The Dissertation Committee for Marnie Ruth Binfield Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Bigger Than Hip-Hop: Music and Politics in the Hip-Hop Generation

Committee:

_____
Janet Staiger, Supervisor

_____
Jennifer Fuller

_____
Mary Kearney

_____
Jürgen Streeck

_____
Christine Williams

Bigger Than Hip-Hop: Music and Politics in the Hip-Hop Generation

by

Marnie Ruth Binfield, B.A. M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2009

Dedication

To Zoe and Harper

The Future

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my mom, who is always interested in what I am doing and always asks lots of questions. Thanks as well to my mother-in-law whose help with the kids assured that I had the time necessary to travel, to concentrate, and to write. Moms might not make the world go 'round, but the definitely make sure it *keeps going*.

The community that sustains me in Austin is awesome. Y'all know who you are and I love you.

And, of course, much love to my man, Aaron. We worked hard and we did it. We both know I would not be where I am without you. I am not even going to try to list your contributions, but will just say thanks for it all. This is yours, too. And I love you.

With Love and Respect,

Marnie

Bigger Than Hip-Hop: Music and Politics in the Hip-Hop Generation

Publication No._____

Marnie Ruth Binfield, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

Supervisor: Janet Staiger

In 1988, rap group Public Enemy's front man Chuck D declared that hip-hop was the "black CNN." His assertion was that hip-hop music could be used as a tool to disseminate information amongst communities that traditionally have been underserved by mainstream media outlets. In the years since, several explicitly political and activist groups have formed within hip-hop communities. Most hip-hop audience members are not, however, directly involved in such groups.

My dissertation investigates the links between hip-hop music and culture and politics in the lives of audience members, exploring audience member's definitions of politics and community and examining the influence of hip-hop on these definitions.

This is an ethnographic project that includes participant observation as well as in-depth interviews with self-identified hip-hop fans. Participant observation took place at two National Hip-Hop Political Convention conferences, in Austin at concerts, panel discussions, and other hip-hop oriented events, and online in an email listserv devoted to

hip-hop and politics. Interviews address listening and other practices that serve to connect individual members to hip-hop communities. In addition, I asked participants to explore their definitions of "politics" and to comment on connections between music and politics from their individual perspectives. Finally, participants were asked to list issues of particular concern to them.

This is an interdisciplinary project that combines aspects of sociology, cultural studies, and popular music studies. I also rely upon Patricia Hill Collins' concept of intersectionality, assuming that race, class, and gender each work together to contribute to audience members' experience with hip-hop music and culture and their sense of belonging to the hip-hop community. This project contributes to understandings of music reception as well as to understanding political affiliation and practice by exploring and describing the ways in which people register and experience music and politics in the hip-hop generation.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: "What's the Scenario?"[1]: Studying Hip-Hop and Politics

In 1988, rap group Public Enemy's front man Chuck D declared that hip-hop was the "black CNN." His assertion was that hip-hop music could be used as a tool to disseminate information amongst communities that traditionally have been underserved by mainstream media outlets. Since then, hip-hop has become a tremendous commercial success and is currently central to American mainstream popular music. Some pundits have lamented the negative impact of commercial success on hip-hop's political potential, arguing that music focused lyrically on conspicuous consumption and professionally on making a hit, rather than making a statement, has severely diminished the music's potential for contributing to positive social change.

Since the early nineteen-nineties, several explicitly political and activist groups have formed within hip-hop communities to address specific issues ranging from incarceration rates among young men of color to voter apathy among young people. For example, Russell Simmons's Hip Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN) was founded in 2001. Its mission is to harness

> the cultural relevance of Hip-Hop music to serve as a catalyst for education advocacy and other societal concerns fundamental to the well-being of at-risk youth throughout the United States. HSAN is a non-profit, non-partisan national coalition of Hip-Hop artists, entertainment industry leaders, education advocates, civil rights proponents, and youth leaders united in the belief that Hip-Hop is an enormously influential agent for social change which must be responsibly and proactively utilized to fight the war on poverty and injustice. ("HSAN mission statement")

---

[1] "Scenario." A Tribe Called Quest. *The Low End Theory*. Jive/RCA Records 1991.

Another national group, the Hip Hop Caucus, founded and led by the young Rev. Lennox Yearwood, is based in Washington, D.C. The group has made a national name for itself by involving big-name international hip-hop stars such as T.I. in its projects. The organization's stated mission is to "empower young people in urban communities to participate in the policymaking process" ("Hip Hop Caucus…"). Their program also includes a twelve-point agenda and they have consistently focused their work on electoral politics.

The National Hip Hop Political Convention first convened in Newark, New Jersey, in 2004 with a focus on getting out the youth vote. The first Hip Hop Political Agenda also emerged from this meeting. They met again in Chicago 2006 to build the movement and amend the Agenda. Their third convention was held in Las Vegas in the summer of 2008. At this meeting members expressed concern about the vitality and future of the organization. This group and its email listserv became one of the central characters in this research on hip-hop and politics.

Much hip-hop organizing has also been done on a local, grassroots level. In his monograph on hip-hop activism in the San Francisco Bay area, *Constant Elevation: The Rise of Bay Area Hip-Hop Activism*, Jeff Chang describes several such groups ranging from the Black Dot Artists Collective, which provides free cultural arts programs and services to young people, to the Third World Majority, a group of young women of color working for global justice. Another organization is the Malcolm X Grassroots movement, a group devoted to defending human rights and community building that started in Brooklyn and has multiple chapters around the country, especially in the southern United States. The Hip Hop Congress (HHC) is based in Washington, D.C. and was created to

provide "the Hip Hop Generation and the Post Hip Hop Generation with the tools, resources and opportunities to make social, economic and political change on a local, regional and national level. Hip Hop Congress is the product of a merger of artists and students, music and community" ("About Hip Hop Congress").

Clearly, hip-hop has been the catalyst for an array of group formations and community building efforts. This project engages three sets of interconnected questions that arise around the notion of a "hip-hop community." First, it explores questions about identity, music, and cultural participation. The terms "Hip-Hop Nation," "hip-hop community," and "hip-hop generation" are common parlance among hip-hop fans, as is the phrase "I am hip-hop." These terms imply that listening to hip-hop creates a connection among the individual listeners, artists, and other participants who make up hip-hop culture. One of the goals of this project is to assess whether listening, even to the point of fandom, amounts to cultural participation. Does a shared "taste culture" imply, as Herbert Gans suggested, shared values and ideology? Can a "taste culture" be adopted as a means to membership in a particular class? To what extent can we consider a taste culture a legitimate community? What binds the hip-hop community other than their taste in music?[2]

Second, this project examines the constitution of communities, the types of communities that listeners form in their relationship with hip-hop culture, and the functions that hip-hop communities serve for community members. If hip-hop audience members are connected into communities, what sorts of communities are these? Can

---

[2] See Pierre Bourdieu on taste and its role in social interactions. Also see Robert Putnam, Colin Bell and Howard Newby, and Elizabeth Frazer on communities.

these groups coalesce in ways that work to develop social capital and mobilize resources? Do community members expect these groups to have material impacts in physical communities or are they "support" groups? Under what circumstances might hip-hop communities transform into a bona fide social movement? Is this even the goal of hip-hop organizing?

Finally, in addition to assaying the types of connections and commitments that form within the "hip-hop nation," this project investigates the links between hip-hop music and culture and politics in the lives of "everyday" audience members. How do hip-hop fans understand the relationship between hip-hop culture and politics? How do they define these terms? Do members of the hip-hop audience conceive connections between their participation in hip-hop culture and political issues and practices? What issues do they consider central to "hip-hop politics"?

A substantial body of work exists on hip-hop, its producers, and, to a lesser extent, its audience. Several serious histories of the music and the scene associated with it (including graffiti and break dance especially) are available as are texts that describe the hip-hop community or *The Hip-Hop Generation* (Kitwana).[3] Very little research has been done, however, on the ordinary people who make up the hip-hop audience. This project begins to address this gap in the literature, providing a view from within hip-hop communities and offering commentary from people who have not made it big in the business or shaped the musical scene dramatically but who work for social change in a variety of ways under the mantle of hip-hop.

---

[3] See Jeff Chang, Alan Light, and Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn for hip-hop histories. See Tricia Rose, Bakari Kitwana, Nelson George, and Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar for descriptions of the hip-hop community.

This is an interdisciplinary project that combines sociological theories and methods with insights from popular music studies and cultural studies. This review of literature focuses on popular music, discussing popular music studies within the larger field of cultural studies and considering Black popular music within popular music studies and placing hip-hop within the realm of Black popular music. I also review the literature on hip-hop and politics. Theories of community formation, social movement theory, and definitions of politics will be covered in detail in chapter two.

Popular Music Studies within Cultural Studies

As a field of inquiry, popular music studies is squarely situated within the larger field of cultural studies. Cultural studies focuses on the meanings of "texts," very broadly defined, and cultural phenomena within their cultural contexts. Cultural studies addresses "three dimensions of popular culture: lived cultures, the social being of those who consume popular cultures; the symbolic forms, or texts, that are consumed within the lived culture; and the economic institutions and technological processes which create texts" (Shuker 14). Thus, the field of cultural studies can be broken down into three subfields: textual studies, industry studies, and audience studies.

The study of music texts is an important area within popular music studies. The motivation for textual studies within popular music studies involves the assumption that texts carry messages and have meaning. Textual analysis of music seeks meaning within

both lyrical and musical structures. This practice, then, can be referred to as a "structuralist" approach to popular music studies. "Structuralist views of popular culture/media concentrate on how meaning is generated in media texts, examining how the 'structure' of the text (visual, verbal, or auditory) produces particular ideological meanings" (Shuker 25).

In response to literary analyses of popular music lyrics, which attended almost exclusively to lyrical aspects of songs, musicologists argued that textual analysis of songs was incomplete without attention to the musical forms and structures that these texts contained. Susan McClary and Robert Walser, for example, in their essay "Start Making Sense!: Musicology Wrestles with Rock," point out that "many analyses of popular music rely too heavily on the lyrics," but that "much rock is not received primarily in terms of text [lyric]: indeed the texts [lyrics] of some genres of popular music are not clearly discernable by its fans—those who are most devoted to the music—and the obscurity of the verbal dimension seems to be part of the attraction" (285). They urge popular music scholars to pay "considerably more attention" to "those aspects of music that trigger adulation in fans" and point out that those aspects tend to be musical (287). These analyses remained basically structural, however.

Structural analysis of hip-hop texts would consider lyrical content as well as musical form to determine meaning. Many hip-hop commentators have noted the importance of sampling in hip-hop form and offered various understandings of the ways in which sampling creates meaning: preserving Black American musical history or making something new from culture's outcasted materials, for example (Rose, *Black Noise*; Neal, *What the Music Said*; Bartlett; George, *Hip Hop America*; Keyes). The

division of hip-hop music into "conscious" rap and party rap relies upon a structural analysis of lyrical content. Although chapter three of this dissertation does devote some time to a historical review of political hip-hop lyrics, the main focus of this project is not on hip-hop's structures but instead on its audiences.

Because musicology had typically been concerned with history and aesthetics, musicologists had to develop new methods for dealing with the specifically social aspects of popular music. This effort led to a less purely structural approach to music in which theorists considered listeners' responses to texts as well as the texts themselves. McClary, for example, wanted to explore how music makes meaning and why it seems to have such significant effects on listeners. This proved difficult. As Simon Frith explains,

> there is no obvious relationship between human experience and musical sounds, between what we feel as humans and how we express and evoke those feelings as members of particular societies…. If music is meaningful in emotional terms it is therefore largely as an effect of cultural rather than psychological conditions. Enter musicologists who have long argued that to understand music is to interpret stylistic codes. (*Performing Rites* 103)

In *Feminine Endings*, McClary attempts to develop a "semiology" of popular music. She asserts that certain sounds, progressions, and musical forms have gendered meanings, that there are sets of "conventions for constructing 'masculinity' or 'femininity' in music" (7).

Walser agrees that musical structure can be used to generate claims about popular musical texts' meanings but argues that these meanings cannot be found within the texts themselves. He contends that a song's meanings can only be understood within specific social and cultural contexts. According to Walser, "Rock songs, like all discourse, do have meanings that can be discovered through analysis of their form and structure, but such analysis is useful only if it is grounded culturally and historically" (31). Like

7

McClary, Walser wants to explain how music has meaning for people; he wants to connect musical texts to their social contexts. He argues that understanding genres as discursive formations allows analysts to do this.

> The analytical notion of discourse enables us to pursue an integrated investigation of musical and social aspects of popular music. By approaching musical genres as discourses it is possible to specify not only certain formal characteristics of genres but also a range of understandings shared among musicians and fans concerning the interpretation of those characteristics. (28)

Indeed, the "challenge," according to Walser, "is to analyze signification dialectically, working between the levels of specific details and generic categories toward social meanings" ibid). In this way, Walser argues, musicologists can understand the meanings contained within and generated by popular music texts.

Walser contends that grasping the meanings of musical structures involves comprehending genres and the discourses that shape them. In his words, "musical details can be evaluated in relation to interlocked systems of changing practices and … shifting codes constitute the musical discourses that underpin genres" (26). Genres are not fixed, stable entities. Instead, discourses within popular music culture continuously shape and revise genres. These discourses provide the framework on which musical meanings are hung. Listeners define genres discursively and genres allow listeners to make sense of musical codes. Walser argues that "musical structures and experiences are intelligible only with respect to these historically developing discursive systems" (27). He makes clear that music only has meaning within a social context, asserting, "Specific musical analysis is important because music is a social practice. Music and society are not just related phenomena; music is a type of social activity and a register of such an experience" (34).

Another major subfield within popular music studies focuses specifically on the music industry and its role in shaping and creating music texts, musical discourses, and music audiences. In 1941, Theodor Adorno argued that the "fundamental characteristic of popular music" was "standardization" (302). "Listening to popular music," he contended, "is manipulated not only by its promoters but, as it were, by the inherent nature of the music itself, into a system of response mechanisms wholly antagonistic to the ideal of individuality in a free, liberal society" (305).

Adorno's condemnation of popular music continues to shape analyses of the popular music industry. Adorno's concern was essentially that popular music amounted to formulaic music that made no demands upon the listener, who became entirely passive in listening. As ownership of the various components of the popular music industry has become increasingly concentrated within only a few massive corporations, concerns about industry control of both production and consumption have escalated. These corporations act as gatekeepers for which music is recorded and promoted and in many cases they also own the outlets that determine radio playlists and the accessibility of music for sale to consumers. As Shuker explains, "Some commentators see the natural corollary of such concentrations of ownership as an ability to essentially determine, or at the very least strongly influence, the nature of the market's desire or demand for particular forms of popular culture" (15). The approach of commentators who focus on the machinations of the music industry and its impact on texts and audiences is generally referred to as the "political economy approach."

"The political economy approach to the popular/mass media has as its starting point the fact that the producers of mass media are industrial institutions preoccupied

with profit making and selling audiences to advertisers" (Shuker 24). This approach to the study of popular music remains a vibrant part of the field. "The industry" is in fact a vast network of businesses that play a wide range of roles in the production and dissemination of popular music. "The industry" includes, most obviously, musicians and record company personnel. But it also involves the music press, concert promoters, radio personnel, retail music outlets, and so on. Each of these players has an impact not only on the music itself but especially upon its distribution.

