, i for instance would look ridiculous walking down the street with a big ass iced out chain on” (Rap Central). This simple yet elusive notion, at least for some, points to the very clear demarcation between hip-hop fans and hip-hop artists, which is sometimes blurry for those hip-hop heads who already fancy themselves rappers and superstars in the making.

The site is not completely devoid of demonstrations of concern with money and material goods from the part of the membership. In fact, there are more than a handful of members, such as *Novakaine*, *The Mac*, and *Bloodiemurdered*, among many others, who list “getting money,” “getting paid,” or “making ends” as their occupation or one of their hobbies. Not only that,

people use this site to promote their businesses, including, but not limited to, people who create beats and then sell them to those members working towards their goal of becoming a recording artist. Member *Dactive*, for examples, has set up Dactive Productions and he creates beats for sale. Furthermore, there are nicknames and handles that reflect this money-making, consumerist mentality, such as *Diamond Studded Diva*, *RandomBling*, *19T-Money88*, *Count\_Da\_\$\$\$*, and *MRDiamondFDC*, among others.

I do not think the dearth of examples from the members means they do not hold money or material possessions to be important. Rather, it seems like bragging about these things would be rather ineffectual on a website. It would almost seem silly for someone to post something about how much money he or she has. Primarily, the question might be, who cares? Secondly, members might ask for proof. No one would want to be perceived as someone who is faking it. Since no one on the site, at least that I have run into, claims to have broken into the business, it is likely the community feels rallied around the struggle of trying to break into the rap game rather than around the notion of the money-related bragging that comes with a rapper's ascent to fame and financial success.

### Disenfranchisement

Despite the fact that there is always a level of disenfranchisement in the sense of the counterculture or subculture that hip-hop represents (in spite of its paradoxical position as a mainstreamed counterculture), there is remarkably little in this website that points to a real concern with the political or social issues that fostered the creation of hip-hop as a means of expression and that have been relevant to the genre, at least to some degree, since its inception. If anything, the disenfranchisement appears more to be a baseless posturing that comes packaged

within the notion of what the real hip-hop experience is supposed to feel like. There seems to be no concerted effort from the part of the creators of the site to create a place for or an interest in these deeper sorts of discussions, and there doesn't seem to be a curiosity from the part of the users, or a drive to engage in those types of conversation. While it is understandable that a website that is devoted to hip-hop might choose to concentrate on the music and the artists, which might make the absence of more socially-relevant problems seem like a non-issue, like business as usual, the fact that this site deals with more than just the music and the artists, and the basic reality that hip-hop was once meant as a means of expression for those who were oppressed, makes the lack of attention to or interest in the socio-political aspects of hip-hop far more conspicuous. As posited in the first chapter of this project, this dearth may be related to the co-opting of the genre by the mainstream media, which has a pernicious tendency to render everything, even most cultures, into caricatures of themselves in the process of representing them to the audience. Therefore, hip-hop, in its popularization, has become decontextualized and what ended up being removed from the picture were some of the central elements of the culture.

Dissecting the lack of socio-political involvement from a radically different perspective, perhaps the erasure of such topics, the resounding silence when it comes to issues that might be considered central to the ethos of hip-hop can be interpreted as a conscious decision to jettison such discussion because of the disillusionment attached to them. If the perception among a segment of a population is that their opinions, their hopes, and their concerns go systematically unheard, it is likely those voices of dissent might be forever hushed. In this sense, the lack of engagement with a certain amount of topics, especially politics, may be seen as a form of protest of sorts.

Nevertheless, my experience as a proverbial fly on the wall in the different areas of the web site makes me believe there is not such a level of sophistication either from the site administrators or the members that would suggest such a nuanced understanding of political subversion. Besides, members are welcomed and encouraged to discuss anything they may choose. There is nothing in my research that would convince me that such topics would be shunned. It seems, rather, that they simply do not capture this group's imagination or attention.

It is important to point out that the absence of political threads relates to references to governmental issues not just particularly concerning the United States, but any other country or area in the world. Political issues, which seem largely a non-issue for the members who populate Rap Central, may make an appearance in the news sections or in the forums if there is something in the current headlines that are in some way related to hip-hop, such as cases when there is legislation that might affect the community or the industry in any way. Except for those very few incursions into the real of consciousness when it comes to governmental issues, political tropes appear in more obscure ways, such as in one of the members' profiles. *Shenron*, a moderator and active participant in the forums, has two pictures in his profile. The first one shows senator and ex-presidential candidate John McCain fixing his collar. A caption over the photograph reads, "Must loosen tie to facilitate the flow of lies" (Rap Central). The second image, which is placed just below the first, is of President Barack Obama exiting a vehicle. The caption reads, "Finally, a bad ass president" (Rap Central). It is worthy of note that this demonstration of support for the American president and derision for his opponent in the presidential run belongs not to someone who identifies himself as an American user, but to a British member. While this display cannot necessarily be construed as a sign of real concern for the political landscape of the United States, it at least construes an awareness of it. On the other



hand, however, this choice of graphics could simply be an attempt at humor, devoid entirely of any political engagement on the part of the members. Furthermore, the singular circumstances of this particular presidential race may have more to do with this display of political awareness. After all, Barack Obama, a fairly young, casual, grass roots, Jay Z-listening, basketball-playing black man can be an enticing persona that, for the first time, makes a politician come ever so close to the type of role model Rap Central members look up to. Race in particular may play a considerable role, but the swagger the president appears to possess may be a considerable part of the attraction as well. The fact that the president is referred to as ‘bad ass’ as opposed to ‘socially-conscious’ or any other such label, may point in the direction of an infatuation with the persona, rather than with any meaningful consideration of his political platform or agenda.

In fact not much in this site points to a concern with some of the central issues of the community in which the music was engendered. For example, there is no substantial support for conscious rappers. According to Jeffrey Ogbar, in Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap, conscious rap “... was a direct result of the desperate conditions of black communities in the 1980s,” which “converged to foment that many would consider ‘positive,’ ‘conscious,’ ‘message,’ or ‘black nationalist’ rap” (144). Despite the fact that the site does list a handful of conscious rappers in its roster of artists they cover, this may be more of a result of these acts’ collaborations with more mainstream rappers, rather than an appreciation for their art in particular. In a news-related thread entitled “KRS-One Reveals Apathy of Conscious Rappers,” moderator *BigStallion* passes on an article by the same title, but it elicits very little interest among the Rap Central membership.

During my time exploring rapcentral.co.uk, I did not run into any serious discussions about topics that pervade the world of hip-hop, such as race, class, poverty, and so on that voiced

frustration with the system. The one area where there is a clear sense of disenfranchisement is in some of the videos, lyrics, and images posted. There is a palpable sense of wanting to run counter to what is considered to be normatively acceptable in society, or what is deemed to be prosocial behavior. These anti-social patterns are evident in the tropes of aggression and madness that seem pervasive in the genre and in the site. The choices of photos that show The Game in gang gear, Tupac Shakur in a straightjacket, and Method Man smoking are but a few examples of these tropes. The membership follows suit, especially with names such as *lostsoul89*, *loenatic*, *Bloodiemurderer*, *ThaBoogieMan*, *OutZida* and *DEFIANT*. Yet their names do little more than show they want to be perceived as tough and outside the grid. Their lack of meaningful discussions still uphold the status quo.

If anything, the real sense of disenfranchisement seems to center on a veritable concern with the state of hip-hop as a genre. This disquiet does not revolve around questions such as whether the popularity of hip-hop is on the decline. Record sales show no signs of abating, so there is no reason to suspect that the interest in the genre may have been transient. The uneasiness is focused on the essence of hip-hop, which its popularity, some might argue may have helped degenerate. Opinions are divided when it comes to what really constitutes hip-hop anymore. This sense of anxiety is not a phenomenon that is particular to this site or their members. Actually, the same reallocation of interest and energy has been felt throughout the hip-hop culture and the music industry. There is dissent among the ranks within the industry and among the legions of hip-hop aficionados. The popularity of mainstream rap, which is by and large ‘gangsta’ or ‘party’ rap, has caused some artists, fans, and critics to take a step back and consider the status quo. Conscious rappers in particular have taken a stand by denouncing what

they see as the bastardizing of the genre. In Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap, Jeffrey Ogbar posits,

In fact, progressive politics and lyrics among many hip-hopers shifted from criticizing societal crises at large to critiquing their peers [...] For many of these hip-hop artists, the fight has been on two fronts: (1) against the rappers who reify dangerous stereotypes and (2) against the problematic impulse to fixate on the meaning of the rhymes and not on the conditions that create the rhymes. [...] These divisions are not along the clichéd geographical lines as much as they are along artistic styles of expression, typified by arguments about “realness” and commercialism (137).

At Rap Central, this preoccupation with the spirit and the health of hip-hop is evident in the forums as various members start different iterations of the same thread, asking questions about the future of the genre. Indeed, these apprehensions and uncertainties manifest themselves in threads such as, “Does Hip Hop these days have a message anymore?” In this discussion, *BigStallion* asks himself and the rest of the membership about the message one can get from hip-hop nowadays and what one might learn from it. The opinions are as diverse as they seem to be everywhere else. Some members, such as *loenatic*, seem to think that there are still plenty of rappers out there who have a message, that is to say something important to say other than the standard fare of violence, drugs, sex, misogyny, and crime offered up by gangsta and party rap. Perhaps these rappers are ever so slightly less readily available to the general public, but members seem to believe that those who think artists with something of significance to say are completely absent are just not looking hard enough. Other members, such as *CCT* and *Elmer Fudd* however, seem to believe that perhaps hip-hop has lost its way and the future looks bleak. Yet another group, including people like *markbl*, just sees this discussion as pointless because

there is no sense in trying to find a message in hip-hop, which is merely music and not a place to seek meaning. In the related thread “What do you like rappers to talk about?” it is again BigStallion who starts the ball rolling and articulates that he prefers rappers to talk about serious and conscious issues such as education and what is happening at the street level in communities as opposed to the typical topics: money and women (Rap Central). Members CCT, Shenron, loenatic, and lostsoul89 echo BigStallion’s sentiments and list topics such as redemption, heartache, addiction, poverty, and politics (Rap Central). Markb1 seems to be the dissenting voice here as he claims, “...anyone who beats on about only liking conscious rappers or what ever is a fraud good music is good music [...] i honestly don’t care about the content, if its a good song that makes me nod my head i like it” (Rap Central).

Although I would like to believe those who claim to desire substance and clamor for depth, I do believe *markb1* might indeed be on to something here. What really confounds me about these threads is that a great number of people declare to be disillusioned with the state of hip-hop, worried about its future, and bothered by the lack of attention paid to what they consider to be meaningful topics. Yet, despite their position on this issue, no one is ready to do anything about giving those important topics an outlet. For all their highbrow discussions about the need for substance, none of them really address those issues on threads in the forums. If they are indeed looking for hip-hop to address subject matter such as education, politics, and social issues, then why not breach those topics themselves? Instead, these members seem to only contribute to the stereotype of hip-hop being without substance when it comes to issues of real importance.

## Violence, Drugs, Criminality, and Prison Culture

As discussed in chapter one, violence, drugs, and crime are a way of life in the urban neighborhoods where hip-hop originated. Whether the blame can be traced to the level of disenfranchisement, to the poverty-driven need, or to any other socio-political issue, or a conflation thereof, the fact is that these elements have become institutionalized. As such, they are very much a part of the culture of hip-hop. This lore can be seen in lyrics, videos, and so on, and while some rappers use their craft as a way to criticize those aspects of the music and even of their own neighborhoods, the vast majority of the mainstream songs and videos do little to facilitate any change since they promote that lifestyle to their audiences, who seem to gobble it up. Given this set-up, those rappers that choose to swim against the current, whose messages do not conform to the formula that has proven to be the industry's cash cow, often do not get the same recognition, and they certainly do not enjoy the same amount of record sales as their more thug life-inspired counterparts. This is the case with conscious rappers, who, as articulated above, tend to discuss political and social issues and question the values of mainstream hip-hop. The thread discussed previously, “KRS-One Reveals Apathy of Conscious Rappers,” which deals with conscious rappers not rising up to the occasion when asked to participate in a concert, is met with an accurate yet somewhat derisive comment from a member. *Shenron* says “i think conscious rappers might fear the competition...they need all the help they can get selling records” (Rap Central). Due to these dynamics, it is the mainstream drug and crime-loving hip-hop that is left to be consumed.

Starting with the trope of substance abuse, it is interesting to note that one of the forums is called “budsmokers only.” This is a place where people congregate to talk about smoking pot. They tell stories, share tips on smoking paraphernalia, the different types of marijuana, and so

on. Under most circumstances, a forum that deals with pot would seem rather out of place in a website that is devoted to a genre of music. Yet, since drugs, especially weed, are a staple of hip-hop culture, this forum does not seem out of place in the least to its users. Quite the opposite, actually, it helps reify the culture of the streets within the confine of the website. On their part, many of the members flaunt their appreciation for illegal substances through their names. To wit, some choose names such as xxx120proofxxx, Spliffstar89, and Thebigbong among others to show off their lifestyle choices, which are seen as not just cool but almost de rigueur.

In fact, when someone dares express his aversion towards the lifestyle that promotes the use of alcohol and drugs in a recreational manner and completely ignores how the glamorization of these excesses affects those who consume and buy into the way of life endorsed by hip-hop and in turn the communities where they live, his point falls on deaf ears. In his thread entitled “straight edge,” which refers to the youth movement and subculture that shuns the consumption of recreational drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, member [Braille<sup>TM</sup>] states, “for life, your ruining yourself on drugs and alcohol!!!” (Rap Central). Granted [Braille<sup>TM</sup>] could have chosen a less patronizing, less sermonic tack. Nevertheless, the fact is his comment could have sparked at least some sort of debate on the merits of a straight edge lifestyle or perhaps a discussion about how alcoholism and drug addiction have affected entire communities. Instead, the few respondents seem to have laughed [Braille<sup>TM</sup>] and his idea off without any real consideration of his point. Weed and alcohol seem to just be part of the package, and there is no room for discussion.