Scholars in this subfield rarely take up Adorno's claims regarding standardization and passive listening wholesale, but these notions do inform most work in the political economy tradition. There is little agreement amongst political economists regarding the extent to which the music industry determines consumption, although the notion of an entirely passive listener or consumer has been consistently questioned as various industry mechanisms have been attended to in detail. Scholars such as Nelson George (*The Death of Rhythm and Blues*), Richard Peterson (*Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*) and Keith Negus (*Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*) study the industry from a variety of perspectives to consider its role in popular music culture. George, for example, is interested in the role of Black radio in shaping Black musical tastes and Black communities. He attends to the interactions between (usually White) record company executives and Black artists. The political economy approach does not exclusively address the industry but attempts to understand the relationships among the popular music industry, the texts that it produces, and its audiences. What sets it apart from the other subfields is locating popular music's institutions and economics at the

10

center of its analysis and its claim that neither texts nor audiences can be understood without an understanding of the production context.

Audience studies in popular music are premised on the assumption that the "'meaning' of any engagement between a text and its consumers cannot be assumed, or 'read off', from textual characteristics alone. The text's conditions of production and consumption are important, as is the nature of its audience, and the various ways in which they mediate their encounter with the text" (Shuker 17). Scholars who study audiences in the cultural studies tradition assume that audiences play active roles in making meaning in their interactions with musical texts.

Aside from music criticism, audience studies may be the best developed and the most diverse of the subfields within popular music studies. This could be attributed to what Frith calls "the analytic response to Frankfurt pessimism" (*Performing Rites* 13). Adorno's work, along with the works of authors such as Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, make up what is known as the Frankfurt school of sociology. Adorno's description of the completely passive popular music listener and Benjamin's argument that art loses its aura of authenticity in the age of mechanical reproduction are key to the Frankfurt school's reputation for pessimism. Frith argues that the dominant response to this pessimism has been "to accept the organizational account of mass cultural production, to ignore the complexities of Adorno's aesthetic theory, and to look for the redeeming features of commodity culture in the act of consumption" (*Performing Rites* 13). This latter point was clearly the major approach found in the work on subcultures produced at the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS).

11

Notions of ideology, especially as developed by Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser clearly influenced scholars at the BCCCS. Althusser argued that ideology constitutes subjects via Ideological State Apparatuses. Gramsci argued that these Apparatuses function to produce ideological hegemony, whereby ideology serving the interests of the dominant group comes to seem true and natural. Gramsci points out, however, that hegemony is never absolute; it always faces resistance.

BCCCS scholars sought resistance in the practices of consumers. The quintessential example of this approach to audience studies is Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Hebdige traces the development of punk culture and argues that punk is a subculture that resists the ideology of the parent culture. Resistance, he argues, is especially apparent in punks' modes of dress, in their "style." Hebdige contends that youth subcultures "represent negotiated responses to a contradictory mythology of class" (86), that they "express forbidden content…in forbidden forms" (91), and that they offer "collective solutions to collectively experienced problems" (Clarke 82).

While the notion of subculture has been crucial in the development of the study of popular music audiences, Hebdige writes very little about the music itself. He argues that the punk subculture formed around the music and that it developed, to some degree, out of earlier subcultures that also had music as one of their organizing elements. Neither does Hebdige allow the punk audience to speak for themselves in *Subculture*. Instead, he theorizes *about* them in the absence of any confirmation of his assertions on their part. His is, at heart, a semiotic analysis and his interest is not in the semiology of music but of style. He sees punk style and the punk subcultures as "symbolic resistance, counter-

hegemonic struggle, a defense of cultural space on a 'relatively autonomous' ideological level" (Clarke 83).

Gary Clarke takes issue with Hebdige's focus on the "originators" of punk style, pointing out the elitism involved in such an approach since it would include very few members of the subculture. He also criticizes Hebdige's failure to explain "how and why these styles became popular …other than through simplistic discussion of the corruption and incorporation of the original style" (83). Sarah Thornton refers to her own work as "distinctly post-Birmingham" because, she argues, she "doesn't position youthful consumer choices as proto-artistic and/or proto-political acts, ultimately explaining the logic of their cultural consumption in terms of its opposition to vague social bodies variously called the parent culture, the wider culture or …'the mainstream'" (201). Furthermore, she contends, "the Birmingham tradition has both over-politicized youthful leisure and at the same time ignored the subtle relations of power at play within it" (ibid).

Thornton turns, as do many other popular music scholars who attempt to understand popular music audiences, to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argued that "cultural capital" is "the linchpin of a system of distinction in which cultural hierarchies correspond to social ones and people's tastes are first and foremost a marker of class" (Thornton 202). Cultural capital is basically knowledge about culture that individuals acquire and then employ to distinguish themselves from others in the context of social inequality. Bourdieu also develops the notion of "taste cultures" in which people "congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music [or other shared tastes], their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves" (Thornton 200). Thornton employs Bourdieu's theories to

coin the term "subcultural capital" and argues that "subcultural capital" is used within club cultures to exert one's power and superiority over others.

Although hip-hop culture began as a distinct subculture, in the last three decades it has in many ways become dominant within youth-oriented popular culture. Few aspects of youth popular culture remain untouched by hip-hop aesthetics and values. Therefore it is, perhaps, somewhat inappropriate to study hip-hop as a subculture. Nonetheless, Hebdige's ideas about style and subcultural identification as resistance can be useful in discussing hip-hop communities as "groups." Additionally, Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and taste cultures are clearly applicable to hip-hop listeners and people who identify as hip-hoppers. Finally, Thornton's cautions against reading too much resistance into consumption as well as her attention to the power dynamics at work within music consumption are clearly to be heeded in the context of hip-hop consumption and a subculture-gone-global cash cow.

One of the most potent critiques of Hebdige's approach to subcultures, advanced eloquently by Clarke, is Hebdige's inattention to subcultural members' own understandings of the subculture (87). Clarke's critique suggests a need for more ethnographically based audience studies. Walser makes a similar claim when he argues, "there can be no meaningful semiology apart from ethnographic inquiry, historical analysis, and argumentation about culture" (31). The idea is that, in order to understand audience responses to and experiences with popular music, it is necessary to talk with and spend time within the social world of audience members. Work such as Tia DeNora's *Music in Everyday Life*, Deena Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology*, Lauraine

LeBlanc's *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance In a Boys Subculture,* and Daniel Cavicchi's *Tramps Like Us* are examples of such work.

In *Music in Everyday Life*, DeNora approaches music as "a dynamic material, a medium for making, sustaining and changing social worlds and social activities" (x). She sees music as extremely meaningful for its users but emphasizes that musical meaning does not reside within the music itself. She argues that it is "impossible to speak of music's 'powers' abstracted from their contexts of use" (x). Instead, music's "effects are generated" by "music, plus the ways that the recipient … attends to it, plus the memories and associations that are brought to it, plus the local circumstances of consumption" (43). Because DeNora finds that very little work has been done that studies how "real people actually press music into action," her research technique is decidedly ethnographic (xi). For *Music in Everyday Life*, she conducted in-depth interviews with women from a variety of age and ethnic groups. She also conducted four different ethnographic studies of music in various social environments including a shopping center and an aerobics class. Like Walser, DeNora stresses that a piece of music does not have particular emotional valences built into it. Instead, "music's 'effects' come from the ways in which individuals orient to it, how they interpret it and how they place it within their personal musical maps, within the semiotic web of music and extra-musical associations" (61). Because listeners make connections between music and various aspects of their emotional, social, and material experiences, musical meaning is utterly contingent on individual interpretations.

DeNora also attends to music's role in identity. As Christina Williams points out, citing James Lull and Simon Frith: "Much has been written about music as an important

element of identity construction, as a site for the investment of identities and as something people identify *with*" (232). In these accounts, especially those of subcultural commitments among young people, the individual chooses music that is seen to represent her or, conversely, identity is built around musical taste and the cultures associated with various genres. This is not the sort of identity work that DeNora describes. In DeNora's description and analysis, the identity work for which people use music is about agency and meeting existing needs. Music does not shape identity; instead, a listener chooses music to do specific work in relation to her sense of self. The people DeNora spoke with "drew upon elaborate repertoires of musical programming practice, and were sharply aware of how to mobilize music to arrive at, enhance and alter aspects of themselves and their self-concepts" (49). Music also helps listeners to sort through their various identity options. "In turning to different musics and the meaningful particles that 'reflect' and register self-identity, that provide a template of self, individuals are also choosing music that produces self-images that are tenable, that seem doable, habitable" (73).

Frith agrees that extra-musical factors influence music listening choices. He argues that value judgments are fundamental to the ways in which audiences attend to music. "[M]usical listening is, by definition, a double process, involving both the immediate experience of sound and an abstract, comparative exercise of judgment" (*Performing Rites* 259). Frith argues that these value judgments are based in the musical discourses of a particular musical culture. Like Walser, he contends that neither meaning nor quality is in the music but is instead a function of the listener's enmeshment within a musical culture. "To grasp the meaning of a piece of music is to hear something that is not simply present to the ear. It is to understand a musical culture, to have 'a scheme of

interpretation.' For sounds to be music we need to know how to hear them" (Frith, *Performing Rites* 249). We know how to hear them because we participate in musical discourses: ones that define genres, ones that define authenticity, etc. Frith argues that we make value judgments based upon our position within these musical discourses. Therefore, "to understand cultural value judgments we must look at the social contexts in which they are made, at the social reasons why some aspects of a sound or spectacle are valued over others" (Frith, *Performing Rites* 22).

Hip-hop music and culture in popular discourse do tend to be coded as both Black and urban. Although hip-hop has often collaborated with and can peacefully coexist with rock and roll, it is commonly posited as the precise opposite of country music. Because of these cultural and generic associations, selection of hip-hop music as one's preferred genre is likely to carry different meanings within different socioeconomic groups. For young, urban men, hip-hop is likely to be the music of "home," the most frequently encountered musical genre, and the music with which one would be most likely to identify in order to "fit in." Although both rural and suburban White youth are regular consumers of hip-hop music, the music is more likely to be associated with rebellion and resistance to parent culture in these settings. Perhaps the association of hip-hop music with urban blackness is a stereotype, if not, as S. Craig Watkins suggests, a myth. Nonetheless, these associations are dominant in popular discourse and imagery and remain powerful among both producers and consumers of hip-hop music.

While a variety of theories, such as Frith's notion of genres, musical discourse, and value judgments, have been advanced to explain how music matters and makes sense to listeners, there simply have not been enough ethnographic studies of music audiences.

17

There are many opportunities for new and original research in the field of audience studies if researchers are willing to go into "the field" and spend the time with audiences that is necessary to understand how people use music.

The ethnographic work that has been done in the field has tended to focus on two groups: youth and fans (or subcultures). This is the result of multiple assumptions and methodological considerations. "Youth" have been assumed to have a special relationship with popular music, which may be, as Lawrence Grossberg suggests, the result of rock discourse generated by scholars who feel especially connected to the music of their youth. Youth also tend to be found in high concentrations in schools, for example, creating a situation in which they are somewhat easier to study. Similarly, fans and subcultures often tend to be concentrated in discreet spaces providing a clear area to enter as a "field" for ethnographic study. It is important to expand our understanding of music audiences beyond youth and their subcultures and to understand meaning making outside the rarified spaces of fan cultures.

There also seems to be a gap between ethnographically focused approaches and musically focused approaches. Walser refers to this as "the disabling methodological split between aesthetic and sociological analysis" (35). Popular music scholars need to find ways to bridge this gap, to include ethnographic elements in textual studies and to include thick description of music in ethnographic field notes in which music audiences are described. Music makes the most sense when the various elements that make up music cultures are considered together.

In this project, I attempt to address both of these shortcomings of ethnographic research of music audiences. Although the participants in this research do often identify

as hip-hop fans, they are not associated with a fan group and were selected from a variety of locations. Furthermore, the participants represent a range of ages from eighteen to forty-five. While a few of the participants still identify with "youth culture," most are well past their youths and still actively participate in hip-hop culture.

Although this project definitely falls on the sociological side of Walser's methodological split, I also include textual analysis and aesthetic description of the music where it is appropriate. Participants often mentioned hip-hop's "boom," or its beat, or another aspect of its sound when explaining their attraction to the music. They generally agreed that, although lyrics are important in hip-hop, perhaps more than in other genres, ultimately it is the sound and feel of the music that matter most. I have made every effort both to represent this attitude on the part of participants and to provide effective description of the aural aspects of hip-hop culture throughout the chapters of this dissertation.

Black Popular Music

Within popular music studies, hip-hop has generally been considered within a larger discussion of Black popular music. Observers and theorists of Black popular music have consistently considered music and culture together. As Tricia Rose points out,

> 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. These cultural forms are especially rich and pleasurable places where oppositional transcripts, or the 'unofficial truths are developed, refined, and rehearsed. (*Black Noise* 99)

Black popular culture in the U.S. has long functioned as just such a site, and music has held a privileged position within this space. Theorists of Black music have described

music as central to Black communities both as a form of cultural heritage and as a site of community building.

Black Music, Direct Descent, and the Souls of Black Folk

Much literature on Black music has been concerned with the issue of what makes Black music Black. Amiri Baraka, writing at the time as LeRoi Jones, asserted that African American musical forms such as syncopation, antiphony (or "call and response"), and improvisation were in fact "retentions" of earlier African forms. Besides these retentions, Black music, he claims, is further marked as Black by its "depth of feeling or 'realness,' its emotional and rhythmic energy, its vocally informed instrumental inflections" which "grow directly out of the depths of social tragedy only to rise up miraculously as the voice of racial uplift" (Radano xii).

Baraka argues not only that African American music maintains many traces of traditional African music but also that African American music reflects the experiences of people of African descent in America and is, therefore, a uniquely (and, he suggests, purely) *African American* form. He asserts "the most expressive Negro music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is. It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time" (137).

The idea is that Black music reflects the changing social conditions in Black communities because the music emerges in response to the community's needs. Blues, for example, expressed the concerns of Black communities, while remaining committed to individual suffering. As blues moved from a folk art into the music industry (especially

20

public performance before the advent of recording), the context changed and the music changed with it, becoming what is commonly referred to as "classic blues." According to Baraka, classic blues "represented a clearly definable step by the Negro back into the mainstream of American society" (Jones 86). Since Baraka and many other scholars of Black music are extremely wary of the effects of mainstream culture, represented especially by "the market,"[4] Jones does not necessarily see this move as positive. "The professionalism of classic blues moved it to a certain extent out of the lives of Negroes" (Jones 87).

Blues People is as much a call to power as it is a work of social theory. As a key figure in the Black Arts Movement, Baraka was deeply committed to asserting the cultural importance and legitimacy of Black Arts. Music has long been perceived as a central element in Black American culture and is, therefore, an obvious candidate for elevation to the sort of status that Baraka assigns it. Within a culture in which discourse itself worked to deny the possibility of "Negro" culture, Baraka's assertions were progressive and inspirational. Baraka not only describes Black music as a key element in American culture but also urges continued engagement with music from within Black communities. Baraka sees music making as a radical political act, arguing, "Negro music is *always* radical in the context of formal American culture" (Jones 235). Furthermore, Baraka is the first in a line of theorists such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and David Toop who argue that indirection and "signifyin(g)" are hallmarks of African American cultural production.

---

[4] See, for example, Nelson George on *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*.