Another element that is very common in the world of hip-hop is enmity. Disputes between rappers are rampant in the rap game. After all, what could be expected in an industry where aggression and violence are glamorized and where masculinity and respect are essential to the braggadocio that is so central to the culture? Rappers’ arguments may range from personal

issues to industry-related problems, or they may simply be started for sport. Of course some of the most famous and infamous conflicts have been the result of rappers from one area disrespecting their counterparts from other regions. Whatever the reason for the fight, the conflict often spills right into the realm of music. In the hip-hop genre, ‘beef tracks,’ songs where a rapper disrespects, calls out, or insults another rapper, his music, or his crew are a dime a dozen, especially since a slight must be met with another lest the relenting rapper be considered a coward and the last insult against him be allowed to stand.

Perhaps as a way to reify that element within rap, there is a forum within Rap Central aptly name “Dish Sum Beef.” In hip-hop slang, according to Alonzo Westbrook’s Hip Hoptionary; The Dictionary of Hip Hop Terminology, to have beef means, “to have a problem with” (Rap Central). Indeed this forum is designated as the area for people to air their grievances, thrash out their differences, or plainly insult each other, whichever the case may be.

Whereas the people online might emulate violence in harmless ways—at least when it comes to being physically harmed as I do not ever discount the ramifications of verbal violence and the way that it may foster violence and desensitization—there are areas of the site where the violence becomes all too real. There have long been discussions about the effect that violent content might have on audiences, and the data has not quite been enough to close the deal. Furthermore, while rappers have not acquiesced to the sophistry involved in their persona, there has been a tacit understanding that there is a degree of exaggeration that goes on. Jeffrey Ogbar, in his book Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap, refers to Robin D. G. Kelley’s explanation in the book Race Rebels that there is a “...fictive badman style, which cultivates outlandish tales of bravado as a stylistic gesture of mic control and artistry. It is not to be taken literally” (117). The concern here is that the intention does not mandate the interpretation or the

result, and that, on top of that, the consequences of the words and images are conflated with reality when the headlines in the media make it patently clear that the lines between fantasy and reality are truly blurred. As mentioned in the site description, Rap Central provides its members and visitors with news about their favorite acts. In this section, more often than not, the headlines relate to drugs, violence, and crime. In fact, in March of 2008, there were a total of 31 headlines in the news section of Rap Central. Out of those 31, 15 are related to a theme of violence, drugs, crime, and/or prison. As discussed in Chapter One of this document, while some rappers hype up their violent persona while living by the law, there are many who walk the talk. This is where the line between fantasy and reality is crossed, and unlike in the world of lyrics and videos, people really get hurt and people truly have to face consequences. The stakes are high, as evidence by some of the headlines from March 2008.

The first headline for the month that relates to violence, drugs, and crime is about rapper The Game who stated his prison sentence. The article explains, “A judge sentenced The Game to 60 days in a Los Angeles County Jail on February 11, after he pleaded no contest to a felony charge of gun possession in a school zone” (Rap Central). A follow-up story deals with The Game apologizing to his fans for the confusion over his release day and thanking them for his support.

The following relevant story describes the escalating conflict between two rappers who were involved in an altercation at a hotel room. The article concludes, “Both rappers seem to agree that the issues will not be solved until a physical, one-on-one confrontation occurs” (Rap Central).

Another article recounts how a record studio CEO faces life for drug charges. The story is about Take Down Records’ CEO Alton "Ace Capone" Coles and Timothy "Tim" Gotti



Baukman, who were found guilty of using the label “as a front to distribute millions of dollars worth of cocaine throughout Philadelphia, Southern New Jersey and Delaware,” of “ RICO charges, including running a \$25 million dollar continuing criminal enterprise, as well as conspiracy to distribute cocaine” (Rap Central). It is ironic that these individuals, like many others in the business, assumed nicknames that allude to gangsters. It is a further identification with and idealization of the world of drugs, crime, and violence that is so endorsed by the genre through lyrics and images.

Another news article describes how police are close to catching the perpetrator in a shooting incident that involved rapper T.I.’s crew and left one of his employees dead.

In another story, police arrested rapper Juelz Santana after they found marijuana and hollow-point bullets in his car. As the article recounts, “After police learned the rapper was driving with a suspended license, they searched the vehicle and found 29 hollow point bullets wrapped in a sock, as well as \$19,500 dollars in cash in a hidden plastic bag” (Rap Central).

Two articles deal with whether Diddy might have had any knowledge or information on Tupac Shakur’s fatal shooting in 1994. This, of course, together with the shooting death of Biggie Smalls, is one of the most infamous unsolved crimes in the hip-hop world. Over 15 years later, it is still considered newsworthy.

Rapper Remy Ma is the subject of three headlines. This female rap artist “...is charged with assault and witness intimidation, after she allegedly shot her childhood friend in a dispute over \$3,000 that was missing from her purse” (Rap Central).

Another story describes how Lil’ Wayne’s London concert was interrupted and subsequently cut short “after at least six fights erupted near the stage” and “an audience member launched a bottle onto the stage and was escorted out of the venue” (Rap Central).

The last one piece of news reposted for the month is about a manager for a popular rap act who was charged with assaulting two teenage girls. As per the article, "...charges include rape by use of drugs, rape of an unconscious person, oral copulation of an unconscious person, sexual penetration by a foreign object and other charges" (Rap Central).

Let us review the month's tallies, then. Nine out of the 15 articles involve some sort of violence, including verbal, sexual, and physical. Eight out of the 15 stories feature a firearm possession or someone being shot. Eight out of the 15 headlines deal with arrests, indictments, court appearances, and trials. Six out of the 15 articles involve talk of prison. Two out of the 15 stories revolve around drugs.

The sheer amount of violence, drug, and crime-related stories should be shocking, except that is exactly what one expects from the people who claim to live and die by the gun. If the artists and other industry people's behavior is not necessarily surprising, what is truly devastating is the reaction from the fans. On Rap Central, members are not just consumers of news posted by administrators. On the contrary, they are able to and often share their thoughts about the articles in the news section.

Perhaps the worst reaction, the most telling response from the members of Rap Central comes in the shape of comments made to the story about how D-12's manager assaulted two teenagers. Instead of being appalled by this man's behavior, most of the members responded by expressing their dislike for girls who use their sexuality to get what they want and then cry foul. Bloodiemurderer is the first one to comment, and he elucidates, "LOL This is getting so old all these slutty ass girls putting them selves out there like a hoe then tring to get a man locked in jail! shit is fucked up!! Just rember R.Kelly" (Rap Central). Member 8ulletproofluv seems to

agrees, “them lil fast girls knew what they were getting into, they just wanted to meet eminem lol” (Rap Central).

It is necessary to remember that these are the people hip-hop fans endeavor to emulate. At Rap Central, for example, we see the imitation of the thug persona through the choice of handles. Names such as *Thugga*, *crimedog9*, *outlaw88*, *suspect*, and *ComptonThugsta*, *Bloodiemurderer*, *MadeNigga*, and *livebythegundiebythegun* are a testament to how the casual nature of crime within the culture of hip-hop has translated into the naturalization, normalization, and even glamorization of crime on this website.

When one considers that these rappers may just be some of this generation’s heroes, it is disconcerting to think that it is these values that they choose to extol and these actions that they choose to take. Their conduct is particularly alarming given their status in life. While people who are in the ‘hood may count alienation, poverty, and desperate need as their rationale for their illicit activities, rappers, who have so much to lose, would be well advised to curtail crime in their lives. Besides, one would imagine that these people have got it all. Indeed, we would assume they are fully satisfied with their lives. After all, isn’t that the image they portray? Rappers are notorious for bragging about the amount of money they have—as well as all the material possessions and privileges that money affords them—, women, fame, and a career they love. The situations and events in which they find themselves involved do beg the question: if they have it all, then why are so many of them involved in criminal activities? It is quite apparent that their lifestyle does not preclude them from continuing the kind of activities in which they might have been involved. Perhaps, there is even more pressure to live the kind of lifestyle about which they rap, complete with the gang-banging and drug-using they endorse in their product.

Other than the harmful example rappers may set by the decisions they make in their own lives when it comes to legal offenses and the brazen glorification of crime in their lyrics and videos, there is an even more pernicious trend that has emerged throughout the last few years, and I was surprised to find signs of it on this site. This movement is known as Stop Snitching, and the basic premise of the campaign is to promote the prevention and cessation of any collaboration with police when it comes to criminal investigations. The movement and its message seem to be working. According to Peter Katel's article "'Stop Snitching' Street Code Hampers Police," Chicago police blame their inability to solve about two-thirds of their local murders on this code of conduct (134). Despite the fact that this campaign was a grassroots effort that emerged from the crime-ridden streets of the ghettos in America, "word of the 'stop snitching' code didn't remain in the underground media," but emerged as a topic in rap music with the height of the movement seeing rap star Cam'ron telling Anderson Cooper on CBS's "60 Minutes" "that he wouldn't tell police even if he knew a serial killer was living next door," and later adding that "tipping police to a crime would hurt his business" (Katel 135). Not everyone in hip-hop espouses the movement, however. In fact, "A founding father of the genre, Chuck D of Public Enemy, has denounced the 'stop snitching' campaign" (Katel 135). Nevertheless, it is often the more mainstream, popular artists that have the most impact on audiences across the world, and it seems their anti-snitching ideology is having a real impact on the world of crime.

At Rap Central, some of this complex matrix of allegiances, morals, and success is further demonstrated in the thread entitled "The Game Talks to Youth about Violence." Here, BigStallion shares an article from the [Los Angeles Times](#) by the same title that explains rapper The Game will appear at a Newark, New Jersey school and talk about the reality of gang violence and the consequences it has in a community. While this would seem like a step in the

right direction when it comes to beginning to counter the messages that hip-hop audiences consume, the members of Rap Central appear very skeptical about the event and The Game's intentions. Members responding to this thread agree that this is likely to be a self-serving publicity stunt. The fact is that at the time the event was planned, the rapper was about to release an album. The timing is indeed suspect. The most disturbing line of commenting on this thread is the one that *BigStallion* takes when he posits that The Game will actually hurt himself by going ahead with this planned appearance (Rap Central). Others agree. Their take is that speaking to kids about the negative effects of violence when he has made his living and his reputation by rapping about how "hard" and "street" he is makes him look hypocritical, which is not good for his image. Not only that, they predict that he will lose credibility with his core audience. They do have a point about the duplicitous behavior, especially when one of The Game's DVD/Mixtape combos is titled "Stop Snitching. Stop Lying," a reference to the controversial campaign. In fact, the cover of that album, which features a bare-chested The Game with a bandana wrapped around his mouth—a typical way in which gangs use the piece of cloth—and his index finger on top of the bandana, where his mouth would be, in the international symbol for keeping quiet, is one of the main pictures featured as part of the design of every Rap Central page. That in itself, speaks volumes.

### Hypermasculinity and Hypersexuality

Displays that are designed to demonstrate masculinity are commonplace in hip-hop and the same can be said for the world of Rap Central. With a membership comprised mostly of men, to the point that the demographics put forth by the site administrators for possible advertisers

completely ignores whatever percentage of female members there might be, Rap Central can sometimes feel like a boys locker room.

The atmosphere of Rap Central seems to recreate the environment of the streets, which is a markedly male-dominated milieu. As discussed in Chapter One, in a place where the possibility of earning a good living and supporting a family, which have long been accepted markers of masculinity in America, are limited, men have found other ways of asserting their maleness. Elements of importance include strength and power (physical, more than emotional or professional in most cases), respect, toughness, and sexual prowess.

A quick look at the site's design strengthens that notion. The colors are drab and serious. The pictures of the rappers that grace the site have a common thread. In them, more often than not, rappers pose in menacing stances. Their faces look menacing. Sometimes, they are shirtless, and their tattooed muscular bodies are emphasized. The three main pictures at the top of the site design epitomize the male aloofness hip-hop espouses. Three things are prevalent in Method Man's picture: his menacing demeanor, his cigarette (which one might assume to be marijuana), and his expensive watch. The ominous stare is also present in the photo of Tupac Shakur, who is featured in a straightjacket.

A trip to the forums, where the majority of the interaction among members takes place, reinforces this paradigm as well. This is where the male club atmosphere is felt the most, not only because the vast majority of the members are male, but because the topics are geared to the male audience as well. Members often choose handles that play up the macho persona, such as BigStallion, RealDogg, tblockzpimp, swaggerboi777, and Tha Mac.

Another area where the importance of masculinity and heterosexual masculine sexual orientation central to hip-hop is manifested is in the rampant hatred of homosexuals. The dislike

for homosexuals is generalized. Part of the stigma attached to homosexuality stems from the deep-seeded religious beliefs that are quite strong within much of the primarily African-American urban neighborhoods, where sometimes faith and hope are what people rely on to make it through the day. Yet, as many churches have begun to be more inclusive of GBLT people, the rap culture has remained rather critical of and aggressive toward them. Despite the strong homoerotic undercurrents present in hip-hop, as discussed in Chapter One, the hip-hop crowd tends to be highly homophobic. Although there have been a handful of openly gay hip-hop acts, they have never been openly embraced by the mainstream nor have they ever achieved much success.

On Rap Central, this kind of sexual orientation apartheid can be appreciated as a normalized element of the culture in the nomenclature used when banning members. From all the words that could be used to signify that a member has become *persona non grata* and no longer has access to the site, the administrators have chosen the derogatory term for the word gay. Indeed, anyone who has earned the scorn of the membership also earns a button on his or her profile that reads “This Faggot Has Been Banned.” Clearly, this is meant as an insult, and what can be more insulting to those so invested in proving the extent of their masculinity than having their sexuality, and then by extension their masculinity, questioned in such a blatant manner.

The word “faggot” is thrown around quite liberally as an insult on the forums, but sometimes the members choose to actually discuss the topic of homosexuality in a more direct manner. In a thread simply titled “gay,” *lostsoul89* claims, “i have no problems wit em and all (if they keep there business to themselves like normal ppl ), but i don’t think they should be allowed to adopt kids, what u think? ” (Rap Central). *abilitee*, *Shenron*, and *ThaGutter* seem to be alone in their full acceptance of gay people and their right to have a family. The rest of the

members range in opinions from tenuous tolerance to unadulterated hatred. Dazzla shows no mercy at all, proposing that all gay people be killed, a suggestion with which josip-zgb agrees and on which *Sawedoffthugsta* builds by declaring, “one time I’d suggest death camps...aids carrying bastards” (Rap Central). *Novakaine*, who finds gay men disgusting, reminds everyone that homosexuality is not just about men, which is what this discussion seems to be about, and that he thinks “...lesbians r d shit dough ” (Rap Central). Here, *Novakaine* is not advocating that lesbians should be allowed to raise children, but simply supporting the existence of lesbians, since lesbian sex is a major male fantasy. Indeed there is plenty of female-on-female pornography in the x-rated forums on Rap Central, so it is no surprise that lesbians seem to get a pass in hip-hop culture. The other pass of sorts is a much more complex one. In Hop-Hop America, Nelson George comments on this phenomenon by pointing to an irony that is lost on some. He posits, “While homosexuality is widely condemned in the black community, the committing of homosexual acts behind bars is rarely commented on,” a fact that may be explained as much by the hatred of homosexuality as by the notion that these homosexual sex practices are not considered real sex “because they often occur through rape or psychological coercion...” (Rap Central). It is food for thought, then, whether perhaps the blind hatred stems from or becomes further ingrained as a result of knowing of the amount of homosexual acts that must take place in jail when this segment of the population is particularly susceptible to being incarcerated. Nevertheless, since no one is breaching the subject, it only gets swept under the rug.

Another element that reinforces the notion of Rap Central as this heterosexual male haven is the focus on the portrayal of women as sexual objects. Not only are there forums for explicit sexual material intended for straight males, but also the “Anything Goes” forum features



a description of the topics that might be discussed therein that includes an invitation to all members to discuss their sexual exploits. Yet, that's but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to women at Rap Central.

### Negative Portrayal and Over-Sexualization of Women

One of the main ways in which women are marginalized in the genre is the fact that hip-hop is akin to a boys' club. Males greatly outnumber the females, not only behind the scenes as producers and writers, but in the limelight as well. On rapcentral.co.uk, this disparity is very evident in the dearth of formal coverage of female rappers. In the section that lists the full roster of rappers the site covers, out of 129 acts, only six are females. Missing from this register are well-known female rappers such as Salt-N-Peppa and Queen Latifah, veterans of the rap game. Their absence may have to do with their pro-female lyrics and attitudes. Although it wasn't the only type of songs they wrote and sang, both acts boasted tunes that were uplifting to the women who listened to them and even played with the gender divide. Since the genre is controlled by males and even aimed toward and consumed mostly by men, it would seem counterintuitive to include such acts. Salt-N-Peppa and Latifah were also known for including moral lessons in their lyrics and broaching more socially relevant issues, which, as discussed earlier, tend to be elements that are far less popular with audiences than the more anti-social ones to which rappers devote their time. These attitudinally-related preferences might be the reason for the exclusion of Lauryn Hill whose album, The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill, was certified diamond and earned the rapper/singer ten Grammy nominations, out of which she won five, making her one if not the most recognizable female artists in the genre.

However, these concerns about pro-female or socially-aware tropes would not explain why other renowned artists such as Foxy Brown, who very much represented and reinforced the elements of mainstream hip-hop and who once garnered mass appeal, with two platinum-certified LPs, are also missing. Pondering about the erasure of these names from what one might consider their rightful place, I considered the possibility that these artists, among others, might not have been included on this list because they have been virtually inactive in the last few years. However, the list also neglects to mention more recent female acts such as Lil Mama and Remy Ma. Not to mention that the roster includes male artists who have not been active in far longer than these two females. In fact, the site covers some rappers, such as Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, who died in the 1990s, making the argument about current relevance moot. The only area where the creators of the site might bring up these females is in the news area, if they happen to be involved in an event that is newsworthy, such as the announcement of a concert or the release of an album, or more often than not, a legal issue.

Nevertheless, the beauty of the Internet as a medium is that the creators are not the arbiters of the content and do not dictate the information contained in websites such as this one. In a blurring of the line that exists between the notions of media producer/media consumer, members also set up the agenda of what is important to talk about. In the discussion forums, members are free to thrash out whatever topics they wish, and female rappers that are not officially covered by site are not out of bounds in any way. Unfortunately, these women do not seem to be a subject matter that holds great importance or interest to the vast majority of the members. In the forums designated as “Hip-Hop,” where users convene to converse about their favorite artists, the state of the industry, and so on, only one out of 661 posts is strictly about a female rapper. In the forums where members can share music by uploading and downloading

music, none of the 102 available downloads are from female artists. In the download forum that is labeled 'Other Music,' only six out of the 35 posts are for females and, in fact, they are all Donna Summer albums and songs that were posted by the same user. In the forum designated for download requests, there is one call for an album from American rapper Trina, who is one of the few artists the site covers in an official manner.

Interestingly enough, nevertheless, within the 661 posts in the forums where members discuss hip-hop, there are two threads that deal head-on with the issue of the female presence in hip-hop, or the lack thereof. The thread titled "The Struggle: Where Are the Female MCs?" was started by *BigStallion*. An interesting if perhaps anecdotal point is the irony of *BigStallion* starting this sort of dialogue when his signature contains an animated segment from the legendary video game *Mortal Kombat* where a male combatant is battling a female. The words "Finish Her" appear briefly before he decapitates her with a kick, tears her torso off with a punch, and then kicks her crotch so that what remains of her body falls to the ground (Rap Central). The post by *BigStallion* is made up by a portion of the article by the same name that originally appeared on the website All Hip Hop ([www.allhiphop.com](http://www.allhiphop.com)), a link to the actual page where users can continue to read the article, and an invitation to start the discussion about the information in the piece. The thread, and the interest, is short-lived with only one other person answering *BigStallion*'s attempt to engage in a conversation. The sole respondent, *Shenron* suggests that the article "must have been written by a woman..." (Rap Central) His assumption is correct, but his lack of certainty also implies that he has not bothered to follow the link to the actual article, where he would have been able to confirm his suspicion. *Shenron* goes on to point out that the "...line about women coming harder on the mic was just ridiculous..." and that the author lost him at that point (Rap Central). The last post is a comment from the same member

who started the thread, and it comes within one minute of *Shenron*'s answer. In it, *BigStallion* agrees with the respondent by stating, "yeh i feel you on that, when i read this ((which was briefly)), I stopped readin it too" (Rap Central). His quick almost mirror-like response almost smacks of backpedaling, as if he was making sure that his post was not in any way interpreted as him agreeing or even condoning such offensive ideas, as that might make him look weak in front of his friends.

Despite this distancing of sorts from the topic at the end of the thread, *BigStallion* is also responsible for the other thread that is concerned with female rappers. In this post titled "Greatest female rap artist?" this Rap Central member answers the question in the title by saying, "lauryn hill hands down, no one could touch her skill" (Rap Central). What ensues is a 32-post exchange where people weigh in on their preferences in regard to female rappers. The participants are: *Shenron*, *Elephant Man*, *Elmer Fudd*, *CCT*, *lostsoul89*, and *Tha Mac*. The group trades opinions, naming American female rappers, Lauryn Hill, Lil Kim, MC Lyte, Jean Grae, and Eve as some of the best in the industry. Despite the fact that some people admit to liking some of these females' tracks and/or albums, there are some anti-female undertones. For example, *Elmer Fudd* agrees that Lauryn Hill is the best, but he manages a back-handed compliment since he likes her because "...she don't sound squeaky or patronizing, and she talks about decent stuff unlike most female mc's" (Rap Central). Of course, what he considers decent material might not necessarily have much to do with decency by most people's definition of that word. *Elephant Man* seems to find a problem with Lil Kim because, as he claims, Biggie Smalls, her mentor, wrote her rhymes. In hip-hop, writing one's own lyrics is an important part of being considered talented. It is not enough to be good at rapping. By outing her as someone who does not have the ability to write her own rhymes, *Elephant Man* discredits her in the eyes of real hip-hop fans, and also shows her

dependence on a male to help her achieve fame. In what constitutes the most direct assault, lostsoul89 dismisses the topic by juxtaposing a laughing smiley with the statement “@ such a things as there being a good female rapper” (Rap Central). Basically, this means he is laughing the whole proposition off. As if to prove his point, he does not rejoin the conversation, even when it derails into a conversation about male rappers. Putdowns notwithstanding, there is a respectable amount of real discussion of the merits of different female rappers and their respective sets of skills, and various members admit to enjoying these artists’ albums. Entirely missing from this thread are female members of the site who have missed an opportunity to have a say in this discussion.

Interestingly enough, this thread is replicated in July in the same forum, when a Rap Central member named *Bristina08* starts a thread entitled “Best Female Rapper.” *Bristina08* does not identify as a female. However, her picture shows two girls, one of whom is, presumably, she. Also, the name itself seems to be feminine. Furthermore, she has added her AOL Instant Messenger name for people to contact her, and her handle is *BabyShay3*, which seems appropriate for a female. Her thread turns into a 60-post conversation. *Shenron* and *Elephant Man*, who participated in the last iteration of this dialogue, take part in the discussion. They are joined by: *Tupaki90*, *NyNe*, *loenatic*, and *MadeNigga*. *Shenron*’s pick is the same as his choice in the previous thread. *Elephant Man*, who in the last conversation had called Lauryn Hills’s debut album amazing, however, becomes very antagonistic and replies, “they all stink, get back to the kitchen where they are actually useful” (Rap Central). His response is interesting in that he might assume, as I am, that *Bristina08* is a female (or, alternately, he might know this member through previous interaction) and that factor has an impact on his response. While he might have no problem divulging his appreciation for a female rapper when the question is asked by another

male, having a female attempt to start this kind of conversation may be seen as an encroachment of this male-centered space, and her inquiry is not to be taken seriously. *Bristina08*'s response appears designed to defend women, but not in a way that might be interpreted as disrespectful. She writes, "Damn I'm mad u feel that way...LOL...I disagree wit u tho" (Rap Central). Here, she expresses her disapproval of his comments, but does so in an almost coy manner. She demurs and claims to be angered by his words, but she tempers her own comment by adding that she is laughing (LOL, which means laughing out loud). While *Elephant Man* feels free to express his thoughts in a most antagonistic, misogynistic manner, *Bristina08*'s tone is more conciliatory, which might point to her perceived status in a site where male is the default gender. *Tupaki90* is quick to applaud *Elephant Man*'s comment, which he does by quoting his comments in his own post and then adding, "Respect increased" (Rap Central). *Loenatic* follows suit, citing *Elephant Man*'s lines and adding, "+10 rep for making me laugh so hard" (Rap Central). Respect being essential to the braggadocio that is part of the hip-hop essence, this congratulatory gesture is very significant. *MadeNigga* adds to the anti-female trope by commenting, "I ain't ever heard a female rapper to be honest, since I heard Gangsta Boo in the 3-6 I don't wish to" (Rap Central). This statement is a complete negation of the entire female rapper category based on his experience of listening to one particular artist. To this, *Elephant Man* replies, "And all women ain't shit Only good for cooking cleaning and sucking dick And that's it – Bizarre probably the truest most realest lyrics heard on wax" (Rap Central). Here, *Elephant Man* is citing lyrics from a song by American rapper Bizarre, the sentiments of which he clearly echoes. While this member is certainly not alone in his beliefs, or at least in his posture, there are other members who find his behavior unwarranted or make fun of him. *Nyne* is the first male to respond by asking whether his lines about the kitchen being a woman's place are a joke (Rap Central).

*Shenron*, who seems to be aware of *Elephant Man*'s agenda, has a suggestion: "i say it's about time we lynched ele...he'd had it coming for a long time now!" (Rap Central). The argument goes back and forth a few times but then it degenerates into a discussion of males and females in relationships and the fact that perhaps the reason men say these things about women is that they have been played by a female. When *Shenron* suggests that maybe *Elephant Man* has had bad experiences with females, the latter seems to backpedal by saying, "nah im just kidding around man u no me," as if when his manhood is called into question in reference to his ability to get women, he needs to reframe the conversation (Rap Central). Yet, he still manages to get a dig in as he finishes his post with, "ps female rappers do stink though" (Rap Central). Another remarkable aspect of this conversation is that when the conversation turns to issues of relationships and females being underhanded, *Bristina08* reveals something quite personal when she states, "its just the bitches u attract [...] cause the bitches I fuck wit [...] is great and Im a good bitch myself" (Rap Central). Here, we learn that *Bristina08* is indeed a female and that she is gay or bisexual. It is interesting that she uses the term bitch to identify herself and the women she dates. Her sexuality does not seem to alarm the men, who probably take her posts more seriously knowing that, in dating women, she probably deals with the same issues with which they claim to deal. The conversation then turns to a discussion about rapping skills that effectively ends the discussion about the original topic of the thread.

Female rappers' insignificance is not the only way in which the male-centeredness manifests itself in the hip-hop universe. Apart from being considered secondary when it comes to their talent and participation in the industry, they are also relegated to the status of sex objects. They are more likely to be seen dancing semi-nude next to a rapper than commanding attention on the microphone.

On the main page, the last section is titled “Hip-Hop Honeys/Rap Video Girls, Hip-Hop Models.” This area is devoted to pictures, contact information, and biographies of women who are associated with hip-hop. They are not performers, but rather females, mostly models and wannabe models and actresses who have appeared in hip-hop music videos, or have been featured in pictorials in hip-hop magazines. The pictures are mostly what could be considered soft porn in the sense that the women are featured semi-nude or nude, but there are no full frontal nudity shots. However, very few of the pictures could be labeled as tasteful or innocent by most standards. The models, who are either nude or very scantily clad (lingerie, bikinis, among other getups) in most shots, are often posed in a sexually explicit manner; their hypersexualization is evident in their facial features and the way in which the make-up accentuates them: markedly hooded eyes, flushed cheeks, and an open mouth framed by plumped lips. In the majority of the photographs, the stance the models have assumed is overtly sexual. Frequently, they are shown with their legs open or bending over, their backs to the camera. Objectification is manifest in the way their breasts and their buttocks are foregrounded in the pictures. In many of the pictures the females are not only sexually wanton, but they appear to be portrayed as definitely submissive, reifying the notion of their status as objects, subject to the male gaze through the screen.

The site does have another area where it moves from the soft-core pornography to the hard-core type. Within the section of the discussion forums devoted to downloads, there is an entire forum dedicated to pornography. Aptly named “XXX Downloads,” this area is devoted to people sharing passwords for porn sites or simply uploading or providing links to free videos and pictures. Again, a forum such as this seems like an unlikely addition in a site about music, but it serves to reify the connection between hip-hop and porn, which had been crystallized by music videos, lyrics, etc.