Since *Blues People* was published in 1963, the notion of direct descent of African musical forms to African American musical form and the belief in Black music as a pure expression of the "souls of black people" has largely remained dominant. This notion has also lent itself to the idea that some Black music is more "authentic" than others because it is more purely African (and more directly descended from African musics) and less diluted by White and European alterations. This tendency reemerged with a vengeance as scholars, such as Toop in his *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* (1984), attempted to prove the importance of hip-hop as a Black form by illustrating its relationship to earlier Black musical forms.

Frith critiques this approach to the study of popular music arguing that it fails to address music as a social practice. In his words:

> The academic study of popular music has been limited by the assumption that the sounds somehow reflect or represent 'a people.' The analytic problem has been to trace the connections back, from the work (the score, the song, the beat) to the social groups who make it and use it. What's at issue here is homology, some sort of structural relationship between the material and cultural forms…. The problem of the homological argument…is that 'music not only represents social relations, it simultaneously enacts them'; and too often attempts to relate musical forms *to* social processes ignore the ways in which music is *itself* a social process…. The question is not how a piece of music, a text, 'reflects' popular values, but how— in performance—it produces them. (*Performing Rites*, 269-70)

Frith's assessment urges popular music scholars to attend to the ways in which music contributes to the creation of specific cultural milieus. Frith is not offering a critique of Baraka, who is, in fact, quite explicit with regard to his understanding of music as a social practice. Nonetheless, Frith urges popular music scholars to reconsider the direct descent approach that Baraka first employed.

22

Other scholars have also begun to question the notion of direct descent of musical

traditions as well. Brian Ward, for example, points out that such an argument involves a

certain degree of racial essentialism and, therefore, "undervalues the dazzling complexity

and syncretic brilliance which have characterized Black American musical forms in favor

of a desperate search for African roots and retentions" (11). Ronald Radano also

challenges the direct descent approach although he is careful to attend to the various

reasons why Black people might be invested in it, not the least of which is the role the

idea "has played in refusing white racism's challenge to black cultural legitimacy" (xii).

He argues, however, that the notion of direct musical descent "tends to prescribe meaning

in a way that has been limiting for many artists as it stands at odds with the historical

complexities of cultural production" (xiii). Furthermore, he argues, "To assume that

musical practices of the present document consistent patterns of performance and

reception over the course of two hundred to three hundred years is to project one past

onto another. It is to assume a kind of cultural stasis that ignores the flux of musical and

sociodiscursive processes as it contradicts the broader historical record" (5). Radano

advocates an understanding of Black music as "neither pure nor unadulterated racial

sound" but instead as "a sonic palimpsest that accumulates tales on those already written"

(3). Most importantly, he urges theorists of Black music to "see black musical

metaphysics emerging from America's own racial imagination in response to

assimiliationist intentions of erasure" (35). Although he sees Baraka's work, and work

like his, as important in that it "challenged a vulnerable white supremacy that could no

longer explain away the power and appeal of black musical achievement," he argues that

such racial essentialisms, at this point, "can only limit critical understanding of black

music's power and place in the American experience" (35).

Black Music, Black Communities, and Politics

Black music is also theorized as a form of community building and a sort of glue that holds communities together.[5] For example, in the introduction to *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, Nelson George writes, "R&B—and music in general—have been an integral part of (and, to me, a powerful symbol for) a black community forged by common political, economic, and geographic conditions" (*Death* x). Ward argues, "Black popular culture, especially the music distributed by an increasingly sophisticated recording industry and a deeply penetrative broadcast media, was a crucial factor in (re)creating some of the black unity, that incipient black nationhood, which the various mass migrations from the South in the first half of the century had strained and sometimes ruptured" (7).

Similarly, Mark Anthony Neal sees Black music as one of the few ongoing sites for the building of Black communities. In his words:

> Despite massive structural transformations and social decay, the black community continues to create social spaces to help buffer black folks from the threats of contemporary society, by producing, reproducing, and allowing the commodification of popular music narratives, which transmit, via the process of critique, the core values and sensibilities of the African American diaspora. (*What the Music Said* 172)

Imani Perry applies this notion to hip-hop specifically, writing, "Hip hop nourishes by offering community membership that entails a body of cultural knowledge, yet it also nourishes by offering a counterhegemonic authority and subjectivity to the force of white supremacy in American culture" (44). One of the goals of this project is to test these claims with regard to hip-hop. Does hip-hop have a community-building effect? If so,

how can this effect be accounted for? And can this effect be harnessed, so that the communities that develop around hip-hop music can contribute to positive social changes and have significant political impact?

Hip-hop is not the first music created by Black Americans that has been credited with having political significance. Baraka described the creation of Black music as a radical political act, and, indeed, many forms of Black music have also been prominent within African American struggles for social justice. Soul music, for example, emerged at the end of the 1960s from the combination of rhythm and blues with gospel music. Rhythm and blues (R&B) was positioned discursively as a decidedly Black form. R&B records rarely received airtime on mainstream radio although for many years they were the bread and butter of Black radio stations. As the Civil Rights Movement achieved some success (and some notable setbacks), the Black Power movement emerged in response to a changing political climate, and rock and roll emerged in many critics' views as a diluted and whitened form of R&B. Soul music represented an alternative to rock and roll and a decidedly "blacker" one. Soul then came to stand for "blackness" in a period in which "blackness" was very much under negotiation.

In *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, Collins argues that in Black cultural nationalism and afrocentrism "soul" is one of distinct aspects of the Black aesthetic. Soul, she asserts, is "interpreted as a condensed expression of the unconscious energy of the Black experience. Soul could not be acquired: You were born with it or you weren't" (100). Collins is not describing the music; she refers, instead, to the notion after which

---

[5] See also Tricia Rose.

the music is named. Soul is the name that was given to the "essential, authentic and positive quality of Blackness" (ibid).

Ward explains that "blacks increasingly consumed soul and funk as a self-conscious assertion of the racial pride which was one of the most important legacies of the Movement, and a defining characteristic of the black power era" (3). Baraka sees soul music as "a form of social aggression…. an attempt to place upon a 'meaningless' social order, an order which would give value to terms of existence that were once considered not only valueless but shameful…. an attempt to reverse the social roles within the society by redefining the canons of value" (Jones 218).

The importance of the incorporation of gospel into soul music connects to the role of gospel music in the Civil Rights Movement and also its role in Black life. The Civil Rights Movement used gospel songs and Black spirituals to strengthen both community and individual resolve. Many songs, for example "We Shall Overcome," which became emblematic of the Movement, played a key role in shaping it. "Whereas Black pop had deliberately muted some of its 'blackest' musical and lyrical elements, soul was characterized by its reliance upon musical and presentational devices drawn from the gospel tradition to which Blacks had an intensely proprietorial relationship" (Ward 3). Black churches had long been the central institution for Black life in America. Countless popular performers emerged from church choirs, and large segments of the Black population in the United States. had been raised on and often felt they had been sustained by church music. Soul's integration of gospel forms represented a certain solidarity with Civil Rights' appeals and an attempt to create music that was distinctly "Black" sonically and discursively. The inclusion of gospel was one way to mark soul as Black music. Ben

Sidran calls soul music "a black-defined, black-accepted means of *actively* involving the mass base of Negroes" (Cashmore 74).

The politics of soul had a great deal to do with the demographics of the audience and the relationship between performer and audience. At issue is the question of "cross-over" and the artist's target audience. Those record labels and performers, exemplified by Motown, who gunned for mainstream (read White) acceptance, while producing arguably excellent music were nonetheless often theorized as betraying the cause. According to George, Motown "wasn't without critics, black and white, who saw the label's aggressive upward mobility as an unnecessary attempt to escape blackness and sell out to the Establishment" (*Death* 106). While there were some notable exceptions at Motown, especially Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder, the most "authentic" soul, according to this argument, is the music that was released for Black audiences without attention to its viability in mainstream markets.

Perhaps the relationship between the performer and the audience is one of the aspects of Black music that sets it apart from other musics. "The intricate and nuanced interactions between artists and community undergirds much of the black popular music tradition and facilitated the role of black popular music as a primary discursive formation within the Black Public Sphere" (Neal, *What the Music Said* 106). Writing about soul music, Neal notes the ways in which many soul artists such as Wonder remained "artists in tune with the social, cultural, and political imagination of the larger African American community" (*What the Music Said* 107).

Black artists are expected (at least ideally) to remain accountable to the audience.

Perry argues that this commitment is symbolized within hip-hop by the notion of keeping

it real. According to Perry, keeping it real

> is an explicitly ideological stand against selling one's soul to the devils of
> capitalism or assimilation as one sells the art form and lives life. The frequent
> calls in the hip hop community to keep it real not only require the maintenance of
> an authentic Black urban identity; they also constitute a theoretical space that
> functions as a living testimony to African American experience. (87)

Although a great deal of today's mainstream hip-hop music seems to be more concerned

with dollars than with people, authenticity and connection to "the streets" (no matter how

contrived) continue to be especially important in hip-hop.

THE POLITICS OF HIP-HOP MUSIC

Many commentators, both popular and scholarly, who have discussed hip-hop

music and its role in Black American culture have indicated the genre's marked political

potential. For example, Neal argues that "hip-hop artists have reclaimed the critical

possibilities of popular culture, by using popular culture and the marketplace as the forum

to stimulate a broad discussion and critique about critical issues that most affect their

constituencies" (*What the Music Said* 161). Similarly, Murray Forman points out, "The

rap genre has provided an important site for the examination and critique of the

distribution of power and authority in the urban context" (xviii). Tricia Rose notes the

numerous ways in which rap music challenges the status quo of racialized power

dynamics. According to Rose,

> [A] large and significant element in rap's discursive territory is engaged in
> symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically,
> ideologically, and materially oppress African Americans. In this way, rap music is

29

a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless. On this stage, rappers act out inversions of status hierarchies, tell alternative stories of contact with the police and the education process, and draw portraits of contact with dominant groups in which the hidden transcript inverts/subverts the public, dominant transcript. Often rendering a nagging critique of various manifestations of power via jokes, stories, gestures, and song, rap's social commentary enacts ideological insubordination. (*Black Noise* 101)

All of these authors suggest that hip-hop has potential as a political arena, if not a political force.

Perhaps hip-hip has returned politics to youth culture as well, making political discourse "cool" with young people. Hip-hop carries political discourses from the emcees who work as "organic intellectuals" of sorts to the masses, who then circulate them through the communities and back again to the emcees. "It is not an empty claim to suggest that rap music and the spectacularity of the extended hip-hop culture have been central factors in the circulation of cultural counterdiscourses among Black and Latino teens and in contemporary transformations of African American cultural identities and politics that are formed within the public sphere" (Forman 11). This is not to suggest a sort of determinism in which the politics on offer via emcees determine the political beliefs of listeners but rather a dialogue in which members of the community participate and in which hip-hop music is both a forum and a catalyst. As Forman points out, "rap and its associated discourses have provided a lightening rod for heated debates about musical 'quality' and aesthetics as well as 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" (11-12).

Both Rose and Forman point to the ways in which hip-hop has made public stories that describe conditions in poor, urban communities that tend to be

disproportionately African American and Latino. These communities created a forum via rap music and hip-hop culture in which the problems these communities face are enumerated and solutions discussed. Yvonne Bynoe urges cultural participants to take the next step: to define what they stand for and will fight for and to demand "rap music that not only tells our stories, but also speaks truth to power and encourages folks to image new realities" (22). Bynoe argues that the hip-hop generation needs not only access to money and power but also to provide a clear vision of what the world would be like if it had its way.

Defining the parameters of the politics of hip-hop is a daunting task. As Watkins explains in *Hip Hop Matters*, "The idea of a national hip-hop political agenda, while enticing, faces enormous difficulty due to the sheer complexity of the movement and its ever-evolving constituency" (150). Watkins points out divisions within the hip-hop community along the lines of age, race, ethnicity, and regionalism as well as a clash between "those who see hip hop as a source of profit versus those who view it as a source of politics" (149). Further complicating any clear definition of which politics are "hip-hop" is the lack of any "single great issue around which the hip-hop movement can rally" (151).

My research aims to consider the roles that hip-hop communities play in the lives of listeners and what these communities believe might be the impact of hip-hop politics. All of the barriers to a national political agenda and an organized hip-hop political movement that Watkins describes did arise in my discussions with community members. Still, none of the people with whom I spoke saw these issues as insurmountable to the development of a hip-hop political platform nor, more importantly, to the local work

toward social change that hip-hop communities hope to sustain. Other relatively successful political movements face many of the same problems. Perhaps the biggest challenge, as this research suggests, is maintaining the momentum to move past differences to the common points around which a hip-hop constituency can rally.

Watkins argues that there is "general agreement on some themes regarding hip hop's impending bid to become a political force. Because hip hop is so closely associated with black and Latin youths, there is widespread agreement that racial politics will be a major part of the mix" (150). It is not clear, however, exactly how this will play out within a hip-hop movement. Certainly, there has been a great deal of strife within hip-hop communities about the role of White consumers (and a few performers, most notably Eminem) in shaping the hip-hop industry. Likewise, critics have expressed concern over the role of White activists within the hip-hop community. Kitwana, for example, warns about paternalistic attitudes that hinder coalition building and social change, writing, "Within the emerging hip-hop political movement some white hip-hop activists … descend on the ghetto to save the Blacks" (*White Kids* 197).

Additionally, hip-hop politics are likely to be urban-centered, concerned with issues especially relevant to city dwellers. Much of the grassroots organizing that has been done within hip-hop communities has developed in urban areas and has, therefore, addressed urban concerns. Police brutality, racial profiling, and adequate transportation are more likely to be issues in urban areas.

Most hip-hop cultural critics also address gender as a key issue in hip-hop politics. Watkins describes the ways in which depictions of female sexuality in much hip-hop fare have been detrimental to the health and safety of young Black women. He cites

32

lowered self-esteem, regular threats of violence, and high incidents of HIV/AIDS among young Black women as consequences of cultural attitudes expressed within hip-hop that devalue and degrade Black women. Likewise, Perry argues that hip-hop will be unable to succeed as a social movement until it addresses the sexism and misogyny that run rampant in the culture.

Advancing any political agenda requires access to money and to power. In the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, hip-hop organizations and celebrities were very visible in their efforts to encourage young people to exercise the power of the vote. In 2004, Russell Simmons's Hip Hop Summit Action Network held rallies in major cities featuring big name rap stars at which tens of thousands of young and first-time voters registered. Rapper and hip-hop entrepreneur Sean "Diddy" Combs spearheaded a campaign through his non-profit organization Citizen Change that urged young people to "Vote or Die!" These campaigns were largely successful. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, in 2004, turnout among 18-to-29 year-olds was up nine percentage points over 2000 (Marcelo).

In 2008, the Hip Hop Caucus organized Respect My Vote!, a concert series and voter registration drive featuring rapper T.I. and a variety of other hip-hop celebrities. The campaign "successfully registered voters in 12 states and executed a 20 city Bus Tour to Get Out the Vote the month before the Election" ("Hip Hop Caucus"). Between 49.3 and 54.5 percent of eligible voters aged 18-29 voted in the 2008 presidential election, the highest youth turnout since the year that 18-year-olds were first allowed to vote (Morgenstern). Clearly, factors were at play in this election cycle that had nothing to

do with hip-hop, but projects like Respect My Vote! and Will.i.am's pro-Obama "Yes

We Can" YouTube video undoubtedly had some impact.

Nonetheless, critics insist that real social change will not be achieved at the ballot

box. Kitwana, for example, argues that too much attention was paid in the fall of 2004 to

registering voters at the expense of educating voters and pressuring candidates to address

issues that are central to the lives of young voters. Groups such as the Young Voter

Alliance (YVA) worked to get out the youth vote for Democratic candidates in swing

states. Kitwana argues that the YVA

> put the cart before the horse, responding to the needs of the Democratic Party for
> a hip-hop vote initiative, instead of striking a balance between local needs and
> mainstream political aims. YVA and similar get-out-the-hip-hop-vote efforts,
> intentionally or not, helped set the wheels in motion for the emerging hip-hop
> political movement to be pimped by the Democrats. (*White Kids* 182)

Bynoe questions whether hip-hop can actually be an effective tool in advancing a

political agenda at all. She distinguishes hip-hop from politics, writing,

> Hip Hop is primarily a cultural expression that is formed from the shared
> attitudes, values, and practices of a subset of the African-American community.
> Where Hip Hop seeks to define a specific group reality within society, politics
> seeks to define society in general. In basic terms, raising awareness about police
> brutality through a song or performance is Hip Hop, but actually motivating the
> masses to force changes in police department procedures or the laws used to
> prosecute corrupt cops is politics. Hip Hop culture, as we currently know it,
> cannot adequately foster a political movement. (xi)

This, Bynoe asserts, is because the hip-hop generation has not produced sufficient

leadership. Rappers, in Bynoe's opinion, are ill equipped to do the real work that must be

done to achieve social change. "The leadership to come from the post-civil rights

generation must be able to do more than rhyme about the problem," she argues. "They

have got to be able to build organizations as well as harness the necessary monetary

resources and political power to do something about them" (xi). Indeed Bynoe argues that

Black communities need to rethink the very idea of leadership and begin to think of

leadership as an act of citizenship. She argues,

> as a nation we seem to be comfortable with the notion of the leader being a person
> disconnected from the masses, occupying a prominent position either above or in
> front of the general public. This leadership construct discourages average citizens
> from envisioning themselves as leaders and challenging the decisions made by
> established leaders. (10)

According to Kitwana, the most important next step to developing hip-hop's

political power is the building of coalitions across race. "[A]s young Blacks remain a

minority in a majority-rule government," he points out, "coalition politics is essential to

moving any 'Black' agenda" (*White Kids* 167). Bynoe agrees, writing,

> the capacity of Hip Hop culture to be an effective vehicle for social change seems
> largely dependent on ... whether or not large numbers of White and Asian fans of
> rap music will necessarily rally around political and social issues that
> disproportionately affect young Blacks and Latinos, e.g. racial profiling, police
> brutality, education reform, unemployment, and discrimination. (173)

Bynoe notes that such widespread support will be necessary to the success of any agenda

that emerges from within a community that she defines as a Black one. Kitwana's use of

quotation marks around the word Black suggests that he is less confident with defining

the hip-hop political agenda as Black. Indeed, Watkins asserts that the premise that the

hip-hop movement is "essentially black" is false and argues that this premise

"disregard[s] hip hop's rich history and cultural legacy" and "limit[s] its reach and

potential impact" (151). All agree, however, that coalitions across race and changing

racial attitudes will be key to hip-hop's coming to political power.

Furthermore, Bynoe contends that coalitions across class divides within Black

communities are equally, if not more, important to the success of hip-hop politics.

Kitwana, too, points to infighting amongst Black leaders and the "desire to be *the* Black leader" as well as paternalistic attitudes from middle- and upper-class Blacks toward poor Blacks as obstacles to the movement's success. Clearly, no agenda can address the specific needs of each member of the hip-hop community. What these authors suggest must happen in order for hip-hop politics to produce change is that community members care about, work for, and support the needs of the least advantaged members. Individuals will need to strive for an ideal of social justice rather than making political decisions only on the basis of self-interest.

In this research I ask listeners and community members about their conceptualizations of "community," including the roles which race plays in inclusion and exclusion. In the chapters that follow, I report on their responses to these questions and discuss the debates, problems, and solutions that participants raised. Participants consistently positioned issues of race and racism at the heart of hip-hop politics. They also discussed gender and class divisions in communities and potential strategies for addressing these divisions more effectively. Community members often have vastly different definitions of politics, diverse areas of emphasis, and sometimes incompatible approaches to problem-solving. Most community members expressed a desire to work in mutual respect across such differences, putting the community ahead of their individual interests, just as the pundits suggest they should.

METHODS

The goal of this project is to explore the roles of hip-hop communities and hip-hop groups in the lives of hip-hop listeners and to consider the various ways in which community members subscribe to and enact "hip-hop politics." Furthermore, I work to clarify and describe the issues and concerns that define hip-hop politics. My approach to this exploration is ethnographic, including participant observation as well as individual and group interviews. Over the course of this research I have attended concerts, gone to dance clubs, and participated in a variety of other events that target hip-hop audiences, including two National Hip-Hop Political Convention conferences, and a number of discussion panels and community events. I have also been a participant observer on the National Hip-Hop Political Convention email listserv since 2006 and have drawn a great deal of insight about these issues from this experience. In the interviews I conducted I asked participants to delineate their definitions of "politics" and to consider connections between music and politics from their individual perspectives.

In recent decades, sociologists have debated whether "insider" or "outsider" research is the more effective approach to fieldwork.[6] Some argue that "insiders" to the community are best suited to research there, while others contend that "outsiders" come with a better perspective. My race and gender mark me as an outsider in the hip-hop community. I am a white woman observing and participating in a community that is still discursively and practically associated with both blackness and masculinity. Besides these obvious markers of my outsider status I am also involved in the community largely as a consumer. I have never mastered any of the "four elements" of hip-hop culture that

37

include rapping, deejaying, breakdancing, and graffiti writing. Although I have listened to and enjoyed a wide range of rap music and often danced to it, I can hardly sell myself as an "authentic" hip-hop head. Nor do I have "street credibility." My childhood on a farm in Nebraska and my teenage years in the suburbs of Dallas hardly qualify me as someone who is "hard," or even especially "down." Because of well-founded fears that White participants are "slumming," attempting to co-opt the culture, or going to hijack the political process, I have had to earn the trust and respect of the people with whom I am working.

Also adding to my outsider status is my association with academia. "Researchers" from outside the community they propose to study are often met with apprehension and suspicion. Watkins points out that hip-hop culture has been especially resistant to hip-hop scholarship. He argues, the "perception [is] that, because of their academic standing, hip-hop scholars are disconnected from hip-hop" (246). In communities that have been abused and exploited, people are rightfully concerned about misuse and misinterpretation of any information that they share. Indeed, the role of researcher necessarily involves a power dynamic that requires caution, attention, and mitigation. I am asking the participants in this research to share with me their dreams and their aspirations and will have little to offer them in return. In some ways, this reflects the very White/Black dynamic that has been widely critiqued within hip-hop: a White scholar uses Black participants to help her develop a dissertation that leads to a PhD for her and nowhere for them. I have tried to balance this dynamic to some extent by actively participating in community events and by sharing resources that my university affiliation affords me

---

[6] See, for example, John Aguilar and Donald Messerschmidt.

including access to professors as potential panelists and access to audiovisual equipment when possible.

Regardless of race, class, and gender power differentials are unavoidable aspects of ethnographic research. Nancy Naples asserts that the insider/outsider debate obscures more salient issues with ethnographic research. She reminds us that outsiderness and insiderness

> are not fixed or static positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differently experienced and expressed by community members. By recognizing the fluidity of "outsiderness"/"insiderness," we also acknowledge three key methodological points: as ethnographers we are never fully outside or inside the "community"; our relationship to the community is never expressed in general terms but is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated in particular everyday interactions; and these interactions are themselves located in shifting relationships among community residents. (84)

The lived experience of "insiderness" and "outsiderness" is certainly more dynamic than the dichotomy set up by this debate suggests. As fieldwork continued, I grew to feel more of an insider, though I encountered regular reminders of the ways in which I remained an outsider.

Despite the aspects of my identity that mark me as an "outsider," I have long felt an identification with hip-hop music and culture that position me as an "insider" as well. I love the music; I am committed to social justice; I am fascinated by the ways in which people (including myself) associate music with social movements and want to explore that connection. I would like to live in a more socially just society and I see within hip-hop culture the potential to promote such a society. I can state these motivations simply, but each contains complex layers of commitment, desire, ambition, knowledge, understanding, and pleasure.

Hip-hop became part of my sonic world first and most pleasurably as dance music. I have always loved to dance and found hip-hop music moved me. Furthermore, dance clubs have been among the most integrated spaces in which I have participated and I have always enjoyed the interaction on the dance floor with a variety of people. Nonetheless, mixed into my desire to live in an integrated community is undoubtedly a certain fascination with Black, urban culture. The worlds described in most hip-hop lyrics stand in stark opposition to the worlds I have inhabited, and it would be dishonest to pretend that I am immune to the fascination that draws many young White kids to hip-hop (like jazz before it).

Still, I believe each of us has a role to play in the work needed to develop more equitable and humane racial politics. I do not believe that I should leave that work to Black folks and other people of color out of fear that I might expose myself as less than the ideal anti-racist White supporter. I feel a responsibility to be honest, first and foremost with myself, about my own habits of racial stereotyping and my own racist attitudes and to work with a variety of others to address them. If we cannot speak to each other across race about race, how will we ever begin to build the coalitions necessary to address racism and its ugly consequences? This project also stems from my desire to participate in that process.

RESEARCH DESIGN

I began to develop my research questions and to consider various fields in which I might conduct research to answer them. In doing so I encountered the National Hip Hop

Political Convention (NHHPC), which was preparing for its second meeting. The first meeting, by all accounts, had been a huge success. It had attracted thousands of participants and the group collectively drafted a five-point agenda and corresponding "demands." The NHHPC promotes political education and the use of hip-hop culture as a tool to encourage community action and civic engagement. According to the 2008 Convention Chairperson, Troy Nkrumah, "This political convention is the biggest gathering of young activists, mostly urban youth of color, who are often ignored and overlooked when policy is developed" (*Hip Hop Linguistics)*.

Both my methods and my field of study changed after my early experiences as a participant observer. While I had hoped to conduct numerous interviews at the National Hip Hop Political Convention meeting in Chicago in 2006, I found there that the business of the convention kept participants quite busy, and I contented myself with attending sessions (which I recorded) and making contacts for future interviews. As an attendee at this convention, I was invited to join the email listserv. This listserv is the major form of communication and connection amongst members across the nation. Through it I have been privy to heated debates about politics, music, and the structure and viability of the organization. I have also gained tremendous insight about the ideas and discourse that circulate regularly within the community.

The NHHPC listserv combined with the Convention meetings provided me with an irresistible field for this research. Although this shift in focus moved my research away from the "everyday" listener, it helped me to focus my research on a group of listeners who have made commitments to a group and to political engagement. Instead of

a comparative project in which I consider the differences between politically committed listeners and "everyday" listeners, I developed a case study of one group who attempt to organize around hip-hop and to use it to effect social change.

My access to this list and its members altered the course of my research significantly, moving it into a largely online ethnographic direction. Online ethnography has both strengths and weaknesses. The NHHPC listserv offers a regular daily connection to the field and its members. It also offers an automated archive of the conversations that take place there. The ability to return repeatedly to conversations and trace their trajectories was valuable and appealing. In addition to the listserv, I also conducted a number of online interviews via email and using surveymonkey.com.

Garcia, et al. explain in "Ethnographic Approaches to the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication" that technologically mediated forms of technology are becoming such a regular part of daily communication that it must be considered part of the social world. They argue that "there is one social world that contains both traditional and technologically advanced modes of communication and sites of social activity" (57). For this reason they conclude that "'virtually all' ethnographies of contemporary society should include technologically mediated communication, behavior and artifacts" (ibid). They also note, however, that online ethnography poses specific challenges for researchers. Furthermore, they point out that "few research topics … justify limiting the field to online phenomena" (56).

Online ethnography clearly changes the nature of participant observation since a listserv not only allows the researcher an opportunity to "lurk" unannounced but also the chance to conceal markers of race, class, or gender. Even if the researcher announces her

presence and her project and does not actively conceal any identifying characteristics, these characteristics are less apparent in the online context. I chose to introduce myself, to announce my project, and to participate in discussions as opposed to merely observing. The online setting did allow me to remain in a comfort zone that daily live interaction would have pushed. My attendance at two Convention meetings where I was able to meet face-to-face with many of the participants whose voices are represented in this project also supplemented this online interaction.

In Austin, I conducted a number of face-to-face interviews, one of which led to the suggestion that I adopt an activist approach to the local research project. One interviewee suggested that I might give back to participants by helping to organize a local chapter of the National Hip Hop Political Convention. In the process, I would meet and talk with a wide variety of hip-hop artists, fans, and community members, and the project would leave a lasting impact in the community.

This type of "action research" seemed appropriate to the project. "Action researchers argue that research should not be aimed at creating esoteric knowledge…. The outcome of research should be useful, aimed at improving the lives of those who are the subject of research" (Esterberg 135). I wanted this project to be of use to the participants, and this approach allowed me greater access to participants while also allowing me to contribute something useful to the community. The group that we formed is the National Hip Hop Political Convention Austin Local Organizing Committee (NHHPC Austin LOC). The group planned and hosted a fundraising event to provide two scholarships to the NHHPC meeting in Las Vegas. Members also designed and conducted a survey of residents in a low-income community that is the subject of intense

police surveillance. Additionally, the group hosted a cookout in the neighborhood where attendees took the survey and discussed community issues and options. The data from these surveys are included in this dissertation, and a number of the voices included are members of this group.

I hope that this project will contribute to the hip-hop community. I hope that it will help to document the long, hard work that members of the community have contributed to the movement for social justice. I hope that it will contribute to the community's sense of connectedness and to a public understanding of the hip-hop generation as a motivated, passionate, committed and hard-working group who do have a vision for a better world and who find their inspiration for creating that world within hip-hop music and hip-hop culture.

CONVENTION MEETINGS, LISTSERV MEMBERS, AND AUSTIN PARTICIPANTS

The information packet that was given to attendees at the 2006 National Hip-Hop Political Convention meeting included a handout on the history of the group. This handout explains,

> In the spring of 2003, a group of activists, artists, educators, entrepreneurs, journalists and civic leaders from the Hip Hop Generation began gathering to develop a plan to funnel the political and cultural power of the hip hop generation into mainstream political activities. Out of these meetings came the idea for the National Hip Hop Political Convention, a bi-annual event that would bring together delegates from all over the country to develop, endorse and vote on a political agenda for the Hip Hop Generation, and act as a training ground to identify and support local, state and national leadership to implement that agenda. ("History of NHHPC")

44

The first meeting is reported to have attracted 6,000 people and included the development of the NHHPC agenda. With so many individuals interested and striving to become involved in hip-hop politics and activism, the organizers of the first convention were excited and optimistic. The group intended to "develop and promote a political agenda for the Hip Hop Generation," to "create a national organizational infrastructure for the Hip Hop Generation" and to "develop Hip Hop Generation leadership and electoral candidates" ("History of NHHPC).

The national organization structure consists of a steering committee. The steering committee makes decisions that impact the group as a whole. For instance, it was responsible for the decision to become a 501C3 organization. Group members also belong to Local Organizing Committees (LOCs). The LOCs are expected to work within the stated goals of the organization but otherwise function independently and organize their own projects and campaigns. To date, the NHHPC has more than twenty chapters nationwide.