These areas help reinforce the idea that this site is indeed a male-gendered space. Females may be alienated by these displays, may be resigned to accepting them as par for the course when it comes to the mainstreamed essence of the culture, or they might indeed be fully supportive of the notion of females as sexual objects. That females may frequent the site does not seem to bother the men. I did not encounter anything that would make me think that there is a concerted effort to make this a males-only site, which would be a hard goal to achieve anyway, given the fact that females could pass as males without so much as a worry they might be discovered. While there is no movement to actually ban women from the site, one gets a sense, at least from some members, that women should not be in this site and should not want to hang around. They are in fact perplexed by the notion of women having an affinity for hip-hop at all. In a thread titled “why would teenage chicks like rap?” RC Young Buck member *suckmeandick* explains that, when it comes to rap, while he “can see why white boys in the burbs can dig it,” he is “weirded out why the chicks like it [since] it puts them down as sluts and they cannot relate to the message,” especially as rap is “tailored made to boost up testosterone and appeal to men (Rap Central). *Suckmeandick*, who does not identify a gender or location and only participated in the forums for one day and was never seen again, ponders whether the women are “dumb and wanting a beat” (Rap Central). *BigStallion* seems to think it is just about the rhythm and explains, “...unfortunately in today’s world females gravitate to anything that makes them dance” (Rap Central). *Shenron* offers a different rationalization and states, “alot of girls get into it to impress guys...unfortunately” (Rap Central). What is fascinating about this conversation is that it demonstrates that the males that listen to this genre are acutely aware of how women are portrayed, yet instead of seeing anything wrong with that portrayal, they find it problematic that females would enjoy it or support it. This may explain, at least in part, their apparent disdain for

female rappers. There is definitely a duality here, which is the age-old contradiction of misogyny. As Jack Holland posits in his book A Brief History of Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice, "...on the depressing list of hatreds that human beings feel for each other, none other than misogyny involves the profound need and desires that most men have for women, and most women for men. Hatred coexists with desire in a peculiar way" (5). It is a sad legacy for the boys and girls of future generations.

### Hip-Hop Vernacular

Language is a paramount element of personal and local distinctiveness. As Mike Storry and Peter Childs explain in their book British Cultural Identities, "Ethnic and regional identity can appear in many forms. Historians, sociologists and anthropologists have discovered, however, that one of the most important ways in which ethnic groups identify themselves is through language" (210). This is a reasonable proposition since words are the symbols that help us classify our surroundings, the prism through which we understand the world, and the code that we use to explain our thoughts and communicate with others. Story and Childs also remind us that when it comes to language, we ought to be careful, for "In any discussion of nationalism, identity, or current affairs, language is never 'innocent'. The choice of words reveals the underlying outlook of the speaker" (18). This is very apropos in hip-hop culture, which is laden with very specific values.

One of the most pervasive aspects of hip-hop is the lingo attached to it and its liberal use on this site may be read as a further marker of adoption of the hip-hop culture. While this may very well be the case, when it comes to looking at language on Rap Central, there are a few issues to keep in mind as they complicate the notion of how and why certain words are used.

The first matter to consider is the fact that English is the language that dominates the world by and large, no matter the sheer number of people that speak other tongues and dialects. It is not, however, just any English that stands unchallenged. It is American English, which, "...British scholars have long conceded that American English is the more influential of our now global language" (3). Indeed, while England may have dibs on the name and the original forms, the US now can claim its form of English is far more widespread. McNeil and Cran remind us that "Spoken by four times as many people as British, American English reflects America's superpower—or, as the French put it, *hyperpower*—status (love it or hate it) in virtually every field..." (3-4). Couched in the American vernacular, is hip-hop's lexicon. Surely, at a certain level, hip-hop speak can almost appear like a completely different language. On the other hand, hip-hop vernacular has become so ingrained into the mainstream American English we hear and read everywhere that at times they seem inextricable. Since America exports its culture—out of which hip-hop music is but a mere sliver—to the world, it is quite likely that foreigners have long been exposed to not just American English, but the hip-hop slang embedded in our colloquial speech.

A subset of that issue of English as the universal language of sorts is that because Britain is Anglophone, American English is likely to be picked up even more in Britain. As McNeil and Cran remind us, "George Bernard Shaw could joke that 'England and America are two countries divided by the same language,'" but Shaw didn't live to see how the languages evolved into their different entities and how one has overtaken the other (2). In British Cultural Identities, the authors suggest that, "Some people fear that sharing a language with the most culturally successful nation on Earth will erode Britain's own linguistic identity..." and that "...through exposure to popular music, cinema and computer technology, British people are becoming more

and more familiar with the various speech patterns of the US, even learning to differentiate between them (214). It is clear that the lack of linguistic barriers makes for an easier mainstreaming of American lingo.

The third and last subject matter to bear in mind is the impact that technology has had on language. As Robert McNeil and William Cran explain in their book Do You Speak American, “IM-ing and e-mailing are beginning to alter the way we write” (147). Undeniably, the use of text on computers and phones has brought with it its own metamorphosis. Indeed, as professors, we often see this type of abbreviated and misspelled lingo creep into student’s academic papers, just because of how innate to their communication it has become. What’s more, and what complicates this research is that, “Besides the fun of using as many abbreviations as possible [...], their language is full of words like *Wassup* or *Sup* for ‘what’s up with you?’; *Ima* for ‘I’m going’ [...] –phonetic spellings of pronunciations that resemble Black English” (McNeil 147). The fact this the hip-hop and digital text lingo are conflated makes it hard to tell which of these influences we are seeing here. Indeed rap’s syntax and lingo are about how we talk; writing on IM, email, and text messages is also akin to talking, and we tend to be far less careful with spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar when we speak. The connection and similarity is clear. That said, McNeil and Cran believe that what is driving this stylistic change in technology is still at its root the result of the influence of hip-hop and Black English (147). If we respect this proposition, then either way, the brunt of the responsibility still rests squarely on hip-hop and the impact of its use of language, even if once removed.

As long as we remember to temper the excitement about the hybridity offered up by hip-hop with these caveats, and if we also keep in mind that many of the people populating Rap Central are American, it is indeed worthwhile to look at how language is used on this site. On

Rap Central, the hip-hop vernacular is everywhere, from the first page where they promise to cover the Rap Game, to the forums where members drop hip-hop words casually as part of their daily vocabulary. It is fair to say that almost all, if not every single one, of the examples of conversation that I have cited in each section of this chapter to back up my findings demonstrate the abundant use of American slang and hip-hop jargon. As a matter of fact, the fact that there were so many phonetic spellings, abbreviations, and just general disarray when it came to writing was the reason behind my decision to forgo the use of [sic] as a way to point out these mistakes or stylistic choices.

Despite the plethora of evidence in the previous sections in the shape of full quotations in context, here are a few quantitative nuggets that speak to the terminology used by people on Rap Central. Since the vast majority of members and users are male and their relationship is friendly, I thought it interesting to find out what kinds of terms of address are being used on this site. The results were telling. There were 3,485 occurrences of dude and 4,128 of guy versus 47 occasions where bloke and 1,066 where mate were used. The first two terms are considered American while the last two are decidedly British slang. These numbers prove there is a considerable favoring of the American terms, but that there is still a marked incidence of words that are very much not American. The next terms I searched for are both American and hip-hop-based ways in which males address each other. ‘Dwag’ yielded 15 instances, while the more straightforward spelling, ‘dog’ showed up 1055 time. Another hip-hop nickname, ‘playa,’ was used on 398 occasions, while the less stylized version, ‘player,’ appeared 1618. It should be noted, however, that the latter was often used when speaking of music players, such as iPods, and when referring to athletes. Still, the incidence of these words to call on each other still points to the incidence of the prevalence of the hip-hop lingo. Next, I chose to look at the words used to talk about

currency because money is not only a major component of the consumerist and materialistic aspect of hip-hop but because dealing with money is a part of our quotidian life. The words ‘dosh’ and ‘quid,’ which are UK slang for money in general as well as for the British Sterling Pound, emerges 1 and 27 times respectively. The term ‘pounds’ was used 148, but many of these instances referred not to legal tender, but to weight. Even the term ‘Euros,’ which names the currency that is presumably used daily by many of the European people who populate this site, was only present 55 times. In sharp contrast, the word ‘dollars’ was written 428 times, and the more colloquial ‘bucks’ put in an appearance 151 times. I also considered that since objectification and oversexualization of women and concern with sex were so ubiquitous on the site, a search for the preferred way of addressing females would be fitting. The word ‘bitch’ yielded 5115 matches, which makes it a fairly omnipresent term. Also, there were 455 matches for ‘hoes.’ Another fairly popular term is pussy, which appeared 2326 times versus 38 cases of fanny, the British version of the word. At every turn, American and hip-hop-infused American English expressions outnumbered British English ones as well as any turns of phrase from other locales. Examples include: 151 cases of ‘arse’ versus 8,133 of ass and 35 instances of bollocks versus 1,770 of ‘bullshit.’ Typical UK slang was present, but not to the level one might expect on a site that is supposed to be UK-based. ‘Bloody’ tipped the scale at 191 occurrences, but it is important to realize the term was also used to describe anything that was actually bloody in the sense of the bodily fluid. ‘Posh’ showed up 152 times and ‘wank’ 127. The rest of the terms I searched, including blimey, sod, rubbish, shag, shagging, tosser, and wanker, did not even break the three-digit mark. This may indeed speak to an erasure of the British linguistic markers and the foregrounding of hip-hop lingo.

Despite the fact that Rap Central users and members use the words quite casually in their conversation, in ways that does not make them appear contrived, at least some of them seem to be aware of the fact that hip-hop has an influence on them. On the thread “Does lyrics really have an influence on peeps?” *BigStallion* poses one of the quintessential questions that fields like media studies, cultural studies, and psychology have asked for a long time when it comes to media in general: how much of an impact does it really have on people? As with people within the disciplines that study the phenomenon of media effects, the members of Rap Central are quite divided and the opinions are very diverse. While the discussion itself is rather fascinating, the area that is interesting in terms of this exploration of language is the notion that lyrics affect speech quite directly. After all, it makes sense that by the sheer repetition, words would become part of one’s vocabulary. If a hip-hop fan listens to only or mostly hip-hop, reads hip-hop magazines, and watches hip-hop videos and movies, it follows that the hip-hop vernacular would percolate. As someone who learned English as a second language, I remember being encouraged by my English teachers to listen to music, watch movies, and read magazines in English. Given the abundance of American media, that was what I consumed. The result: despite the fact that my formal education was in British English, I began acquiring a markedly American vernacular. The same applies to hip-hop fans the more they immerse themselves in the world of the genre they love. Furthermore, even if this process did not happen organically, there is an investment in being well versed in the lingo. In a genre and a culture that puts a high premium on authenticity, those who are removed from the actual street scene of the hip-hop they feel as their own can bring the culture closer to them by making themselves part of it. Living the life by talking the talk, if you will. Besides, since songs, magazines, and videos are laced with words that can sometimes feel like a whole different code, those who wish to really feel like insiders would be

well served to learn the cipher. Therefore, there is quite an incentive to become familiar with the terms.

Looking at the thread “Slang from round your way,” which was analyzed earlier, the members share with one another terms that are used locally. From the entire lingo their respective languages offer, out of all the words they could have picked, it is interesting but not necessarily surprising to see that all the words and phrases they have chosen to share with one another all relate in some way or another to the elements that are central to hip-hop. Therefore, while they might not be the vernacular that is familiar to those used to listening to hip-hop, those words still comply with the guidelines of what makes hip-hop what it is and can be classified as hip-hop vocabulary. As *Novakaine* initiates the thread and members *ComptonThugsta*, *abilitee*, *L.G Da G-O-D*, *Clear*, *Shenron*, *NyNe*, *JohnnieUpahts*, *chacho\_187*, *markb1*, and *UrbanVimy* join in, the words they share include local terms for: dawg, weed, gun, bitch, faggot, fat bitch, pussy, cool, cruising, stab, loser, and fuck you. Clearly, these are all terms that belong within the tropes of misogyny, criminality, drugs use, masculinity, and so on that are at the core of hip-hop values. These are words one would expect to find, in abundance even, in most hip-hop songs, magazines, and videos.

One term that is conspicuously absent from most members’ roster of hip-hop words but that is right at home in most rap songs, videos, and magazines is “nigga.” Perhaps most members do not include the term in their list because it is one of the single most controversial and polarizing words in the American English vocabulary. Laden with historical, socio-political, and racial meaning, the word that was once a derogatory word used for African Americans by their oppressors, became a taboo term no one would utter. Until, that is, it was co-opted by the most unlikely group, the people against whom it was used, or at least a segment of that population.



According to Jeffrey Ogbar, in Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap, “the term has different meanings depending on context” yet “its use here implies, in no uncertain terms, a masculine black working-class identity that represents the core of hip-hop’s character” (7).

Despite its ubiquitous use, there has been much debate about its use with passionate factions on either side of the divide. There are some who think the word vile because of its violent, oppressive past. On the other hand, those who avail themselves of it believe that its use by African Americans as a way of addressing one another in effect neutralizes the impact the word used to have and renders it innocuous. Whereas these points are deliberated and probably will for a long time to come, there is one application of the word that is not really up for discussion: the use of the word by white people. As Ogbar explain, “...few [rappers] have been able to achieve the ultimate “ghetto pass”: free usage of the n-word” (63). This kibosh does not just apply to hip-hop artists, but to all white people. In fact, famous rapper Jay-Z actually “requests his white fans to avoid repeating the word as they recite his lyrics aloud at this concerts” (67-8). Whether they comply or not is debatable, and there is certainly no way to enforce this mandate when people are in the privacy of their own home or car.

So what happens in the public/private arena of the Internet? The online milieu is conducive to the erasure of race. Without being able to ascertain people’s race, it is hard to make sure who is allowed to say the word nigga or not. At Rap Central, there is no race category in the profile and members are not required to post pictures, nor do they often go out of their way to identify their nationality let alone their ethnicity. With the diversity of the membership and the diversity of the hip-hop fandom, assumptions about race simply cannot be made, and I do not believe anyone would think it prudent to start checking people’s ethnicities in order to ascertain their right to use the word. Besides, this is another place where the elements of hip-hop are

decontextualized, so there may indeed not even be a concept that the use of the word can be problematic. This anonymity means that members may use the ‘n-word’ with virtual impunity. And it is indeed used, with a total of 2,979 individual instances of the use of the word in the history of the forums. As of yet, I have not found any threads that discuss the use of the word or arguments that began as a result of someone using the term when they should not have. After all, it’s all just part of the hip-hop vernacular.