The second national meeting was held in July 2006 at the Jacob Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies and at nearby Wendell Phillips High School on the south side of Chicago in the Bronzeville neighborhood. Bronzeville is a historic Black neighborhood once known as the "Black Metropolis" because of the influx on African American emigrants from the south between 1910 and 1920. The neighborhood was home to such African American icons as Ida B. Wells, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sam Cooke, and Louis Armstrong. I took the train through the city from my host's home on the north side of Chicago and walked several blocks through the neighborhood to the Convention site. Much of the residential property in the area had recently been torn down. Much of what

remained was in various degrees of disrepair or decay. I was offered drugs and generally regarded with suspicion. When I walked back to the train on the first evening, it was growing dark and I took a better-lit and more populated route through the neighborhood. Much of this area included new condominiums and was undoubtedly gentrifying. The neighborhood provided a compelling backdrop for the NHHPC meeting.

The attendance at the 2006 meeting was significantly less that the 6,000 reportedly in attendance in 2004. Although some people who had also attended the first convention expressed some disappointment, the Chicago Organizing Committee (Chi_LOC) presented an ambitious and comprehensive program including training sessions on topics ranging from "Web Organizing" to "Branding the Hip-Hop Political Movement" to "Hip Hop and Sexual Politics / Gender Justice." Panel discussions addressed each of the issues that the 2004 group had identified as the foundation around which hip-hop activists organize.

The 2008 convention was held in August in Las Vegas on the University of Nevada Campus. This backdrop was decidedly less compelling and one Austin participant expressed perplexity as to why it would be held in Las Vegas. Las Vegas made sense in that the city is well equipped to host conventions and does have a significant African American population. Las Vegas also boasts a very active Local Organizing Committee, which include former National Chairman Troy Nkrumah. Unfortunately, Las Vegas also features an unfriendly relationship between the police department and the hip-hop community, which was exacerbated by the 2007 National Basketball Association (NBA) All-Star weekend during which violence and rude behavior broke out amongst NBA fans. Though there is no direct link between the NBA

and hip-hop, the Las Vegas police clearly expected the hip-hop convention to pose problems for them and demonstrated their concern through harassment and excessive personnel.

The program included an evening devoted to hip-hop in the academy and a multi-day film festival. Panel discussion and trainings covered topics ranging from "COINTELPRO to RAPINTELPRO" to "Transformative Power of Broadband Technology" to "Introduction to Nonviolent Direct Action" and "The Electoral Reality: How do We Vote for a Hip Hop Agenda, or Can We?" In many ways this meeting appeared more professional and official than the 2006 meeting. But trouble was brewing.

During the convention there were rumbles that the attendance was poor and morale seemed low. A late-night meeting of LOC chairpeople included the airing of all sorts of dirty laundry and the expression of a number of old and unresolved arguments. Sessions ran late and were frequently shut down in the middle of dialogues because of the need to maintain a schedule. Attendees seemed frustrated, accusations flew, and tempers flared. Very few attendees remained at the end of the weekend to work on the Agenda.

Many of the most outspoken listserv members, who eventually serve as my primary sources for this ethnography, were present at the Las Vegas Convention. Hip Hop journalist and radio personality Davey D was on hand conducting interviews to post on his website and moderating the panel on Electoral Reality. Rosa Clemente, one of the founding members of the organization, was present and campaigning as the vice-presidential candidate on the Green Party ticket. She was especially critical of the organization and frustrated with what she perceived as a lack of support for her candidacy. Nkrumah was ubiquitous as an amazingly high-energy organizer who seemed

to know everyone and always to have the latest scoop and a definite opinion. Rafiki Cai, who was an avid supporter (and often defender) of Barack Obama, is a thin, soft spoken man and served as a panelist on the Hip-Hop Spirituality panel. Reverend Lennox Yearwood spoke about the Hip Hop Caucus and its efforts to connect grassroots organizing with mainstream hip-hop and Capitol Hill. Jeff Chang is friendly and warm and seemed always to be working: recording interviews, taking notes, and constantly observing. Zenzele Isoke, one of a handful of women who regular engage in conversations and debates on the listserv, served as a moderator for "How Not to Get Played! Exposing the Troublesome Sexual Politics of the Hip Hop Generation."

In addition to important participants whom I met at the national conference many Austinites also took part in this research. Austin participants, with the exception of popular local rapper and singer Bavu Blakes who spoke with me early in the project, were all involved in the Austin LOC to one degree or another. Blakes also participated in a discussion of the "Politics of the Business" during the South by Southwest music festival in March 2008.

Gator is a wiry young man with a huge Afro and a sweet disposition who I met at the 2006 convention. He is a slam poet and the front man for local rap group Public Defenders. He is involved in several activist projects and regularly performs at politically oriented events.

James Price and Trevor Goodchild attended the 2008 convention on scholarships provided by the Austin LOC. James is known locally as rapper Nov. 27. He is originally from Little Rock, Arkansas, and is new to activism and organizing but is extremely motivated and always has his hustle on. Trevor Goodchild is a founding member of an

Austin organization called the Better Hip Hop Bureau whose purpose is to "preserve the roots of HipHop Culture through community-building activities and unifying community members" and to "ensure a positive environment for future hip hop generations in hopes that the youth will learn from our mistakes and not face the same struggles as our generation" (Better Hip Hop Bureau). He is also a rapper who performs as Gnostic Prophet.

Kenavon Carter was listed on the NHHPC website in 2008 as the chairperson for the Austin LOC. When I contacted him about the LOC, he said he had not gotten around to that yet, and we decided to start the LOC together. He is a criminal defense attorney in Austin and has created a "Know Your Rights" training session aimed at reducing police harassment and brutality.

Clifford Gillard was the manager at the Victory Grill, a historic music venue on Austin's eastside that consistently supported local hip-hop artists under Clifford's direction. He is also one of the founding members of the Austin LOC.

Debbie Russell is President of the Central Texas ACLU, a tireless activist, and a constant defender of freedom and citizens' rights. She is also a hip-hop devotee.

Ann del Llano spearheaded a campaign to turn Harris County, which includes Houston, blue in the 2008 election. The campaign included prominent Houston rapper Bun B of the legendary Underground Kings (UGK) as well as other Houston rap personalities. She is a lawyer, an organizer, and a hip-hop fan.

Chris Harris is the host of "Word on the Street" (formerly "Conkrete Skoolyard") on KOOP radio, a community radio station in Austin. "Word on the Street" features hip-hop music as well as news and information about issues and activism in Austin. Chris

began as an apprentice on the program and became the host when the original hosts moved on.

Erika Gonzalez is co-director of PODER, People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources. PODER's mission is "redefining environmental issues as social and economic justice issues, and collectively setting our own agenda to address these concerns as basic human rights. We seek to empower our communities through education, advocacy and action" (poder-texas.org). Erika coordinates and supervises all of PODER's youth programs. She is a poet and a supporter of hip-hop communities.

Although many other individuals contributed to this project through conversations, meetings, panel discussions, online surveys, and listserv posts, these vignettes are intended to give some shape and character to the community that is described in the following chapters.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The following chapter explores in more detail the relationship between hip-hop and politics. I offer my definitions of hip-hop, of community, and of politics. In defining hip-hop as a musical genre, I also discuss hip-hop culture and offer a brief history of its birth and development. The section on hip-hop communities explores various ways in which communities and groups have been theorized and how these theories might apply to hip-hop communities. It also includes a brief overview of theories of the development of social movements. I describe the roles that music can and has played within social movements, focusing specifically on the roles it plays in hip-hop communities. Finally, I discuss the various ways in which hip-hop is political from identity politics to political

50

economy and offer some general themes that emerge as integral to any definition of politics.

The third chapter explores the history of political hip-hop, tracing it from Black spoken word performances, early hip-hop, Black Nationalism and Afrocentricity in hip-hop, gangsta rap, through contemporary "conscious rap." It considers the ways in which political lyrics might contribute to social change movements. The chapter also describes the challenges that political rap has faced from government, police, insurance companies, the recording industry, and the mainstream market.

In the fourth chapter, I outline my findings regarding the political issues that are of central concern in hip-hop communities. The chapter begins with discussion of the parameters of the hip-hop political community, arguing that diversity is one of its strengths as well as its weakness. I describe the National Hip Hop Political Convention's Agenda, including the points contained therein and the ways in which the organization suggests the Agenda should be used. The Agenda's points consist of Criminal Justice; Economic Justice; Human Rights; Education; Health and Wellness; and Gender Justice. In the remainder of the chapter, I discuss the issues that emerged as salient in the interviews and participant observation. Participants were especially concerned about violence, economic issues, and media issues including access, conglomeration, and representation. Identity issues including race, gender, and sexual orientation were regularly raised on the NHHPC listserv and both the NHHPC and the local Austin community consistently discussed the need to work together across differences and to build coalitions for social change.

In the fifth chapter, I discuss two debates of concern in building political hip-hop communities. First, I discuss participants' remarks regarding electoral versus grassroots political projects. Participants in this research consistently expressed skepticism regarding electoral politics. Nonetheless, the election of Barack Obama sparked enthusiasm for both electoral and grassroots politics. This chapter also includes an exploration of discourses within hip-hop communities regarding leadership, the role of elected officials, the role of activists, and the responsibilities of hip-hop celebrities to function in leadership roles. Participants stressed the importance of leadership that arises from within communities and truly represents the interests of those communities.

The final chapter is devoted to my own conclusions with regard to my research questions. Ultimately, I argue that hip-hop music has not had the political impact that its champions suggest that it could have. I believe that, although hip-hop communities have formed, they lack the coherence, the social glue, and the sense of purpose needed to form groups capable of long-term concerted action. I agree with one of my respondents who said quite plainly that while hip-hop is important, it is "not enough." I also find, however, that hip-hop is still at work, that it is serving a variety of political purposes for its constituents, and that its paramount contribution to social change has yet to be seen.

Chapter 2: Hip-Hop Music, Community, and Politics

Whether at a show or at a club, I like nothing more than a serious bass line. It was bass and dance that first attracted me to hip-hop music, but as I heard more and began to listen more closely, I started to notice the poetry of the lyrics. As one interviewee explains, "It's the sound … that's why people listen to music … it's the sound definitely that draws people there … But it's the lyrics that…. You might move to the music … but if you're going to move toward something it's going to be because of the lyrics" (Harris, 20 February 2008). I began to learn about soul and R&B through hip-hop and developed respect for the historical significance of a musical form that grew from the literal rubble of some of New York's poorest neighborhoods. For years, I could not get enough. I had a sense that I could never learn all that hip-hop music had to teach me. As a White girl, a feminist, a graduate student, and a teacher, hip-hop often seemed an odd match for me, but as a pure listener, it is where my heart remains.

Most people have stories about the music that they love. Music seems to have the ability to transport us through time, to reach across vast distances, to ease our loneliness, and to express what we had previously failed to say. People ask each other, "What kind of music do you listen to?" as a way to gauge compatibility. As Simon Frith argues, "[W]hat people listen to is more important for their sense of themselves than what they watch or read. Patterns of music use provide a better map of social life than viewing or reading habits. Music just matters more than any other medium" ("Music and Everyday

Life" 100). Pierre Bourdieu also notes the primacy of music in marking an individual's

status, writing:

> [N]othing more clearly affirms one's "class," nothing more infallibly classifies,
> than tastes in music….[T]he flaunting of "musical culture" is not a cultural
> display like others: as regards its social definition "musical culture" is something
> other than a quantity of knowledge and experiences combined with the capacity to
> talk about them. Music is the most "spiritual" of the arts of the spirit and a love of
> music is a guarantee of "spirituality".… [M]usic is bound up with "interiority"
> ("inner music") of the "deepest" sort. (19)

In many ways, we imagine that we are what we listen to and we make the same

assumption about others.

Musical genres are discursively constructed and represent values and norms,

ideological associations that most of us can make easily even if we are aware that they

are stereotypes. According to these discourses, country music is White, rural, and

working class. Heavy metal is associated especially with young men, with anger, and

with alcohol and marijuana. Hip-hop music is Black, urban, often sexual, but it also

contains a rebellion, a middle finger to "the man." Whether we select music based upon a

pre-existing sense of self or develop a sense of self in relation to the music we like,

clearly music plays an important role in many people's identities.

WHAT IS HIP-HOP?: DEFINING A GENRE

So what makes hip-hop so special? Why is hip-hop music so often singled out as

a music that has the potential not just to create identity but to produce social change, both

positive and negative? Answering this involves an enunciation of the generic qualities of

54

the music and an explanation of why particular cultural elements have come to be associated with it. Being able to hear and understand the hip-hop musical genre is both a mark of cultural capital and connection to the hip-hop community. One interviewee remarked that a defining characteristic of the "hip-hop generation," which he is otherwise not sure really exists, is the ability to understand rapped lyrics. "Pretty much anyone over forty-five" is unable to do this, he explains (Harris, 20 February 2008). As Robert Walser points out, genre classification is dependent on one's familiarity with the standards of the genre. Ultimately, musical genres are similar to pornography in that they are hard to define, but people know them when they hear them, especially if they have some experience with them.

As a musical genre, hip-hop emphasizes the beat. During a panel discussion on the state of hip-hop in Austin, local radio personality Mz Marlah argued that hip-hop's sonic "boom" has made it the cultural phenomenon that it is ("Gospel 2 Hip-Hop"). Grandmaster Flash, one of the pioneers of the genre, points out that in the beginning "the key was we could take almost anything musically just as long as it had a beat to it so that the rhymer who flowed over the top of it could syncopate" ("Grand Master Flash's"). Hip-hop music often uses "samples," bits of sound taken from earlier recordings. As Flash's comments suggest, hip-hop music is eclectic; numerous musical genres influence it, including soul, funk, jazz, and rock. It is also likely to include rapped (rather than sung) lyrics. In an effort to demonstrate hip-hop's relationship to earlier forms of African American music, scholars have pointed out characteristics such as syncopation and call-and-response structure that hip-hop music and earlier music forms share (See Hager;

Toop; Hebdige; Chambers; Gilroy; Rose, *Black Noise*; Keyes; Bartlett). Because hip-hop

is a vast and varied genre, though, most attempts to define it return to the beat. Hip-hop

music has a hip-hop rhythm most importantly.

Hip-hop *culture* is the art, style, attitudes, values, and, ultimately, the

communities that have developed around hip-hop music. Of course, not everyone agrees

as to who and what ought to be included in hip-hop culture, but most commentators agree

on some general points. First, hip-hop culture includes four elements: emceeing

(delivering rap lyrics over beats), deejaying (creating musical accompaniment for an

emcee or mixing music on two turntables), breakdancing (performing gymnastic dance

moves, usually to hip-hop music), and graffiti art. Each of these art forms came to

prominence in New York City in the mid to late 1970s. DJs and MCs worked together to

develop the musical form. Breakdancers substituted dance crews and dance battles for

street gangs and fights, developing a dance form in the process that reached unexpected

heights of popularity with the release of major Hollywood films such as *Breakin'* (1984,

dir. Silberg). Graffiti art exploded in popularity both illegally on subway train cars and

within the legitimate art scene starting in the mid-1970s. Artists like FAB 5 FREDDY,

who was both a graffiti artist and hip-hop promoter, helped to build bridges between the

two scenes (Chang, *Can't Stop*).