### Sense of Community

There are many music websites, including hip-hop websites, which act as little more than a repository of information. Just like Rap Central, they hold data that is important to the genre’s fans. Areas of interest include artists’ biographies and contact information, up-to-date news feeds about artists and the industry, album reviews, photos, lyrics, and even downloads. What these sites lack, however, is a real sense of community, where users can become part of the flow of information and where they can communicate with one another, as well as with the creators of the site.

Despite the fact that Rap Central’s home page appears to have the same elements as most of the sites described above, they play up the sense of community in their welcome message, which states, “With thousands of members in our Rap Forum, a powerful unique network of artist sites, our grip on the rap game will soon be equal to that of Tupac Shakur” (Rap Central). The links to the forum main page are also very prominent on the main page, with no less than three different areas from which the forums can be accessed. In fact, a side panel, which contains a link for the forums, is titled RC Community. The hope for a sense of community is made explicit by the choice of words in that section and the decision to include forums denotes the

desire for a feeling of community, making this website not just about information or music downloads, but about the people who visit it. The forums page is divided into several sections for the sake of organization, but this also allows for people to have easy access to the areas where they find people with whom to discuss their main topics of interest.

The discussion forums and the chat area are only infrastructure, and while they provide the opportunity and the actual place that may allow the members to turn into a community, it is really the interaction among members, the rituals, and so on that really reify the idea of a community. One of the main ways in which to create a sense of clustering, of coming together with a purpose is to create the option for membership, which, as discussed in chapter two creates a perception of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Rap Central boasts 21,406 registered users. This seems like a massive amount of members, but it is probably not quite representative of the current membership. It is commonplace for people to tire of sites and abandon them without ever coming back in order to erase their accounts. Similarly, the number of members listed on the site is not necessarily indicative of the amount of people that may actually participate actively. While most visitors have access to a vast majority of the site, there are areas, especially those that involve downloads, that are members-only sections. In fact, users can only participate in the forums if they are registered members. Those who decide to become members have other kinds of privileges, such as the ability to create profiles, post their pictures, and create signatures. In fact, Rap Central provides its members with a rather sophisticated dashboard where all their preferences and settings are centralized for easy control: The User Control Panel. In this area, members can personalize their Rap Central experience by customizing their environment. For example, registered users can make friends and foes lists. Their ‘friends list’ is useful as a way to keep tabs on their favorite members—perchance see if they have posted any new messages on

discussion forum threads—and to have quick access to their info for purposes of communication since the User Control Panel is the area from which members can send personal messages. The ‘foes list’ allows members to ignore discussion forum posts by people to whose messages they would rather not be subjected, unless those members are moderators or site administrators. Members can also exercise control over other areas, such as notification options, privacy settings, and display preferences, and so on.

The ability to make the site their own and the capacity to produce their individual profile are elements conducive to people recreating (or creating) their identity online and for people to begin to recognize other members by name. In fact, members are encouraged to introduce themselves to the rest of the membership. One of the first forums in the lineup on the forums main page is entitled “Introduce Yaself.” Here, newbies stop in to say hello and give everyone a taste of who they are. In some ways, posting an introductory message is a way to show respect since they are joining a group that is already established and they do not know what the norms are or what to expect. Some people choose to just let everyone know they have joined the site and why while others choose to promote themselves, drop a rhyme or two, or even start trouble, which tends to be a way to make a splash, but hardly the way to endear themselves to the people who have been around longer and have seen many come and go. This forum is where we get glimpses of hazing. Regardless, most senior members tend to make themselves amenable enough and are generally inclined to welcome the newbies, answering any questions they may have or making suggestions of how they can maximize their time on the site. Members who have been a part of the site for longer tend to be very inclusive and welcome them to the community, or even to the family. However, even before they get to start their journey as members of this group, they are also reminded to read the rules. A forum called “Announcements/Rules” serves

as a bulletin board for broadcasting information about changes to the site, rules of engagement, banned members, and so on. Interestingly enough, when I joined the site, I could not find a document or post that listed all the rules, yet members seem to be aware of them. This may be a product of members educating other members about the norms. This happens in the “Introduce Yaself” forum quite a bit, with senior members doling out advice and warnings.

As in many communities, virtual and otherwise, the membership is stratified. In the case of Rap Central, members are classified according to the amount of posts they have published. This method is a great incentive for people to increase their participation, as they want to be seen as relevant in the eyes of their peers. The classifications for the general membership are as follows, from the least prominent to the more prestigious: Young Buck, V.I.P (very important person), and M.V.P. (most valuable player). A higher level of membership, which is attained through being involved, however, is that of staff. It would appear that owner *HitEmUpRobbo* often needs help running the site given its magnitude and the sheer number of users, and members are offered the opportunity to contribute in a special manner. At this time, for example, the site is looking for someone to collect news and post that material on the site as well as someone to pull together lyrics from covered artist and deliver that information to the members. Beyond that, the site owner always has a deputy administrator of sorts and different levels of moderator, that is to say the person who has been given certain special powers and dispensation to control the site. S Mods have jurisdiction over the entire site, while normal moderators are in charge of specific forums. Generally speaking, these people are in charge of overseeing the day-to-day management of the forums and making sure everyone is behaving according to the rules. When members fail to follow guidelines, moderators can use their judgment to figure out how to deal with the infraction. While moderators certainly have a level of discretion when it comes to

resolving issues, they are not left to their own devices. The site administrators have created a post that explains what the responsibilities and powers of the moderators are. The moderators' job is not complicated, but it carries a fair amount of weight and commands the respect of the other members. Moderators or Mods get a special extra avatar in their profile and signature that identifies them as such. They are in charge of keeping the peace, moving posts that do not belong in that forum to the correct one, locking threads, deleting spam, editing or deleting posts that break the rules, among other duties. With these obligations come the responsibilities of doing their job well and not abusing their power. To ensure there are checks and balances, members are encouraged to complain about moderators who exploit their position for personal gain in any way or who mistreat others.

While many times it is site administrators that act as moderators, at Rap Central moderators are trusted members who have earned a reputation within the site as judicious and fair. Not only do members have the opportunity to become part of the staff, but the process for choosing moderators takes the sense of community to a higher level as members are not only allowed but also encouraged to vote for the members they believe should become moderators. This extremely democratic process affords members a great level of involvement and a sense of their opinions and their preferences being valued. Demonstration of appreciation and opportunities for involvement are two major factors that help members feel validated and foster the development of cohesiveness within a community.

If the examples are to be set by the owner of the site and the staff, it is quite evident that *HitEmUpRobbo* and his deputy administrator, *Bloodimurderer*, as well as all the moderators, are quite visible in the website, visiting forums and chat rooms quite often and starting discussions as well. The fact that the owner of the site is also a frequent participant and that he is a familiar

figure to the members, with whom he commune on a regular basis, makes the site feel a lot more grassroots and organic, as opposed to sites that are affiliated with particular acts or big media conglomerates. In fact, the site owner relies on his members to maintain the site and users are encouraged to donate money through paypal to allow the administrators to cover the cost of hosting the site. The fact that people donate is a testament to the idea that they are invested in the survival of the community. This sense of meaningful participation is further heightened by the fact that Rap Central members are able to contribute to the progress and further development of the site not just by participating in forums, chats, or voting on staff and members, but they actually have a direct line to the “management” as it were. A forum entitled “Letters to the President” is an area where members can address the site administrators, who dutifully address each of the inquiries. Topics here range from spam and user reports and accounts of technical difficulties to access requests, and the like. However, the most remarkable part of this forum is the fact members can offer ideas to better the site. This is yet another way in which Rap Central is democratic. Members are encouraged to communicate with the site administrators and suggest ways to enhance the site. Often the site’s management not only validates these suggestions, but they actually work towards making implementing them a reality. What better way to assert members of a group, make users feel valued, and foster a sense of community than to allow members to have a say and a hand in the building of said community. The sense of ownership and investment is incrementally augmented in a directly proportional manner as involvement is increased. Members are not just welcomed to communicate with management, but they are encouraged to seek one another’s help as well. There are forums where members can ask for technological help, request that other members upload files for them, etc. This certainly promotes a sense of solidarity among members and further cultivates the perception of being part of a

community. Not only do members rely on other members for music to share or technical instructions, but they also trust each other with very personal and critical issues, such as their own art. Many of the members of Rap Central could be categorized as hip-hop enthusiasts, who have an appreciation for the music and the culture, but have no inclination to become a part of the industry. Many others, however, are not mere fans but artists, lyricists, musicians, producers, or rappers who are looking for ways to break into the business. Many threads deal with people asking for advice on what their next step should be and requesting honest feedback on their abilities.

Under the area “All Eyez On You,” there is a forum called Street Audio Dropz, the tagline for which reads, “Budding MC's Post Ya Skillz! Producers Drop Ya Best Street Beatz!” (Rap Central). Here people post their lyrics and music for people to critique their songs, their rhymes, etc. This further promotes the sense of community since many of the members share more than a love for hip-hop but the aspirations to one day join the ranks of the rappers they adore and seek to emulate. If solidarity is forged in a far quicker way in situations of strife toward a common goal, then this shared dream of recognition and success, which in such a competitive industry is bound to be fraught with many obstacles and much frustration and heartache, is a perfect conduit for the members to coalesce.

This cohesiveness is visible in many ways. Members often check on members if they have not seen one another in a while, and if someone is searching for another member, there are often people on hand who know where that member tends to hang out or when he or she was last seen. An example of this phenomenon is a thread entitled “Where’s Novakaine?” where Elmer Fudd is looking for his friend because they are collaborating on music. Both Shenron and Elephant Man help Elmer Fudd by reminding him that Novakaine has been active lately, but that



he is not on the same time zone, so he generally shows up at night (Rap Central). Here, we also see that members are aware of other members' locations and visiting habits, which is indicative of a community. Furthermore, if members feel like people have been slacking off and gone missing in action for a while, someone will rally the troops. For instance, in a thread entitled "Get it together people," member Shenron scolds the rest of the membership for becoming complacent, and he attempts to revitalize everyone by symbolically calling roll to see who is still around and committed to the site (Rap Central). This shows concern for members but also a deep investment in the survival of the community. The members' understanding of the importance of constant activity to the continued existence of the community is very telling. This interest is palpable, for example, in their insistence, to new members especially, that they stay active.

Another demonstration of the perception of a digital village of sorts is the investment in its history. As we have seen, the members of Rap Central definitely have norms and rituals, some based on explicit bylaws and others that are far less prescribed and much more organic. There is definitely a need to pass down those norms to the new members as they join. Yet, that's not all that is passed down. Just like every group of people has legends, stories, in a sense, a history that is passed down through the generations and that keeps the essence of the community alive, so does Rap Central have a history that deserves chronicling and remembering. Unlike other groups, this history cannot be passed on orally or through books, but they find ingenious ways in which to create a sense of history and keep those accounts alive for new members. For example, members often refer to discussions that happened in the past and they use links to redirect users to those discussions in case they were not around. Rap Central keeps their discussions for years, which is a way of archiving their past and maintaining a connection to the history. A thread posted in "Anything Goes" entitled "RC's Most Memorable Moments" is a great example of the

way in which members value their past interactions and their history together. Here, *Shenron* reminisces about his top ten favorite classic moments on the site. He names each moment and provides links for members to visit the past threads and be reminded of those particular episodes. Almost all of these threads are incidents where there was some sort of epic argument. Interestingly enough, many of these people who were involved in these squabbles can now look back upon those occasions and laugh them off. In fact, that's part of what *Shenron* does. One particular thread towards which *Shenron* points his fellow members is one he tags with the explanation "(all us old members actin like fools)" (Rap Central). The word choice in here is interesting because it creates the sense of history and bonding. Reminiscing about the past, and as one member calls it, "the good old RC dayz" gives new members both the sense that they are a part of something larger than themselves and a goal towards which to work in their membership: being able to be one of those senior members that can look back at his shared history in the site (Rap Central). A similar demonstration of the importance attached to endurance and seniority is a discussion by *ComptonThugsta* who wants to share with the rest of the membership that he has been a member of RC for three years. Similarly, *Shenron* also shares the good news that has reached 5,000 posts, which speaks highly of his contribution over the years. In an ever-changing online landscape where millions of sites vie for people's sometimes-fickle attention and loyalty, this kind of allegiance speaks well for the sense of permanence of the site. It is also rather remarkable that these members are hardly the sole registered user that has been around for that long. Indeed, as many joined the conversation to congratulate him, many started sharing their own Rap Central anniversary milestones. The real sense of community was quite palpable in that thread.

Despite the attempts to create that sense of inclusion and camaraderie, and no matter the amount of success these may have, however, there is bound to be some dissent among the ranks. As discussed previously, online groups, like any group of people, are susceptible to disruptions, especially due to member disputes. Online, the skirmishes may be fueled further by the lack of real physical repercussions and the level of anonymity afforded to people by the medium. Every online community has ways of dealing with disturbances caused by users or members.

Rap Central, however, has one alternative, which is rather practical and ingenious. As discussed in a previous section, Rap Central counts with a forum called “Dish Sum Beef,” which is designated exclusively for fighting. While this may originally have been designed this way because ‘beefing’ is considered to be an element of the hip-hop ethos, this forum may actually be a smart way of dealing with the disturbances that threaten the livelihood of the group. Whereas some tension in the forums is to be expected, and some of that friction can make for an entertaining read on an idle day, the fact is that constant arguments can smother the fun out of the forums, not to mention diminish the sense of belonging to a cohesive group. The high level of hostility may then result in members feeling alienated, and that disaffection may eventually result in members becoming less active, which might in the end lead to member attrition. Setting up a place where users can take their arguments so they do not block the flow of communication in the regular forums or alienate other members is a way to stave off possible trouble. Yes, the forum may legitimize the fighting in some ways, but ultimately it functions as a preemptive way of dealing with an issue no online community can really stave off completely.

Nevertheless, there are times that an entire forum dedicated to disputes is not enough. Sometimes, despite attempts to diffuse such situations, or discipline the people involved, some members are bent on creating chaos. When members become too much to handle, the only

option available may just be to revoke their membership and ban them from the site. Just as members are able to choose in a democratic manner those who will keep the peace, they are also encouraged to be involved in the decision to exclude a member from the community. For example, when member *oNe*'s behavior crosses the line and becomes intolerable, members flood one of the owners with PMs (personal messages) asking him to deal with the member. As a response to this groundswell, site owner and administrator *HitEmUpRobbo* posts a thread entitled "Should *oNe* be banned," where he acknowledges he's received numerous complaints and after thanking those members for bringing this issue to his attention, opens up the vote on the issue of *oNe*'s banning, asking people to not only vote but cite the reasons for their votes and welcoming *oNe*—whose privileges have been suspended until a decision is made—to defend himself if he so pleases. *lostsoul89*'s indictment of *oNe* reads, "he is breakin rules, he spamming like fuck, creating multiple members (tWo), treating other members kids (raping them), this is not acceptable even on a rap forum, its ridiculous that theres even a poll for this he should have been banned last year when he tried to hack passwords" (Rap Central). His choice of words is interesting when he mentions that this behavior shouldn't happen even on a rap forum, which highlights the notion that in rap forums there is far more tolerance for that kind of conduct than in non-rap forums. This forbearance may be related to the level of aggression that is par for the course when it comes to hip-hop. Yet, there is still clearly a line this group sees as not crossable. *MadeNigga* backs up *lostsoul89*'s claims by posting a screen capture of a chat session that corroborates *oNe*'s behavior and words. Members *Clear*, *Esoteric*, *Ez-Ed*, *loenatic*, *Shenron*, and *Bloodiemurderer*—against whom *oNe*'s most egregious comments had been made—also agree with *lostsoul89* and complain that *oNe* is guilty of starting unwarranted arguments, offending people, giving members negative reputation points for no reason, among other things. On the

other hand, *Mega87* and *ElephantMan* seem to think that one doesn't deserve to be banned, that he is a cool member whose activity keeps the forums going (Rap Central). *BigStallion* suggests a compromise, stating, "Going off the strength that he did contribute to the site, if he apologizes for what he did, maybe you'll should let em stay?" (Rap Central). Yet those who support *oNe* do not manage to convince the rest of the members, who are not easily dissuaded from their belief that the situation calls for his banishment from the site. Even *BigStallion's* olive branch is refuted. At the end of the stipulated 48 hours of voting, administrator *HitEmUpRobbo* concludes, "Thanks for voting, and thanks to *oNe* for when he was a good member before all of this shit happened, thanks for the work and its a shame it came to this, but RC HAS SPOKEN! BANNED!" (Rap Central). While most of the members engage in some manner of celebratory behavior after the verdict is reached and the sentence handed down, some people seem to doubt the validity or effectiveness of the whole process. *Elephant Man* wonders, "whats the point? cant he just register under a different name? pointless really" (Rap Central). What *Elephant Man* is pointing out is one of the major issues of online communities: their inability to ensure that people they wish to remove from their group will remain exiled. *Shenron* agrees, "no point whatsoever... much like nazi germany they like to make us think theres democracy, in reality.....no" (Rap Central). Despite his angry comment, *Shenron* is an example of democracy, having been voted moderator. Furthermore, he must have some belief in the processes set up by the administrators. Otherwise, his acceptance of the position is rather hypocritical. Nevertheless, the final outcome is that *oNe*, who in most members' eyes—or at least in the eyes of the members who participated in the voting and the thread—is a threat to the community, has been removed from the site, which further boosts its members' trust in fairness and diligence of the system and their ability to enjoy themselves in the forums.

Despite the fact that a thread in the Announcements/Rules forum shows a long list with an excess of 100 people who have found themselves banned from the site, there is often no need for this last recourse. More often than not, members appear to feel quite comfortable when it comes to letting others know they are messing up. At times, there is even a sense of pack mentality, in the sense that a group of members, especially senior and very active or well-regarded ones, will bring someone that has been misbehaving back into the fold by “nipping” at them with comments, personal messages, and the like. This is generally enough to alert most people that their behavior is not welcome. However, that is not the only way members are able to demonstrate dislike for members who are behaving in ways that are not appropriate for the community. In fact, Rap Central offers its members a way to show their opinions of others: the reputation points system. Through this mechanism, members are able to increase or decrease someone’s overall reputation index by assigning them positive or negative points based on contributions, posts, or due to any other reason they see fit. Members’ reputation points are listed in their profiles and in the section of their profiles that is visible when they post messages on threads in the discussion forums. These points are seen as an indication of how much a member is cared for or esteemed within the community, and their visibility makes them quite impactful. Respect is important for the wellbeing of a community. When members feel they are valued constituents, they are more likely to stick around and to have an investment in the survival of the community. Respect, however, is doubly significant on Rap Central given the fact the importance that element is assigned in the world of hip-hop. Conversely, not commanding the respect of peers is considered a cause for humiliation. It is a matter of honor and therefore not to be trifled with in any way. While perhaps the motivation behind this system was rooted in a sound idea, the actual implementation proved that while the “management” might come up with

a plan, the membership ultimately has its own way of using tools. One of the outcomes of this program is that the group seems further stratified and people have become really (sometimes overly) enthusiastic about getting rep points, at times at the exclusion of any other pursuit. Members have abused the reputation points system in different ways. People have taken to emailing or personal messaging others to request they give them positive reputation points and there have been instances of mutually beneficial arrangements among members who award one another reputation points that may be unwarranted. Conversely, many instances arise where people decrease other members' reputation without any real justification other than they dislike them. In fact, points began to be used in many ways that were not quite conducive. An example is the way in which *loenatic*, in a discussion entitled "Bet yoyre (sic) rep points!" wants to wager rep points on a football (soccer) game. He writes, "i will give every person 5 rep points who say france (sic) will win, and if they lose, they gotta give me 5" (Rap Central). Members *Clear*, *abilitee*, *Novakaine*, *Shenron*, *Nyne*, and *God's Son* take sides and raise the stakes. Although I was not able to find a post that explained the real grounds for the decision, it seems reasonable to think that perhaps this free-for-all has caused the site administrators to reconsider the system, which has been suspended indefinitely. Clearly, there could be other rationales for the cessation of the program. Nevertheless, the fact that the site's creator and the membership are so involved in the betterment of the community—by constantly proposing new ideas, bringing to fruition new developments to enhance everyone's experience, and so on—shows that they look at Rap Central as a living, shifting, thriving organism in whose survival they are deeply invested.

### Closing Remarks

This chapter serves as a snapshot of life as it unfolds in the microcosm that is Rap

Central. The site serves as a case study that helps shed light on the broader issues at hand. Not only does it reflect the sheer wealth of information to be found in this and other such web sites and just how much they may be able to teach us about human beings' online lives (in terms of their behaviors, their relationships, and their identities among other facets), but it serves as a starting point to begin to answer the questions I posed before I embarked upon the research phase of my dissertation. The conversations and relationships herein captured as well as the descriptions of the environment within which they transpired are but a sample of the exceptionally rich social fabric that the creators, administrators, and users of this website have woven throughout years of dedication and interaction. Yet, even if a mere slice of the larger picture, they speak quite loudly to the intricacies of online communities, identity negotiation, and globalization of culture, all topics at the core of the present study. After spending time in this chapter analyzing the text (both the site itself, as in its design and its elements, and the exchanges among the participants) in the context of the assortment of values that pervade the genre and culture of hip-hop and exploring behaviors that point to the notion of community building and the understanding of a web site as a place, it is time to reframe the results of my research in terms of the larger narratives and theories espoused in the first two chapters.



## **CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In the previous chapter, I explored the world of the UK-based website Rap Central (rapcentral.co.uk) through a close examination of its design, its content, and the interactions that take place within it. While that effort paints an extraordinarily comprehensive picture of the daily goings-on at that particular website and delves into how the values of hip-hop are reasserted both through visual and textual cues and through the interactions among users and members, it is now time to tie those observations and the answers they provided to the larger theoretical matrix within which this dissertation is situated.

In order to accomplish this, we must first find our way back to the original questions, as they were posed in the introduction and the first two chapters of this dissertation. These inquiries revolved around whether and how the American-born genre and culture of hip-hop, which are so undoubtedly tied to the physicality of the local and the notion of authenticity, could be adopted and experienced as legitimate and local in a virtual space that is perceived primarily as British, even if based on its URL. Further questions centered on whether the hip-hop being consumed in these online venues was American, British, or a combination thereof. The interest here was to discern whether hip-hop was being adopted or adapted (or both) and how the meaning of hip-hop was being processed in either case.

Based on the theories that I outlined throughout the first two chapters, my initial perspective on this issue, prior to launching fully into my research, was that it was possible that certain online venues could perhaps offer a feeling of place and grounding that could foster a sense of community. In my estimation, this type of site, through its design and its contents, would manage to reify the elements and values that bestride hip-hop and hence become a locus

of identification for users by allowing them to play out a part of their identity, perhaps a more hip-hop-oriented persona, which might or might not have no outlet in their non-virtual lives. An online environment that allowed for bidirectional communication, collaboration, and participation would certainly be an inviting place for people to commune with other like-minded folk. A web site rich in visual and textual hip-hop cues could be very conducive to the reinforcement of a perception of commonality, unity, and foster a sense of community that would in turn make the transmission and strengthening of hip-hop values even far more likely.

Following that chain of logic, of how the pieces of this puzzle come together, it makes sense to start with how Rap Central fits the notion of space and place. It is my estimation that Rap Central indeed qualifies as a place or space. Here, I start from the viewpoint that the technological, economic, and social trends to which we are witnesses today have created the perfect storm, if you will, to make the emergence of the Internet as a place not only a viable option but an actual necessity, an inevitability. As Mary Chayko, whose theories resonated more and more with me as I delved into this world, explains in her book Connecting, “The combination of transience and privatization that has come to characterize suburban life has eroded the bonds of neighborhood, family, and kinship [...] perhaps as a response to these conditions, we now make an unprecedented number and variety of sociomental connections, bonds, and communities” (127). These relationships, which rely not on physicality but on a mental association, are often mediated and make use of technology as a mediator and a means for the relationship to germinate. In the case of Rap Central, this place happens to be the Internet. Chayko posits, “Cyberspace can be thought of as a subset—an Internet-bound, computerized sector—of sociomental space” (33). As I discussed in Chapter Two, the vernacular used to speak about computers and the web, as well as the metaphors employed not only by theorists but by

laypeople and everyday users, has been instrumental in the normalization of the notion of locality when it comes to online life. Indeed, the term Cyberspace, which has been widely accepted as a way to refer to certain aspects on the web, points to our straightforward acceptance of the notion of the Internet as a place.

Furthermore, it has become clear to me that we can no longer limit the notion of place and space to that of spatiality or physicality. It is patently obvious after my research that if we were to continue to accept and conform blindly to these entrenched but dated definitions and formulas, we would fail to see that they no longer apply to the world in which we now exist and the lives we now lead. While it is completely understandable and even expected to a certain point that there might be a level of apprehension about this phenomenon, and that there might even be some resistance against such a drastic alteration to the way we look at the world, I suspect there might be more to this indolence than mere intransigence. Acknowledging that the Internet is a place can be a scary proposition because of the doors it opens. As it is, the Internet is, in many ways, a liminal site. It is vague, indefinite, and seemingly infinite. It sits comfortably on thresholds and defies facile definitions. It flirts with semantics, blurs boundaries, and confounds us. People can also be liminal online, given the advantage (or burden) of anonymity. Classification is optional in many ways. While this liminality is quite seductive and is likely to be part of the allure of the Internet, there is, without a doubt, a sense (more keenly accepted or voiced by some segments of the population than others) that we may all just be dancing at the edge of the abyss.

In Chapter Two, I referred to the Internet as a sort of Wild West, which needed or begged to be conquered. This is still the case in some ways. It isn't just academics and researchers trying to figure out what the Internet means, how we use it, and myriad other questions. In perhaps

more pragmatic venues, there is still a lot of catch-up being played. The law, for example, is still reeling from changes and lagging behind in some areas, which still remain undefined. As we struggle to bridge the gap, life online keeps moving forth, challenging new frontiers, making new rules, and thriving on new connections. From the perspective of the nation-state, this signifies a break from their faith in their ability—or at least the illusion that they still may have the ability—to exert control over the media their populace consumes or the activities in which their populace takes part. The putative democratizing aspect of the Internet is not a cause for celebration to some, but a source of apprehension. Short of a totalitarian approach that entails controlling Internet traffic, monitoring IP addresses, and censoring content, there is not much that governments can do to assuage their concerns. In Modernity at Large, Appadurai points out, “Neighborhoods as social formations represent anxieties for the nation-state, as they usually contain large or residual spaces where the techniques of nationhood (birth control, linguistic uniformity, economic discipline, communications efficiency, and political loyalty) are likely to be either weak or contested” (190). Given the fact that the Internet can act as a place as well, and, at that, one where control is even less likely, I extrapolate this observation past the limitations of the physical neighborhoods and straight into the realm of online spaces and how the ideologies therein created, fostered, and spread may indeed create a concern for nation-states. Some of these, which may very well indeed be already suffering from a sense of eroded national identity, may count the Internet as yet another threat to that sovereignty and homogeneity they crave.

My view of how Rap Central epitomizes the notion of Internet as space is informed by Appadurai’s writings about technoscapes and ethnoscapas, for it is unambiguous that globalization, and especially mobility, migration, and technological advances (elements which can be considered both causes and effects of globalization), have forever altered the notion of

place. As Appadurai posits, "...the electronic mediation of community in the diasporic world creates a more complicated, disjunct, hybrid sense of local connectivity" (197). My observation of life as it unfolds at Rap Central has led me to appreciate place in a different way, and has made me rethink its definition, which is now far closer to that of those researchers and academics such as Murray Forman, Johan Förmans, and others, who challenge the archaic, monolithic view of locality as inextricably tied to the geographical and the spatial, and whose characterization of place is tied far more to the notion of culture and relationships. In The 'Hood Comes First, Forman simply declares, "Space is foremost a cultural construct" (4). This moves space away from objective existence and places it squarely in the realm of subjectivity, which depends on people. Johan Förmans, in Intro to Digital Borderlands, expands on that by explaining, "Cyberspace is a cultural concept, depicting a structured and meaningful symbolic universe—a sociocultural space for communication and symbolization, interaction and interpretation" (5). The former definition moves the characterization of place as dependent on a human contact, and closer to the idea of community. Interestingly enough, this seems like a reversal of sorts since community was once strongly tied to geography. Mary Chayko references this dichotomy of sorts when she writes, "Community...tends to be defined one of two ways: either "territorially," to depict a grouping of people relating to one another within a specific geographic area, or "emotionally," to depict the sense of belonging to such a group" (40). Hence, if there is a sense of affiliation, there can be a sense of place, and both perceptions cover both bases of what is needed to create a community. Any way we look at it, these ingredients are triangulated in such a way that they conflate to make a communal space possible.