Most commentators also agree that hip-hop culture tends toward the urban and is

often associated with African diasporic peoples, especially African Americans. Still,

many of the early pioneers make a point of being racially inclusive in their definitions of

hip-hop culture. Most histories of hip-hop music recognize the influence of Jamaican

music and musical performance. Most also describe the important role of Puerto Rican

music and artists in the development of hip-hop music (for accounts of hip-hop's early

history see *Vibe*; Fricke and Ahearn; Chang, *Can't Stop*; George, *Hip Hop America*;

www.daveyd.com). Nonetheless, nearly all of the artists recognized as pioneers of the

form are Black New Yorkers. As the music moved out of New York City, across the

nation, and eventually around the world, people of all races and all walks of life have

made significant contributions to the genre, but hip-hop music remains closely associated

with Black, urban communities.

Hip-hop values, attitudes, and activism tend to center on notions of social justice

and to promote the needs and concerns of the underclass and the dispossessed. Again, the

history of the development of the music is instructive in understanding the reasons for

this. The story of hip-hop's birth situates it in some of the poorest and most neglected

neighborhoods in the nation at the time. In his comprehensive history of hip-hop culture,

Can't Stop Won't Stop, Jeff Chang describes what was left of the Bronx in the wake of

the Cross-Bronx Expressway in 1977: "a modernist catastrophe of massive proportions"

(10). Not only had the expressway literally torn the Bronx apart, but the economic

conditions in the Bronx in the 1970s were equally appalling. According to Chang:

> Here was the new math: the South Bronx had lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs; 40
> percent of the sector disappeared. By the mid-seventies, average per capita
> income dropped to $2,430, just half of the New York City average and 40 percent
> of the nationwide average. The official youth unemployment rate hit 60 percent.
> Youth advocates said that in some neighborhoods the true number was closer to
> 80 percent. If blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive,
> forced labor, hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work. (13)

Grandmaster Flash describes digging through dumpsters and vacant lots looking for electronic parts that he could combine to create the technology necessary to play two records at the same time (Chang, *Can't Stop* 112-113). Kool Herc, another pioneering deejay, explains that his sister planned the first party he played in an effort to earn money for school clothes (Chang, *Can't Stop* 67-68). The hip-hop creation myth includes stealing city electricity in parks in order to operate turntables, microphones, and amplifiers. Indeed, the history of hip-hop often paints these early pioneers as heroes who were able to make something out of nothing and the music as a triumph of the creativity and strength of impoverished people.

Many hip-hop practitioners, scholars, and commentators are careful to make a distinction between rap music and hip-hop culture. According to this approach, the music associated with hip-hop culture is rap music. Everything else – the dance, art, fashion, literature, attitudes, values, activism, etc. – is hip-hop culture. Nonetheless, many people involved in hip-hop culture refer to the music as "hip-hop" as well. One of the most prominent and influential hip-hop publications, *The Source,* is subtitled "The Bible of Hip-Hop Music, Culture, & Politics." And listeners today are much more likely to say that they are fans of hip-hop music than to say that they listen to rap. This is partly because others define hip-hop as an umbrella musical genre that includes hip-hop soul, gangsta rap, underground hip-hop, trip-hop, and other subgenres.[7] Other commentators argue that hip-hop is the music as a whole and rap is the lyrical component. This

---

[7] For a range of definitions of hip-hop see "Hip-Hop" on urbandictionary.com, which includes over forty definitions submitted by readers.

definition understands "rap" as a verb. Rapping is what MCs do; the music that results

from their collaboration with DJs and producers is hip-hop. For some, the distinction

between hip-hop music and hip-hop culture is not only unnecessary; it is impossible.

Many hip-hop heads argue that hip-hop is not music; it is a "way of life." David

Shumway and Lawrence Grossberg made similar arguments about rock when they argued

that rock is not just music; it is a cultural practice, including performance, media,

attitudes, etc.

I will use "hip-hop" as an adjective to describe music, artists who create music,

the culture that has developed around the music, or activists who base their work on the

ideals and values of this culture. In my opinion, the term itself has become too general to

be useful as a stand-alone phrase. Instead, it is best used to qualify other terms.

HIP-HOP COMMUNITIES

One of the goals of this project is to examine the degree to which it is possible to

speak of a hip-hop community. And, if so, how is this community constituted? Does

simply listening to hip-hop music qualify an individual as a member of this community?

Is shared musical taste an adequate bond to constitute a community? What other

requirements might need to be met in order to speak of hip-hop fans as a community?

And how might this community shift allegiances to become effective in promoting and

creating social change that is consistent with hip-hop values?

Determining who ought to be included in the "hip-hop community" has been the subject of much debate. On the one hand, some definitions are explicit with regard to age and race. According to Bikari Kitwana, for example, the hip-hop generation is "young African Americans born between 1965 and 1984 who came of age in the eighties and nineties and who share a specific set of values and attitudes. At the core are our thoughts about family, relationships, child rearing, career, racial identity, race relations and politics" (*Hip Hop Generation* 4). On the other hand, some definitions are intentionally broad and inclusive. One interviewee argues that "anyone who is down for the struggle" ought to be included (Harris, 20 February 2008).

It is not uncommon for fans to form a sense of community via their interest in and love for a particular musical genre. Punk and heavy metal fans have both been studied and discussed as distinct groups of people whose status as a "group" depends upon their participation in genre fandom (See Hebdige, Weinstein, Walser, and LeBlanc). Genre selection, however, might also be connected to identity in that demographic factors often influence it and contribute significantly to individual identity formation. I am likely to think of myself as a White, middle-class, educated, and female before I think of myself as a fan of any particular musical genre, and these aspects of my identity are likely to influence my selection. "Many factors determine a person's choice among taste cultures, particularly class, age, religion, ethnic and racial background, regional origin, and place of residence, as well as personality factors which translate themselves into wants for specific types of cultural content" (Gans 70). Thus, hip-hop's pervasive and abiding

association with blackness is likely to influence listeners' genre choices as well as to impact perceptions and discourses regarding who belongs to the hip-hop community.

Debates about who is a legitimate participant in hip-hop culture may seem divisive, but they also serve to establish a sense of an in-group and an out-group, which contributes to a feeling of solidarity among the in-group members. "The belief on the part of its members that the movement is being opposed unjustly and unfairly by vicious and unscrupulous groups serves to rally the members around their aims and values" (Blumer 207). Hip-hop artists and fans rightly believe that society at large misunderstands, misrepresents, and often vilifies hip-hop music. This creates solidarity among members whether or not each member's definition of the community would include all the others. Jeremy Brent sees community formation as a process of drawing boundaries, arguing. "Boundaries are drawn to create a sense of unity 'inside,' through conflict with 'outside'" (in Hoggett 76). According to Brent, community cohesion requires boundaries and exclusions.

Pierre Bourdieu describes taste or media selection as a means by which individuals distinguish themselves from one another. In this case, selection is not so much about connecting oneself with others as it is about distancing oneself from others although it might still have the effect of placing oneself within a particular class or group. According to Bourdieu, "Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed" (Bourdieu 6). For Bourdieu, selection is about a demonstration of

"cultural capital," displaying one's knowledge and wielding one's power. In a sense this is still a matter of exerting identity through selection, but this approach posits identity as an interactive process. One's identity stands in relation to another, rather than developing interiorly and then being expressed through selection.

For Bourdieu, both genre selection and membership within a group of generic fans offer individuals the opportunity to display mastery. According to Bourdieu's approach, I am most likely to align myself with the genre about which I have the most knowledge and of which I have the best sense of the boundaries and standards.

> Consumption is…a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code. In a sense one can say that the capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of the knowledge (*savoir*), or concepts, that is, the words, that are available to name visible things, and which are as it were, programmes for perception. A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. (Bourdieu 2)

Just as Gans notes demographic factors that seem to impact one's selections, Bourdieu points out that cultural capital is often linked with financial and especially educational capital.

In the case of the underclasses, with whom hip-hop is most often associated, financial capital is likely to be in short supply and, while formal education might be similarly limited, knowledge of the genre can function as a major source of distinction. Bourdieu argues that strategies for demonstrating one's superiority and status must vary depending upon one's financial capital. On the one hand, if I can go out and purchase every hip-hop record ever made, I can demonstrate my fandom and my social status

through material possessions. But if, on the other hand, I have access to very limited

means to record ownership, I might demonstrate my status by writing rhymes that

reference classics or choose a hip-hop subgenre about which most fans know very little

and learn about it in great detail. As Bourdieu explains,

> [I]n the absence of the conditions of material possession, the pursuit of
> exclusiveness has to be content with developing a unique mode of appropriation.
> Liking the same things differently, liking different things, less obviously marked
> out for admiration – these are some of the strategies for outflanking, overtaking
> and displacing which, by maintaining a permanent revolution in tastes, enable the
> dominated, less wealthy fractions, whose appropriations must, in the main, be
> exclusively symbolic, to secure exclusive possessions at every moment. (282)

Cultural capital, then, allows fans to assert high status even without access to great

financial capital.

If musical selection is bound up with identity, how might one's identity as a fan of

a particular musical genre impact one's social relationships? In what sense might fans of

a particular musical genre be considered a group? Are fans connected to each other

simply on the basis of their shared taste in music? In his discussion of "taste culture,"

Gans describes groups of people with similar tastes as "taste publics." He writes: "Users

who make similar choices of values and taste culture will be described as publics of an

individual taste culture, or taste publics, even though they are unorganized aggregates

rather than organized publics" (11). Gans stresses that these "groups" rarely have much

contact with or awareness of each other. According to Gans, "Taste cultures are not

cohesive value systems, and taste publics are not organized groups; the former are

aggregates of similar values and usually but not always similar content, and the latter are

aggregates of people with usually but not always similar values making similar choices

from the available offerings of culture" (69-70). Such a "group" might be useful from an analytical perspective. For example a researcher might be better able to study and assess media selection within a group that has already been designated as a taste public. Such a "group," however, is unlikely to have much impact on group members who probably will not share a rapport with or feel connected to other members. Membership within a particular taste public in all probability will not alleviate social isolation or loneliness or contribute to a sense of solidarity with other group members.

In his book *Acting in Concert*, Mark Mattern argues against a definition of musical community that offers relief from loneliness, explaining, "When the concept of community appears…in the existing literature of music, it is typically formulated in organic, apolitical terms that erase disagreement and difference, and it is justified on psychological grounds as a tonic for alienation and isolation rather than on political grounds as a social basis for collective political action" (5). Instead, he defines "community" along specifically political lines. He writes, "*Community* represents a theoretical and practical means through which disparate individuals come to recognize and act upon common concerns and interests, negotiate differences, and assert themselves in public arenas" (ibid). According to his definition, community members must find and *act upon* shared interests and values. His definition implies that community members must, to a certain extent, put the group's interests ahead of their own.

In political discourse "the use of the term community has remained to some extent associated with the hope and the wish of reviving once more the closer more harmonious bonds between people vaguely attributed to past ages" (Hoggett quoting Norbert Elias,

64

1974). Communities are discursively constructed as positive and membership in one

often involves a level of selflessness and sacrifice for the good of the group.

Communities provide members a sense of belonging; they are imbued with meaning and

become "a referent of [members'] identity" (Cohen 118). Community studies scholars

from Alexis de Toqueville to Robert Putnam contend that certain qualities are conducive

to community building; these include tolerance, reciprocity, and trust. Communities are

more likely to grow and thrive in a context of openness and respect, helpfulness, and a

belief in the goodness of others. "Self-interest may bring people together, but in

interaction something else emerges" ("Community").

      In his popular work on American communities and civic engagement, *Bowling*

Alone, Robert Putnam explains the notion of social capital. According to Putnam,

> Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individual, social capital refers to the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue." The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital. (19)

Putnam argues that "life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of

social capital" ("Bowling" 67). He contends that communities encourage reciprocity and

trust, "facilitate coordination and communication," provide a "cultural template for future

[successful] collaboration," and "broaden the participants' sense of self, developing the

'I' into the 'we'" ("Bowling" 67).

The gist of Putnam's book is that civic engagement and the development of social capital has been on the wane in America recently after a spike in "joining" after World War II. He provides ample evidence of decreased participation via significantly diminished membership numbers for groups from the Boy Scouts to the Junior League. He notes a decline in voter participation rates and a general disengagement amongst Americans from the political process. He argues that America has shifted from a nation that actively and earnestly built communities to one in which individuals "bowl alone." He asserts that "mass-membership organizations" have replaced "secondary associations" and argues that these organizations are insufficient for building community. As Putnam explains,

> The bond between any two members of the Sierra Club is less like the bond between any two members of a gardening club and more like the bond between any two Red Sox fans (or perhaps two devoted Honda owners): they root for the same team and they share some of the same interests, but they are unaware of each other's existence. Their ties, in short are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to one another. ("Bowling" 71)

The mass of hip-hop listeners, undoubtedly, more closely resembles this sort of mass-membership organization than it does one of Putnam's "communities."

In *Contested Communities: Experiences, Struggles, Policies*, Paul Hoggett explains that community studies emerged in the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s. In this work, community was integrally linked with place. A community was a group of people who resided together within the same geographical area, who shared a place. Understanding such local communities is important to understanding how people navigate their everyday lives.

66

In contemporary community studies, however, the notion of "community" has been detached from a sense of place. "By linking identity to imagined community, contemporary sociology has begun the process of revealing the unseen terrain of 'elective groups' and 'intentional communities' (ranging from cybercommunities to car boot enthusiasts)" (Hoggett 8). Christine Everingham also comments on the shifts in the ways in which communities are theorized, suggesting that "contemporary communities gain their solidarity … from their symbolic underpinnings" (6). She critiques Putnam's assumption that "communities held together through personal connections are more desirable, and perhaps more 'natural' or 'authentic,' than those forms of community held together through shared convictions" (6).

"Community implies both similarity and difference" ("Community"). Members of a community share a place, or an interest, or a set of beliefs and values; the thing that they share then distinguishes them from others. Everingham also points to the ways that community divides people, arguing, "Community, by definition, has a boundary that marks it off from 'other'" (6). Defining a community necessarily includes some people and excludes others. Just such a politics of exclusion is at work in hip-hop communities when listeners of some types of rap are divided from the "masses" and portrayed as the smart and morally superior community members.

According to Everingham, "communities may take shape as much through protest and conflict as through the sharing of common goals and values…. [T]ensions also create processes of identification that can build social solidarity around issues of social justice" (7). Imani Perry makes the point that hip-hop music continues to offer a community of

solidarity and resistance. "Hip hop," she writes, "nourishes by offering community membership that entails a body of cultural knowledge, yet it also nourishes by offering a counterhegemonic authority and subjectivity to the force of white supremacy in American culture" (44). Even in the early hip-hop crowds, the music and parties offered an alternative to the violence and divisions that gangs created in the neighborhoods. Many attendees and commentators marveled at the abilities of DJs such as Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa to bring people together and to mix people from crews who were normally at odds in peaceful and productive ways. These early parties caused former enemies to interact in positive ways; this allowed them to recognize their common foes: poverty, racism, corrupt police. Solidarity formed where animosity had previously been.