This rings true for Rap Central as well. If one can define community as a group of people with a common interest and working towards a common goal who coalesce in a given place (and

sometimes time), then I believe Rap Central is indeed a community and a communal space where people who have a set of common interests come to connect with one another. Their sense of community is palpable, with members having been a part of the site for years, which shows permanence and resilience in an online landscape where audiences or members can be fickle and where there is much that threatens the continuation of any group. Members of Rap Central show a keen knowledge of other people's lives as well as behavioral patterns that correspond to those of a community. There is a solid sense of members working for the betterment of their online "home" by volunteering time, donating money, and sharing information.

I imagine that if even from my silent, non-contributing and observation-driven position (I cannot refer to it as fully invisible as I did have a name and logged on visibly), I managed to form some sort of rudimentary attachment to the site and its users based solely on reading people's posts and seeing their personalities and beliefs shine through their posts, it is highly likely that those who are not abstinent, and who actually participate in the conversations and delve into the site fully are forming strong bonds with others and contributing to the overall sense of community. Furthermore, despite the fact that corroborating this information would require more than mere observation, I would certainly wager that sociomental relationships, as defined by Mary Chayko and discussed in detail in Chapter Two, undeniably contribute to this establishment of the foundations and the strengthening of connections among users. To be quite honest, it would be hard to imagine that, at the very least, Rap Central members, who frequent the place often and are clearly invested in the site and the other people on it, would not spend some time through their day thinking about the place when they are not on it and about their friends while they are not communicating with them. I know that I spent time mentally engaged with this place while I was not actively visiting it. Moreover, even if I deem that proper research

scholarship standards would require me to corroborate this fact through a direct interview, I do believe that many of the interactions captured in my observation of this community point to the fact that members and users are indeed bonded in this way and that these affiliations are strengthened by members' ability to feel connected to the site and their acquaintances and friends through keeping them on their minds.

It would be interesting to find out whether members who are physically removed from any area that boasts a street-level hip-hop presence experience any sort of letdown when they leave the hip-hop rich environment. Nevertheless, the beauty of the online world is that it is constantly there for us, available and vibrant. We don't even need to be there in the presence of others in terms of synchronicity in order to achieve a feeling of community or even perceive a sense of communion. An interesting aspect of an online community is that there is permanent (as long as there is connectivity and the site is not deleted) evidence of that community's existence in the shape of messages, etc. through which users and members can relive, even if somewhat vicariously, the sense of unity they experienced again and again. They can reread conversations in forums, review posts, look at posted pictures, and more. This, to my mind, is an expansion on the space in which sociomental relationships develop. When we don't see certain people, we keep them in our minds, which is how the connection we have with them strengthens. The transcripts of our online interactions are a stronger way of solidifying our bonds with people. If we miss them, crave interaction with them, and so on, we can always return to the place where we once were in communication. We don't have to rely solely on our memory. The proof of our relationship is accessible.

At the same time, while a sense of kinship is very important, there would be no sense of community without a perceived commonality. In turn, this commonality is rooted in the fact that

what these people have in common, aside from anything else they might share and despite how different they might be in other ways, is their passion for hip-hop. Hence, it is the reifications of the hip-hop markers that allows for the sense of community, which then marks this non-physical space as a place. If this site did not already hold the promise of being a hip-hop rich space, then no one would populate it, and it would become yet another barren, empty slot of data as opposed to a vibrant, thriving community with returning members, a history, a culture of its own, and fair chances of future survival.

It is quite apparent, then, that the primary manner in which the ideology of hip-hop takes root in this space is through the pervasiveness of images and text that reinforce the fundamental values of hip-hop as described in Chapter One. I tried to come into the research with few if any expectations or preconceived notions about what I might find. Nevertheless, I was genuinely taken aback by the extent to which all the elements on the site reflect some element of hip-hop. Of course, this could be read as a posturing of sorts. Ingredients might have been chosen specifically so as to achieve the desired effect. Yet, there is nothing to prove that these factors were put together with the intent of creating an atmosphere that would be conducive to the reification of hip-hop. In fact, it would make more sense, rather than to believe there is such a contrived rationale behind the specific choices made by the creators of the site, to expect that they would have crafted the site according to what they deem ordinary hip-hop fare, what they enjoy, and what feels right. This would be a far more benign outlook on the situation that accounts for the more grassroots aspect of hip-hop's spread.

Upon entering the realm of Rap Central, it is clear that the space in which this community comes together is a male-centered, Americanized, hip-hop haven, where the vast majority of the markers of hip-hop are reified. The elements of crime, prison, misogyny, materialism,



consumerism, hypersexuality, hypermasculinity, attachment to place, and a common language, among others, are alive and well on this web site. There is no doubt in my mind that the elements that are central to hip-hop have translated from the streets to the screens to the point that I would consider Rap Central a locus of hip-hop culture. It is my impression that as members delve into this web site, they immerse themselves further into the world of hip-hop. Here, they have found a home, where like-minded people help bring to life the world of hip-hop no matter how near or far it may be in terms of miles, ethnicity, heritage, and so on.

I spent much of Chapter Four demonstrating how the design of the website and the interactions that take place within it play a role in the reification of hip-hop elements, but it is worthwhile to touch on some of the highlights. Even though I was stunned by just how well the site lived up to the hip-hop ideal, some aspects of what I found were somewhat anticipated, while others were surprising for different reasons.

As I had expected, hip-hop vernacular permeates the site. Since the language is a basic central component of the culture, which has always featured heavily in the music, it was not a revelation that creators and users alike would be fully fluent in hip-hop speak and would feel comfortable navigating and recreating the parlance. Familiarity with hip-hop lyrics, hip-hop magazines, films, etc. would make hip-hop terminology almost second nature to hip-hop heads.

The representation of disenfranchisement was also not quite surprising. In fact, as I discussed in Chapter One, one of hip-hop's strengths, and one of the reasons it has proved so popular across the globe, is that it was born out of disaffection and it still retains that iconoclastic element, which is so attractive to anyone who might feel alienated from the mainstream, from authority, and even from society and government. In fact, many localities have adopted or adapted hip-hop to articulate their own discontent. Even the less politically charged hip-hop, the

type that is often referred to as “party rap,” still presents tinges of antisocial attitudes, beliefs, and behavior as well as signs of estrangement from the mainstream.

Neither was I shocked about the macho feel of the site and the fact that the majority of the members are male. As the section on hip-hop values in Chapter One outlined so clearly, the genre and the culture are male-centric and testosterone-driven. That Rap Central feels like a men’s club or a men’s locker room is part and parcel of the ethos of hip-hop, which was born in neighborhoods where men’s masculinity is contested territory given the very specific socio-cultural, political, racial, and economic circumstances that conflate in those areas.

As a part and counterpart to that machismo-based essence, I had certainly predicted there would be an overt anti-female vibe that would most likely peak in the shape of the over-sexualization and objectification of women. What floored me, however, was the fact that a site that is supposed to be primarily centered on the appreciation of a particular genre of music could be so explicitly inscribed with what could be labeled misogynistic material. At the top of the list of shockers was the section I described in the last chapter that shows pictures of half-naked women on the home page. It was outrageous that it would be there at all, and I would have thought it out of place if it had been any other type of music site, but it was just shocking that it would feature so prominently on the site. Another factor that astounded me was the porn links and downloads forum. Nevertheless, these two elements are just a reification of what Bakari Kitwana calls hip-hop’s problematic “tendency to cross over into the adult entertainment industry—from the soft porn images of rap music videos and the XXX hip-hop video *Doggystyle* (a SnoopDogg/Larry Flynt joint venture) to emerging magazines like *Black Gold* that blur the lines between pornography and hip-hop” (*Hip Hop Generation*, 1213). While I was aware I would run into some sort of objectification and sexualization of females, this was an area where I

would have imagined there might be more pushback than I encountered. My rationale was that Britain, as well as many other European countries, has had a far better record than America when it comes to leveling the playing field between the sexes. For example, Britain saw a female Prime Minister come and go many decades before the US even considered the possibility of electing a woman. Not to mention that England has a queen, who has a long list of female rulers upon which to look back. Beyond the realm of politics, the gender roles that still limit women in the U.S. are often considered dated and retrograde in Europe. At Rap Central, there were pockets of conversations that featured a more evolved mentality from some male users that challenged the status quo of the site in terms of its treatment of females, but they were sparse and vastly overlooked in a sea of misogyny. Perhaps, there was a little bit of mob mentality going on as far as this aspect is concerned, or perhaps the hip-hop values were indeed taking root.

Another element that perplexed me was the representation of criminality, prison culture, violence, and drugs. Again, there is an enormous disjunction when it comes to these issues in America and outside of the U.S., and it seemed quite bizarre that those differences would not negate or at least lessen the impact of this element on the site. While crimes, violence, and drugs are constituents of every society, the United States is notorious for the soaring incidence of brutality, legal offenses, and a war on drugs that has been as ineffective as it has been protracted. In comparison, Britain's and other European countries' crime statistics are minimal. Moreover, laws that regulate punishments for illicit affairs and the ways that prisons operate are so very disparate from place to place that it would seem foreigners would not be able to relate to the woes American rap music describes. The attitude towards drugs is certainly not the same outside of the U.S., so one might assume that many of the drug-related stories, lyrics, and images might seem out of place. Britain, for example, is plagued by alcoholism and the use of "party drugs"

such as ecstasy. Nevertheless, these elements do not make an appearance in the conversations on Rap Central. Finally, firearms, which are such an iconic part of the hip-hop ethos are not even legal in Britain and many other European countries. The whole love affair with one's gun is such an inherently American construct that it seems incoherent in the context of a British website. If it were not for the conviction with which these elements are interwoven in the fabric of the site, they might appear to be mere caricatures.

As I discussed in Chapter Four, the one marker of hip-hop that wasn't really reified as well as the others were was materialism. Even though there were a decent amount of references to it in the design and certainly in the advertising, there weren't many expressions of consumerism and materialism from the part of Rap Central users. As I explained in my analysis, one could allow that there might be a number of limitations to how members and users might be able to express this element online effectively. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to point out that this phenomenon could also have another reading, one which involves a discussion of how cultural differences, when it comes to the notion of consumerism and materialism, might affect how different members process this element of hip-hop and how they live it out or perform it as well. While there is certainly a feeling that some members of this site might have a bit of an idealized view of America and might romanticize the original source of the music and culture they revere, there are still aspects of America's behavior in the world's stage that are not easy to forget. Our imperialistic tendencies and brutal materialistic and consumerist behaviors do not sit well with much of the rest of the planet. Ironically, hip-hop, which condemns "the man," and "the system," has become commodified. Today, as Nelson George reminds us in Hip-Hop America, "...hip hop is the ultimate capitalistic tool" (156). It may just be that this disjunction between the global and the local is one where the differences are not as surmountable. It is also

possible that looking at hip-hop in America from the outside in, Rap Central members might see the paradox I pointed out and want nothing to do with what they might perceive as hypocrisy.

While on the topic of Americanism, it is important to point out that there is definitely a sense of premeditation about the material presented by the creators of the web site. Whether there is an agenda behind it or not, which is in itself difficult to determine without the opportunity of asking the creators directly, and even then we would have to trust that their answer is not disingenuous, it is quite evident that when it comes to Rap Central, hip-hop is framed in a particular way: one that encompasses only the American version of hip-hop and excludes any other account. The way in which the chat rooms are labeled according to U.S. hip-hop geographical areas was a conscious choice to designate the place as American, even if only when it comes to American in terms of hip-hop. Therefore, while it can be argued that there is a high level of Americanization, the fact that the site's URL the administrators picked the designation ".co.uk" when creating the site defies a simplistic approach to the notion of whether this is intended to be an attempt at Americanization.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the hip-hop that Rap Central is interested in for the most part is purely American. This is clear from the way that everything in the design references American artists, American geography, etc. References to other kinds of hip-hop, especially British, tend to be quite negative for the most part. The main complaint seems to be that British acts try to be American, which matches up with the theories I looked at in Chapter One as far as the lack of authenticity being one of the reasons for British hip-hop having a hard time finding an audience locally. The fact that this is a chief grievance of the members who even thought to bring up the notion of British rap is somewhat ironic since the members of the site seem to prefer the American brand anyway.

The fact that the hip-hop in Rap Central is American leads to the question of authenticity and awareness of the roots of the genre and culture. I pondered whether the hip-hop consumed in Rap Central is decontextualized, that is to say whether there is a break between how the hip-hop is understood and the subtext it contains in terms of cultural baggage. After spending time on this site, my opinion is that, to a vast extent, it is somewhat decontextualized, but not because there isn't an awareness of the context in which hip-hop was born and the socio-economic, cultural, and racial weight it carries within it. Members at Rap Central seemed very aware of how hip-hop came to be and they were very respectful of those issues. Nevertheless, I have come to understand that hip-hop is probably decontextualized here in the U.S. as well because we have really moved away from the conscious rap that had a deeper meaning. What has become popular, what is now being consumed is a type of hip-hop that does not necessarily demand such a familiarity with or appreciation for that socio-political "baggage." Hence, it would be unfair to expect this re-contextualization to happen in the realm of an online community based in the U.K.

Interestingly enough, however, in his book Hip-Hop America, Nelson George points out, "Non-Americans have actually shown more loyalty to certain aspects of hip hop than their American counterparts" (203). This might explain, to a certain level, why I felt that hip-hop was so reified in Rap Central, and it calls attention to the question I posed as far as whether there is a sense of members and users cloaking themselves in otherness by adopting something so essentially foreign. Yet, I can only say that nothing that happened on this site felt even remotely disingenuous. Perhaps the onslaught of hip-hop material on the site and its sheer "in your face" attitude might seem a bit over the top, but I only understood this in terms of it being, perhaps, a result of an attempt to overcompensate for what they might perceive as a deficit in authenticity, which is of so much import in the genre and culture. As I watched members lead a piece of their

online lives at Rap Central, they merely seemed to be themselves, even if through an avatar and text. Unfortunately, a deeper reading about whether their behavior was performative in any way would demand a deeper exploration that eluded me given that my ethnography was based on non-participative observation.

Whereas I am thoroughly convinced of the place, space, community, and hip-hop-reifying aspects of Rap Central as a result of my study of this site, it is clear that one area remains a tad beyond reach: the realm of identity. While the site has a palpable culture, and the membership as a whole appears to have a community identity, and even if I have observed each member and can pinpoint aspects of their personality and behavioral patterns, it is still hard to point to whether the site serves as an agent of change in these people's identities. As discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One, through the writings of Thomas De Zengotita and Andy Bennett, we are aware that music not only occupies a privileged place in our culture and our identity, but that a passion for music can be compared to religious devotion, and that lyrics have the power to create meaning in the sense of ideological stances. This means that the people that populate Rap Central are already predisposed to a hip-hop-centric view of the world and are likely to already exhibit a propensity for reifying, through their beliefs and behaviors, the elements of hip-hop. In fact, many of those who are attracted to, visit, and populate the site may find it appealing because it reinforces what they already see as their own worldview. Hence, it would be misleading to say that Rap Central members and users are entering this space as blank slates onto which the markers of hip-hop are being inscribed by what they see, what they read, and the interactions they witness or in which they participate. What can be asserted, however, is that when anyone visits Rap Central, they enter a hip-hop rich space that presents a hip-hop worldview and hip-hop values. It is quite possible that there might very well be a percentage of

people who are simply curious and become indoctrinated and, at the very least, Rap Central, in its championing of hip-hop elements certainly reinforces those who are already engrossed in the music and lifestyle.

Despite the lack of solid evidence, there are plenty of logical reasons to believe that immersion in this type of environment would result in some sort of impact. Hip-hop may be many things, but it is not subtle. Its elements are brazen. As Terrence McPhaul explains in The Psychology of Hip-Hop, “Innuendo is virtually non-existent in hip hop. Sex, violence, death and disrespect are blatantly perpetuated and featured...” (49). At Rap Central, the elements of hip-hop are inescapable, both from the design and content standpoint as well as in the interactions among site members and users. Constant exposure to this material is bound to have an effect. As Joan Morgan points out in When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost, “Repeated often enough, even the most aberrant acts bear a striking resemblance to normalcy” (158). Furthermore, this exposure to hip-hop elements and values is far more intricate and potent than the mere consumption of images, videos, and lyrics. At Rap Central, members are not just bombarded with pictures and text, but they are immersed in a community steeped in the tenets of hip-hop. Not only is there an incentive to fit in, but there is a mechanism by which the individual is trained in how to look at the world. Mary Chayko elucidates on this point: “In each group of which we are a part, we learn to “see” the world through a sort of “mental lens,” which results in our gaining perspective, worldview, or thought style similar to all those others—but only those others—who use the same lens” (22). It is clear Rap Central and its users have a particular lens, one that has visibly been shaped by hip-hop. Add to that the fact that people may come to this place seeking a connection in a fractured world where hip-hop might be a major agent of socialization, and you have a recipe for indoctrination. In Why White Kids Love Hip Hop,



Bakari Kitwana, reminds us, “In the absence of social intervention in the lives of abandoned young people, hip-hop has filled the void” (100). Indeed, just as we once bemoaned the fact that parents set their children in front of the television, which served as an electronic nanny for kids while simultaneously inculcating values into them, we now recognize that popular culture phenomena such as hip-hop may have the same socializing power. Referring to movies in particular, Kitwana also points out: “The degree to which the fantasy of film interfaces with reality in the public imagination, especially in the imagination of the younger generation for whom such image-induced definitions are central to our identity, can no longer be ignored” (*Hip Hop Generation*, 139). I bring this point up because I do believe it is necessary to now extend that explanation to include the realm of the Internet, which I believe to be a major locus of identity negotiation.

The other side of the coin, however, is that, without interviewing users (and even then there is always the possibility of deceit), there is no way to corroborate whether the information members post is real. Whilst I am inclined to believe that what I am seeing through their posts and profiles is their genuine identity, and I am also prepared to wager that given the amount of time and effort they spend here, it would be taxing, not to mention futile to put forth some sort of charade, at the end of the day, the idiosyncrasies of the medium and the limitations of the study make it challenging for me to gather the information necessary and provide a solid analysis on this front. Nevertheless, I believe that in the future, these obstacles could be removed and the research would yield interesting data.

### Incidental Lessons

Apart from the answers to the larger research questions that I posed for this project, my investigation yielded other lessons. I uncovered what I consider to be little gems of wisdom, not always academic in nature, but all certainly interesting in their own right.

In my introduction, I explained that I was invested in this research not just from an academic standpoint, but a rather personal one. Having been on the other side, the receiving end, as it were, of Americanization, or American cultural imperialism, I saw myself in some of the non-American users on this site. I saw myself in how they appear to have adopted the culture and navigate it effortlessly with a complete and palpable sense of belonging and authenticity. I believe that being in an environment such as Rap Central is conducive to creating and reinforcing that sense of authenticity. Whereas in their own towns, in their own countries, and among their friends and relatives, their hip-hop-laden lives might (or might not) be considered eccentric or unacceptable, at Rap Central they get positive reinforcement and full acceptance when it comes to their love of the genre and their espousal of the culture in any shape. Outside of the odd questioning or challenging of their genuineness at the hands of a site troll or someone with a bone to pick, non-American users will get forbearance and approval from others in their same position and even from Americans who frequent the site and recognize in them the same enthusiasm for the music and the culture they see as their own. Indeed, they are getting acknowledgement and support from people they consider their kin, which is far more important than any level of tolerance that could be afforded by outsiders and that trumps any perception of judgment or ridicule they might experience elsewhere. For example, no one will question their liberal use of hip-hop lingo, which might appear contrived or out of place to others. I am reminded that I did not have such a sanctuary. Not only that, but I did not have an active role in

the culture I already considered mine, even if from afar. I could only live my “Americanized” life vicariously, through the media I consumed. I was not able to contribute anything to the conversation. In sharp contrast, these hip-hop aficionados can reify their hip-hop existence through active participation in a bona fide hip-hop space.

I also realized that I soon become fond of and came to look forward to my visits to the site. Regardless of how my own values are, for the most part, not in line and sometimes in sharp conflict with the principles generally espoused by hip-hop and hence often championed on this site, I could not escape the truth: this microcosm was utterly fascinating. Not only that, but I began to notice that I felt a sense of familiarity with many of the frequent users. I felt a sense of connection and even of continuity when I saw the same names popping up on different posts in the various discussion forums. I even came to expect particular kinds of responses from certain members. I realized I would find myself reacting to certain members’ posts with thoughts such as, “That’s so typical of him,” or “There he goes getting into an argument again,” etc. I was honestly staggered by how quickly and strongly these reactions began to happen, which made me look at online communities in a completely new way. I was not expecting to feel any sort of attachment.

Even though I had previously participated in forums, especially writing forums, within online writing websites, and I was vaguely aware of the basics as far as their organization and reach, I had never felt so fully involved, which is a lot to say given that I didn’t really have the opportunity to experience a bidirectional relationship. That in itself was an interesting wake-up call about online communities for me. It was a paradigm shift that made me begin to respect the power of online affiliations on a whole new level.

Last but not least, working on this dissertation has created in me a desire to continue exploring how culture is lived online, especially when it comes to online communities, and even social networking sites, which seem to have taken our culture by storm. Indeed, I may just have found my niche within the field.

### Towards the Future: Recommendations for Further Research

Today, many years after I first became interested in hip-hop as a cultural phenomenon, I am further convinced of its impact on our everyday lives. Throughout my exploration of hip-hop, I have encountered varying levels of resistance from various fronts. Some of the opposition stemmed from people's belief that the popularity of hip-hop was but a mere phase, a trend that would wear out in due time and the repercussions of which hardly warranted any attention at all, let alone exploration of this magnitude. I have never wavered in my conviction that studying issues surrounding hip-hop music and culture is a valuable investment as an academic involved in cultural and media studies. Nevertheless, an affirming reminder came in the utterly unexpected shape of an event I attended recently. At TwiCon, the largest conference for the Twilight Saga, a vampire-based paranormal romance, I attended a ball, as part of the closing festivities. Since the books attract mostly women (teenagers and grown women alike) and the author's Mormon background and abstinence-until-marriage message appeal to a fairly conservative and/or Christian crowd, and given that the conference took place in Dallas, Texas, I was expecting a subdued, genteel affair. To my complete dismay, more than three-fourths of the music selected for the dance were hip-hop songs. As I watched the ladies flooding the dance floor, gyrating their collective pelvises to the rap beats, and singing along with the provocative

lyrics, I could not help but feel vindicated in my convictions about hip-hop's tenure and its impact.

While this has been a deeply satisfying journey for me on a personal level, and it is academically sound for the program in which I am enrolled, it is also my sincere hope that this work will add something new to the larger conversations in the areas of globalization, popular culture, media, and Internet studies, and that it might serve as a starting point, a springboard for others who wish to study similar topics or embark on complex, interdisciplinary research in this fields.

One of the areas in which I hope to make a difference is in the way that the notion of place and community are viewed. In the future, I would hope that Appadurai's and other theorists' versions of place as it applies to the Internet should be considered more effortlessly. I hope I have helped to demonstrate that Appadurai's point about the dated view of place and space should be heeded if we are to do a thorough job of redefining ethnographies and other future studies. I also hope that the idea of the Internet as a locus for identification and identity negotiation is featured more prominently in future research.

While I believe my work to be truly thorough within the limitations of the scope, time, and other constraints as explained in Chapter Three, I am still fully aware that there is more to be done with this topic and this research.

In order to be able to speak about the members of Rap Central with more authority in what concerns their online identity or persona, it would be necessary to conduct interviews with them and ascertain whether they are who they claim to be. Of course this would still be problematic as, despite the fact that I would be able to gather far more information than what they have chosen to disclose online, I would still be dependent upon their self-disclosure. Phone

interviews and/or chat sessions complemented by the use of webcams would be ideal if ever more difficult to set up than a digital questionnaire that can be emailed so that the participants may fill it out at their leisure.

This project has taken me on a journey that traces the process of how hip-hop has colonized media's last frontier, the Internet, and how the culture that surrounds the genre has been recreated online. In order to further this research, it would be necessary to look into other UK-based online hip-hop communities to determine whether my observations are applicable to a wider range of sites or if they are particular to my experience in this particular niche within the Internet. As a counterpoint, it would also be helpful to look at websites that unlike rapcentral.co.uk, which does not proclaim to focus on any particular type of hip-hop, concentrate on UK hip-hop. It would be of particular interest to study whether the local hip-hop co-opts any of the values that pervade American hip-hop or whether hip-hop has been retooled to fit the locale.

As a final point, I believe the next logical step would be to take it back to the streets. That is to say, this undertaking has taken me on an excursion from hip-hop at the street level to its translation into the world of binary codes and pixels. It would only be fitting to see whether the values that have taken to the screens so well in this UK-based hip-hop community actually get played out at the street level in the neighborhoods of the United Kingdom. Appadurai points out the importance of this issue when he writes, "...virtual neighborhoods are able to mobilize ideas, opinions, moneys, and social linkages that often directly flow back into lived neighborhoods..." (196). There appears to be emphasis on exploring at how life is represented and lived out online, based on how it might mirror life offline. Nevertheless, there seems to be a dearth of articles or

studies that examine what I call the second part of the feedback loop. What happens when what has been imported online has an effect that is felt offline.

It is clear to me that it would only be fitting to follow that trajectory for this study since it deals with more than just fashion and music. The values that hip-hop espouses have the ability to actually effect change in people's belief systems and eventually affect their behavior.

Furthermore, as, ultimately, our actions in the real world still (at least for now) often have more weight than those in which we engage online, this reverse look at the street-to-screen path would be fascinating and have immediate applications. Indeed, I would consider that this type of trajectory could be applied to other areas and other studies that concern the transference of values through the Internet.

In hindsight, one of the most important lessons this study has taught me is that the Internet presents us with an unprecedented chance to explore aspects of communication, relationships, and identity formation. It offers up a brand new terrain to survey, and, from what I have surmised, it is incredibly fertile.

## **APPENDIX: IRB APPROVAL**





University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2012 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Notice of Exempt Review Status

From: UCF Institutional Review Board  
FWA00000351, Exp. 5/07/10, IRB00001138

To: Natalia Cherjovsky

Date: May 02, 2008

IRB Number: SBE-08-05604

Study Title: **Virtual Hoods: Exploring the Hyper-Mediated Hip Hop Culture Experience in UK-Based Online Communities.**

Dear Researcher:

Your research protocol was reviewed by the IRB Chair on 5/2/2008. Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.101, your study has been determined to be **minimal risk for human subjects and exempt** from 45 CFR 46 federal regulations and further IRB review or renewal unless you later wish to add the use of identifiers or change the protocol procedures in a way that might increase risk to participants. Before making any changes to your study, call the IRB office to discuss the changes. **A change which incorporates the use of identifiers may mean the study is no longer exempt, thus requiring the submission of a new application to change the classification to expedited if the risk is still minimal.** Please submit the Termination/Final Report form when the study has been completed. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <https://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

The category for which exempt status has been determined for this protocol is as follows:

4. Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. ("*Existing*" means already collected and/or stored before your study starts, not that collection will occur as part of routine care.)

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

**NOTE:** This letter has been held because your faculty supervisor, Dr. Anthony Grajeda, has not completed the training that is required of all UCF faculty, students and staff who conduct research with human participants. The IRB has sent repeated reminders to Dr. Grajeda and spoke to him as well, but to date he has not completed CITI (online) researcher training. Per UCF policy, the IRB does not grant final approval without this training, but we did not want to penalize you further for your advisor's failure to comply with this requirement.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 05/02/2008 04:08:07 PM EDT

IRB Coordinator

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