Communities come in a variety of types. For example, Benedict Anderson described "imagined communities," which are socially constructed by members who perceive themselves as part of that community. Anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger discuss "communities of practice" in which members share an interest or an occupation and develop a community in which they can exchange information and learn from each other. More colloquially, many people belong to "support groups" which tend to be locally-based but have been moving increasingly online. Support groups offer space for individual members to relate experiences, share concerns, experience sympathetic listening and establish social networks. Each of these types of community is present and relevant to the National Hip Hop Political Convention and to the local organizing chapters that constitute the national organization.

But does this collection of communities constitute a social movement? According to Blumer, "Social movements can be viewed as collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in a condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living" (199). Undoubtedly such conditions, values, and goals have been central to hip-hop culture since its inception. Hip-hop was born from a desire to change the community's circumstances even if only for an evening. From the start, pioneers like Bambaataa worked to bring people together and to find solutions to community problems. As Bambaataa continued to work crowds on the turntables at parties, he began to build an organization, the Zulu Nation, which exists to this day. The Zulu Nation was born out of Bambaataa's association with a gang known as the Black Spades and included members from all of the New York City's boroughs and eventually from around the world. But is the Zulu Nation a social movement?

Blumer's theory of the development of social movements is essentially a psychological one. Other theorists offer economic, organizational, or institutional explanations for why social movements develop and why they succeed or fail. Sociologist James Davies argues that people form social movements because of economic deprivation or inequality. Bob Edwards and John McCarthy point out that social movements cannot possibly form unless they have access to resources that they can press into service for the movement. Obviously money is a key resource, but resources also include people, knowledge, social networks, and a sense of moral correctness and

solidarity (Zald, Edwards and McCarthy). Edwards and McCarthy also stress the unequal

distribution of resources that persists across time. Despite efforts to redistribute

resources, they point out, "middle-class groups remain privileged in their access to many

kinds of resources, and, therefore, not surprisingly social movements that resonate with

the concerns of relatively privileged social groups predominate while the mobilizations of

the poor groups are quite rare in advanced industrial democracies" (117). This theory

suggests that, though hip-hop communities are likely to be primed for a movement due to

economic deprivation, they are unlikely to be able to assemble the various resources

necessary to launch and maintain an effective social movement.

Others argue that the most salient determining factor in the development of social

movements is the overall political context. In the political process model, "a social

movement is held to be above all else a *political* rather than a psychological

phenomenon" (McAdam 36). Some political climates will favor the development of

social movements while others will actively hinder it. According to the political process

model, "while excluded groups do possess the latent capacity to exert significant political

leverage at any time, the force of environmental constraints is usually sufficient to inhibit

mass action. But this force is not constant over time" (McAdam 39). Theorists such as

Doug McAdam examine political processes and describe ways in which political

opportunities open, giving rise to social movements. Like the resource mobilization

model, the political process model

> rests on the assumption that wealth and power are concentrated in America in the
> hands of a few groups, thus depriving most people of any real influence over the
> major decisions that affect their lives. Accordingly…social movements are

seen…as rational attempts by excluded groups to mobilize sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through noninstitutionalized means. (McAdam 36-7)

The political process model, however, maintains a Marxist optimism in the power of the masses to wrest wealth and power from the elite.

McAdam identifies three aspects of the political environment that are crucial in the generation of social movements: "the level of organization within the aggrieved population; …the collective assessment of the prospects for successful insurgency within that same population; and …the political alignment of groups within the larger political environment" (40). When participants in this research argue that the election of Barack Obama and the excitement, energy, and hope that his election generated created opportunities for hip-hop activism, they are essentially adopting a political process approach to social movements. The months leading up to Election Day saw the organization of the community around voter registration and Obama campaign efforts. Obama's win dramatically increased the community's confidence in the possibility of successfully advocating for social change, if only temporarily. Finally, the victory put Obama supporters into the "dominant" group, the party with the position of the greatest political authority. Many Black constituents had this experience with Obama on a level at which they had never had it before. Young Jeezy and Nas celebrate, rapping, "my president is Black," implying "like me." This experience has a potentially dramatic impact on the position of hip-hop community members within the overall political climate.

Both resource mobilization theory and political process theory offer feasible explanations for how hip-hop groups might organize to become social movements. Each of them also offers possible explanations for hip-hop communities' failure to do so. According to resource mobilization, hip-hop groups could lack any number of resources that are essential to an effective social movement, from money to group solidarity. From a political process perspective, hip-hop groups may not have experienced that appropriate political climate in which to coalesce into a true social movement. The political process model, however, sees social movement development and insurgency as an ongoing process. This model might also suggest that hip-hop communities are simply still in the process of forming an effective social movement.

Groups like the National Hip-Hop Political Convention work toward something like an organized social movement but face daunting challenges in bringing together individuals who vary tremendously in their values and priorities and who are largely resistant to hierarchical organization. While hip-hop culture has consistently shown the potential to develop into a social movement and to affect massive influence, it has also consistently fallen short of this promise. Ultimately, the NHHPC also fell short in this endeavor.

THE ROLE OF HIP-HOP AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Music can play a number of roles in community and movement building. As described above, it can provide an object of shared interest around which listeners can

rally and form a sense of connection to others who share their interest. It can also

function as an agitator:

> agitation operates to arouse people and so make them possible recruits for the movement. It is essentially a means of exciting people and of awakening in them new impulses and ideas which make them restless and dissatisfied. Consequently, it acts to loosen the hold on them of their previous ways of thinking and acting. For a movement to begin and gain impetus, it is necessary for people to be jarred loose from their customary ways of thinking and believing and to have aroused within them new impulses and wishes. This is what agitation seeks to do. To be successful, it must first gain the attention of people; second, it must excite them, and arouse feelings and impulses; and third, it must give some direction to these impulses and feelings through ideas, suggestions, criticisms, and promises. (Blumer 203)

The role of agitation, in the case of hip-hop music and activism, is to "intensify, release, and direct the tensions which people already h[ad]" (Blumer 204). Tricia Rose explains that the musics of oppressed people, with hip-hop as a prime example, "produce communal bases of knowledge about social conditions, communal interpretations of them and quite often serve as the cultural glue that fosters communal resistance" (*Black Noise* 99-100). Music such as Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" and NWA's "Fuck the Police" gave voice to complaints and concerns that already existed within the community and potentially excited listeners to the point of action.

In their book *Music and Social Movements*, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison argue that social movements are, in fact, as much about culture as they are about politics, noting their lasting impact on music, art, and cultural traditions. According to Eyerman and Jamison, music and social movements share a mutual influence. The cultural and political climate that gives rise to a social movement also gives rise to particular music and other media. In turn, social movements "utilize the media of artistic expression for

73

communicating with the larger society and, by so doing, often serve to (re)politicize

popular culture and entertainment" (10). As Eyerman and Jamison explain, social

movements affect cultural forms while also using these forms, and music in particular, to

disseminate the message of the movement. They argue, "music and other forms of

cultural activity contribute to the ideas that movements offer and create opposition to the

existing social and cultural order" (24).

HOW HIP-HOP MUSIC WORKS POLITICALLY

In her book *Politics and Music: Music and Political Transformation from

Beethoven to Hip-Hop*, Courtney Brown contends that music and politics are integrally

and necessarily connected. She argues that music is an especially potent venue for

political expression because of its impact on identity as well as its role as entertainment.

Music can make politics fun. Brown explains,

> If politics is the blood that feeds our societies with the energy to evolve, then
> music is an essential ingredient to political transformation. We listen to music not
> only to be entertained. We listen to music to understand ourselves both
> individually and collectively. Yet it is precisely because music is so entertaining
> that it carries such great potency as a venue for political expression. It conveys
> more than the written or spoken word. Through rhythm and tone, music becomes
> a powerful link between the emotionally rich ideas of a political thinker and the
> listeners. We are both political and musical creatures. This is, indeed, one of the
> things that makes it so fun to be human, and this is also why it is so crucial to
> understand the potential of music as a mediating factor in the political
> transformation of society. (10)

Although Brown maintains that music has this political potential across genres, many

have claimed an especially political role for hip-hop music.

74

Hip-hop music is "political" on a number of levels and one of the goals of this project is to determine an appropriate definition of "politics" and to consider the roles "politics" plays in hip-hop communities. Hip-hop texts and culture are, undoubtedly, rife with identity politics, and many of the claims that hip-hop can have a political impact are based on the concept of hip-hop as a tool for consciousness-raising. Hip-hop, especially within the music business, also involves very specific issues of political economy. Some people have become very wealthy through hip-hop music and this generation of wealth continues a long history of exploitation within the music industry. Finally, many participants within hip-hop culture advance a traditional political role for hip-hop music, advocating hip-hop's use in promoting voting and in advancing political agendas. Of course, hip-hop lyrics have addressed politics from all of these perspectives.

Michel Foucault encourages us to see power everywhere at work in the everyday. Power is not just in the government or in institutions but circulates amongst all aspects of society. He argues,

> If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (Rabinow 61).

Foucault contends that power "circulate[s] in a manner that is at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted, and 'individualized' throughout the entire social body" (ibid). I take this to mean that individuals are continually impacted and influenced by the

circulation of power. Its influence on some may be different than its influence on others but it isexerted in some way in each moment.

Defining politics is tricky and the notion is hard to pin down, but I do find some common threads in all of its uses among the participants in this research. As Foucault suggests, most fundamentally, politics has to do with power. The point of identity politics, for example, is to raise consciousness of disparities in power and to seize power for traditionally marginalized people. Within the political economy of the music industry, money is power, and how money is distributed is a reflection of who wields power. The use of hip-hop in traditional, electoral politics represents a desire to utilize the decision-making power of hip-hop communities in an official and significant capacity. Furthermore, the "idea of community is saturated with power" (Hoggett 14). All of the participants in this project who attempted to define politics also stressed the importance of people. Whether politics is the ways in which people "have their say so" or the ways in which we negotiate with each other for control, people and their interests are at the center of politics and must remain central to any discussion of the roles of politics in hip-hop culture.

Although I will go into greater detail in chapter five on the ways in which hip-hop is used in and impacts both grassroots and electoral politics, I offer these brief comments to illustrate the various political functions that hip-hop music might perform. These snapshots each contribute to an inclusive definition of politics that makes room for the various definitions offered by the participants in this project.

Hip-hop culture offers a public expression of voices that had been so marginalized that they were utterly absent from public discourse. Rose contends, "a large and significant element in rap's discursive territory is engaged in symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically, ideologically, and materially oppress African Americans. In this way, rap music is a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless" (*Black Noise* 100-101). Brown agrees. In her analysis of why White youth are attracted to hip-hop music, she describes the genre as "an invented means expressing individual, social, and political views in a manner in which the raw tenor of the associated emotions is not suppressed" (206). Hip-hop lends an emotionally charged voice to the interests of Black Americans who suffer a common oppression in the continued racism of American society. Hip-hop lyrics describe and contest racism and its effects, and offer a version of blackness that is positively defined rather than being defined as what whiteness is not.

Rose's remarks above point to the ways in which hip-hop music contributes not only to individual Black identities, but also to a sense of Black American community identity. The notion of a hip-hop community or a "hip-hop nation" draws directly from the claim that hip-hop music contributes to a sense of community identity. Cheryl Keyes describes the hip-hop nation as "a community of artists and adherents who espouse street performance aesthetics as expressed through the four elements of hip-hop" (157). Keyes quotes cultural studies critic Josh Kun who describes the hip-hop nation as "an effort by communities of Black youth to establish political, philosophical, and racial identity through an accessible framework of recognizable linguistic, historical, and cultural

77

markers" (in Keyes 160). All of these critics agree that hip-hop music, culture, and its aesthetics provide a source of Black identity that has proved especially attractive to and effective with young people.

Other critics note the ways in which hip-hop can work to bridge racial divides. Brown points out "by the mid-1980s, hip-hop had crossed racial lines entirely as it began its rapid spread into mainstream American culture" (187). Craig Watkins questions the "false premise that the [hip-hop political] movement is essentially black," arguing that this premise "disregard[s] hip hop's rich history and cultural legacy; it also limits its reach and potential impact" (150). Like Watkins, Kitwana stresses the importance of coalition building through hip-hop. Kitwana observes "for hip-hop politics to have a substantial political impact, the voting bloc should reflect the full range of American youth who identify with this youth culture." It should "include those individuals, regardless of race, age, or sex, who helped make 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* sell 800,000 copies in its first week or Kanye West's *College Dropout* sell over 400,000 units its first week or Eminem sell 1.7 million copies of the *Marshall Mathers* LP when it debuted" (*White Kids* 165-6). In each of these cases the authors stress the need for hip-hop's identity politics to include a range of racial identities. According to these critics being "hip-hop" cannot be synonymous with being Black if hip-hop is effectively going to build a social movement or political constituency.

In the introduction to *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop*, Kitwana asks, "Will this generation's music, hip-hop, be appropriated by white America just as rock and roll was, leaving its Black originators all but forgotten?" (1) Although Kitwana uses this question

as a way to illustrate the methods by which "America's outdated racial politics" obscure understanding the relationships that White kids have to hip-hop music, it also raises an issue that is at the heart of hip-hop's political economy. Hip-hop began in impoverished, marginalized, and disenfranchised communities. It is now the top-selling musical product both nationally and globally. Hip-hop moved into the mainstream and as it did it generated millions of dollars. But whose pockets were filled with these earnings and who remained, essentially a laborer?

Much has been made of the "fact," supported by Soundscan data, that the majority of hip-hop consumers are White. Deeper exploration of the racial and economic conditions within the hip-hop business suggests that, although the majority of hip-hop performers are African American and despite the prominence of Black moguls and millionaire rappers, many of the industry executives who have benefited most handsomely from hip-hop's ascension are White. Record company executives like Interscope's Jimmy Iovine are credited with recognizing hip-hop's commercial potential but also with making their fortunes on the careers of Black performers.

Concerns about cooptation and dilution of the blackness of hip-hop are often expressed through resentment toward White performers and a policing of their authenticity and credibility. Eminem, for example, despite his obvious talent and undeniable success, often faced challenges based on his whiteness that no comparable Black rapper would ever have faced. Much of the resentment expressed toward White hip-hop performers is based on the history of White appropriation of Black musical styles throughout the history of American popular music. Furthermore, race-based economic

inequality remains a basic fact of American life so that attempts on the part of White

artists to profit from a form that is coded as Black remain suspect and raise the specters

of appropriation and exploitation regardless of the performer's skills.

Within mainstream electoral politics, hip-hop still appears to have had very little

significant impact. In the past two presidential elections, however, some of hip-hop's

political influence can be seen in the form of voter registration drives and high youth and

minority voter turnouts. Additionally, many commentators credit Obama's success in part

to hip-hop's increasing White people's comfort level with African Americans as figures

with power.

Perhaps more significantly, hip-hop has spawned a wave of activism and

organizing around specific issues relevant to hip-hop identified community members. As

Kitwana explains, "Police brutality, mandatory minimum sentencing, and the death

penalty are issues that began picking up national momentum and popularity with Black

youth and galvanizing activist efforts by the end of the 1990s" (*Hip Hop Generation*

149). Hip-hop identified activism continues to flourish. Activists also continue to use hip-

hop music to reach out to young people, as well as to educate and inform listeners on

activist issues.

As I have alluded to earlier and will explore in further depth in the following

chapter, many hip-hop lyrics are overtly political and are intended to educate and inform

listeners on social and political issues. Brown refers to music with such lyrical content as

"political manifesto music." She argues that, "creators of political manifesto music use

their music to express a perspective on politics, society, or even the human condition"

(29). Furthermore, she observes that political manifesto music often intends not only to educate and inform but also to incite listeners to action. Political manifestos, she argues, "are typically intended to be catalytic documents that help to create political change by virtue of the affect they have on their readers or listeners. Thus political manifesto music may also play the activist role whereby it serves as an agent that triggers significant change in our political world" (Brown 29).

Political hip-hop lyrics can serve a variety of political functions. They offer a forum for public social critique and political discourse from the perspective of often marginalized and disenfranchised citizens. In this way, they invite the political participation of historically underrepresented groups such as Black inner city youth. Political hip-hop can lend its "coolness" to political issues and causes and make passion and participation cooler than apathy and indifference. Political lyrics can function as catalysts in this way and by promoting particular courses of action intended to lead to better social conditions.

Gans is unconvinced that the political content in media texts reaches most of its audience members. He writes, "while it is correct to argue that all culture is political, that argument is politically relevant only for people for whom politics is of major importance, for the rest of the population is not likely to care — or even notice – the political values which are implicit in their taste cultures" (108). The participants in this project, however, seemed aware of the political content in hip-hop music. Some of them are undoubtedly people for whom politics is "of major importance" but perhaps others chose hip-hop at least in part for its political discourse.

Participants' definitions of politics sometimes focused on traditional political realms such as regulations, laws, and voting. More often, however, participants emphasized the machinations of power in everyday life. They talked about the ways in which people have their "say so," the ways in which individuals were able to impact their local communities, and the identity politics that effect human interactions along race, class, and gender lines. The personal is undoubtedly political for these participants and because "politics" is a part of everyday life these hip-hop listeners *do* notice when it is a part of their music.

Each participant in this project is self-identified as a member of a hip-hop community based upon interest in the music, involvement in a hip-hop organization, or participation in the hip-hop music industry. Participants were asked explicitly to offer definitions of politics and to describe their involvement in politics. Likewise, they were also asked whether the term "hip-hop community" was meaningful to them and whether they felt a part of this community. Answers to research questions rely upon the answers that participants provided in response to these questions.

The definitions discussed in this chapter are intended to provide a framework with which to consider participants' responses. If an individual describes herself as political the various definitions of politics offered here help to categorize in which sort of "politics" she participates. Similarly, the varieties of communities and groups discussed here provide a range of ways with which to conceive of groups and to categorize the kinds of groups to which participants belong. In the final chapter I use the various theories of social movements described here to parse out the participants' responses to

questions about hip-hop's political roles and to consider the extent to which the hip-hop

political movement can be considered a "social movement."

Chapter 3: Political Lyrics and Hip-Hop's Contributions to Social Change Movements

In her book *Politics and Music: Music and Political Transformation From Beethoven to Hip-Hop*, Courtney Brown considers the various ways in which music can contribute to political movements and social change. She argues that there are "two primary approaches by which music can convey political content": the representational approach and the associational approach. "Representational political music presents a clearly defined political point of view that corresponds with the composer's intent with respect to the music" (4). Although all hip-hop music can be said to have political content, according to my definition of politics, this chapter focuses on music with explicitly political intent and I will refer to this music as "political hip-hop."

The story of the birth of hip-hop often emphasizes the economic concerns of its earliest practitioners and hip-hop histories typically cast early hip-hop as party music, the primary purpose of which was to "move the crowd." While this music might work to relieve daily stresses, address audience needs, and should be regarded as politically important, hip-hop also has a long history of artists recording songs with explicitly political intent. In this chapter, I will outline a brief history of such music, dividing it into sections: the roots of political hip-hop, old school political songs, feminist hip-hop, the rise of Black nationalism and "Afrocentrism," gangsta rap, and conscious rap. To some extent, these divisions are arbitrary and reflect industry labels. The divisions do, however, attempt to take into account the chronological development of political hip-hop as well as

broad trends that have occurred both within the mainstream music industry and within grassroots, street-level scenes. Some readers may disagree with some of my categorizations and selections as well as some of my interpretations. This attests to the richness of the political tradition within hip-hop culture and the passion that listeners bring to their relationships with the music. It is well beyond the scope of this chapter (or this project) to provide a comprehensive history of political hip-hop. Instead my goal here is to outline the contours of the history of political rap, using some of the most salient examples and necessarily excluding countless other relevant artists, to provide some context for the discussion among the research participants in the chapters that follow.

In the remainder of the chapter, I look at various ways in which political content functions in its relationship with listeners and contributes to community building. At least three themes emerge. First, many hip-hop commentators, activists, and listeners describe the very act of telling the stories and airing the concerns of the (mostly) Black underclass as political. In this sense, lyrics do not need to call for political action in order to have a political impact. Advocates often point to the ways in which political hip-hop music has raised consciousness of socio-political issues amongst listeners. Second, socially conscious lyrics can work to connect listeners with artists and each other across geographical and socio-economic distances contributing to a sense of community via shared experience. Mark Anthony Neal has pointed out the ways in which hip-hop lyrics have retrieved forgotten historical events and figures for a young generation of African Americans (*What the Music Said*). These histories often contain political aspects and provide context within which newly politicized young people can understand

contemporary struggles and movements for social justice. Finally, political hip-hop has often promoted racial pride within African American communities; this sense of pride can provide listeners with a sense of place and allows them to identify with each other as well as the music.

In the final section of this chapter, I will describe the challenges that hip-hop communities have faced and the ways in which both institutions and discourse have often worked against the formation of cohesive hip-hop communities. Some argue that political hip-hop has failed to reach a mainstream audience and therefore has had limited influence because the music has not appealed to listeners. Arguably, potent lyrics will only be received if compelling music delivers them. That is to say, listeners want to be entertained and inspired, not given lectures. Additionally, political hip-hop, especially gangsta rap, has faced challenges from law enforcement, insurance companies, and other institutions. Finally, hip-hop is discursively constructed as "divided" into "mainstream and "underground" and these divisions involve value judgments regarding both the music and its listeners. Each of these circumstances have sometimes worked against hip-hop community formation.

THE ROOTS OF POLITICAL HIP-HOP

Political hip-hop is firmly rooted within the history of African-American cultural production. As David Toop points out in *Rap Attack*, hip-hop's forbearers include Black American verbal traditions such as exchanging coded insults in "playing the dozens";

Black musical traditions, especially jazz and blues; and the cultural practices of the Black Arts Movement. A number of artists associated with the Black Arts movement could be described as predecessors to today's political hip-hop artists, especially those whose spoken word performances were recorded and set to music.

Poet Nikki Giovanni is perhaps the Black Arts Movement poet most closely associated with hip-hop. Giovanni's first record *Truth Is On Its Way* (1971) set Giovanni's poems against a background of gospel music. Although the musical accompaniment would sound out of place in contemporary hip-hop culture, Giovanni's delivery of her poetry has a distinctly hip-hop flavor, and contemporary artists such as Blackalicious have sampled her performances. Giovanni's poems are overtly political addressing such topics as the use of the word "nigger," the mistreatment and murder of African Americans within the White supremacist power structure of the United States, Black pride, and the important contributions of Black women to Black culture and to social justice struggles.

Similarly, the work of Gil Scott-Heron, writer, poet, and spoken word artist, has clearly influenced the work of many contemporary political hip-hop artists. Best known for "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," Scott-Heron consistently produced compelling and politically informed work that addressed topics including revolutionary politics, conditions in Black inner-city neighborhoods, and the impact of white racism on Black communities. Between 1970 and 1984, he released sixteen albums including his debut album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Ave* (1970)*, Pieces of a Man* (1971), and

Winter in America (1974). Scott-Heron appeared on Blackalicious's 2002 release *Blazing Arrow*.

Hip-hop aficionados often cite The Last Poets as the first real rappers. The Last Poets released their self-titled debut in 1970, which included the now classic tracks "Run, Nigger," "Niggers are Scared of Revolution," and "Wake Up, Niggers!" The Last Poets' tracks are spoken word poetry delivered by a group, sometimes "passing the mike" and sometimes with poets providing backup sound effects for other poets. The poems are rapped over syncopated percussion. Russell Potter suggests that the polyrhythmic percussion tracks, which give the recordings a distinct African flavor, may be the reason "the Poets aren't sampled as often as they might be, though artists as different as Yo Yo, A Tribe Called Quest, and Paris have looped lines from 'Run, Nigger'" (n.p.). He points out, however, that although Poets' recordings are not among the most popularly sampled recordings, The Last Poets "top many rappers' prop lists (right up there after God and Moms). Their influence is great, but it's more an influence on 'attitude' than on the music itself" (n.p.). The attitude is righteously angry and blazing with revolutionary zeal. The Poets speak directly to their Black brothers and call for pride in oneself and one's community and for change in American culture and politics. Their lyrics, their subject matter, and their attitude make them obvious predecessors to the political hip-hop artists who follow them.

HARD TIMES OLD SCHOOL

Many of the first hip-hop songs to break out from local scenes were party jams

that encouraged listeners to forget their problems, dance, and have fun. Others were

boasts in which rappers articulated the various ways in which they stood out from the

competition. As the music evolved, however, "rap began to describe and analyze the

social, economic, and political factors that led to its emergence and development: drug

addiction, police brutality, teen pregnancy, and various forms of material deprivation"

(Dyson, "The Culture" 61).

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" (1982) was the first hit

rap song to describe the social and economic conditions within poor, Black, inner-city

communities. In the opening verse of the song, rapper Melle Mel of the Furious Five

describes the environment as well as the limited choices its inhabitants face, saying:

> Broken glass everywhere
> People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
> I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise
> Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
> Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
> Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
> I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far
> 'Cause the man with the tow-truck repossessed my car

The song's famous chorus distills the anger, frustration, and hopelessness that so many

describe feeling at the time into a catchy and memorable message. Melle Mel spits:

> Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
> I'm tryin' not to lose my head
> It's like a jungle sometimes
> It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

Although Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, including Melle Mel whose voice makes "The Message" that much more powerful, had their doubts about releasing such a depressing and down-tempo track, their producers at Sugar Hill Records all but forced the group to record the song. Just as Sugar Hill's owner Sylvia Robinson had been right about rap's first big hit, "Rapper's Delight," she was right about "The Message." In July 1982, "The Message" entered the singles charts, where it peaked at number four on the R&B chart and at number sixty-two on the pop chart. When Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007, the organization had this to say about "The Message": "This slice of unvarnished social realism sold half a million copies in a month, topped numerous critics' and magazines' lists of best singles for 1982, and cemented Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's place in hip-hop's vanguard. …[I]t's the only lyric-pictorial record that could be called 'How Urban America Lived'"(Rock and Roll, par. 6). Dyson sees it as an essential step in the development of political hip-hop, arguing that the song "along with Flash's 'New York, New York,' pioneered the social awakening of rap into a form combining social protest, musical creation, and cultural expression" (Dyson, "The Culture" 62).

Another early contributor to political hip-hop was Boogie Down Productions (BDP), hailing from The Bronx and including rappers KRS-One and D Nice and deejay Scott La Rock. BDP's1987 full-length debut, *Criminal Minded*, might be considered political in that it offers vivid descriptions of the violence and poverty facing South Bronx residents at the time. When La Rock was murdered just months after the release of

the album, however, KRS-One explicitly devoted himself to the creation of socially and

politically conscious music. In the song "Stop the Violence" on BDP's second album *By*

All Means Necessary (1988), KRS-One again describes poor conditions in his and similar

neighborhoods. But in this song he also calls out the media and the United States

government for their contributions to creating and perpetuating these circumstances and

urges community members to work together to solve problems, asking hip-hop heads to

"Stop the Violence." *By All Means Necessary* is typically described as one of the first

politically conscious hip-hop albums. Anthony DeCurtis of *Rolling Stone*, impressed with

the album's sustained social commentary, wrote, "KRS delivers the word on the drug

trade, AIDS and violence – three forces that threaten to destroy minority communities"

(par. 2). KRS-One continues to be an important figure in political hip-hop.

HIP-HOP FEMINISM

Most discussions of political hip-hop exclude women altogether or include only

nominal reference to great female hip-hop politicians such as Queen Latifah.

Nonetheless, many political hip-hop crews included women. Female rapper Isis was a

prominent and often overlooked member of X-Clan's Blackwatch. Sister Souljah,

famously denounced by presidential candidate Bill Clinton during his 1992 run for the

White House, was an active member of the Zulu Nation. Each of these women addressed

political issues in their music and gave voice to much needed female perspectives on

issues ranging from drugs, to AIDS, to violence.

91

Rapper Roxanne Shante became an early champion of hip-hop feminism when she released "Roxanne's Revenge" (1984), an answer to UTFO's "Roxanne Roxanne," (1984) which accused the titular Roxanne of being a "bitch" because she refused the narrator's advances. Shante was only fourteen. Her song explains that the narrators of "Roxanne, Roxanne" have neither the money nor the skills nor the looks to attract a woman of her stature. She is not being "bitchy"; she just believes that UTFO are not being realistic about the league in which they ought to play.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s solo rappers like Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, and Monie Love came to the game spitting hip-hop feminism.[8] Latifah promoted women's rights on "Ladies First" of her debut album *All Hail the Queen* (1989). As her name implies, she also boasts of her lyrical supremacy and is generally able to back up her assertions. MC Lyte's debut album *Lyte as a Rock* (1988) featured "I Am Woman," which riffs off Helen Reddy's 1972 women's liberation anthem. Latifah and Lyte were also members of the Native Tongues collective, best known for their Afrocentricity.[9]

BLACK NATIONALISM AND AFROCENTRISM

Arguably the next step in the evolution of political hip-hop was the turn toward Black Nationalism and a focus on Afrocentricity in style and thought. Neal attributes this

---

[8] For an extended discussion of hip-hop feminism see Joan Morgan.

[9] According to Rose in *Black Noise*, both Latifah and Lyte "were uncomfortable with being labeled feminist and perceived feminism as a signifier for a movement that related specifically to white women" (176). Their work might be more precisely described as pro-Black woman, but I would argue that it *is* feminist.

shift to a change in the attitudes of young African Americans that was sparked by events

in the political arena. He writes:

> Though hip-hop represented an art form that countered mainstream sensibilities and clearly could be construed as a mode of social resistance, in and of itself, it was not invested with political dimensions, at least not any more so than African-American youth culture contained within itself. At best hip-hop represented a distinct mode of youthful expression primed to serve as a conduit for political discourse as it coincided with the sensibilities of black youth. Jesse Jackson's first presidential campaign in 1984 and the reemergence of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam represented two distinct though related phenomena that would politicize black youth and thus politicize some aspects of hip-hop music in the early to mid-1980s. ("Postindustrial Soul" 374)

Among the first groups to espouse Black Nationalist politics on hip-hop records

was Brooklyn's X-Clan. The X-Clan was a part of the Blackwatch Movement, which

founding member of X-Clan, Brother J, describes as

> a Hip-Hop generation blending with Black Nationalist movement. It was a pro Black movement.… based on killing the stereotype. When people think about Black folks in this day and age you know they start talkin' with a swaggered tongue. They start making funny gestures and stuff like that…. They stereotype Black folks… and we wanna kind of erase a [sic] ignorant stereotype and that's what the movement is for. That's what any Black Nationalist movement has been about. Stop labeling cultured people as being ignorant or animal like or just angry. Just because we say revolution doesn't me[an] [sic] we're angry. We are outraged and disappointed in a way that we can maintain discipline but we're not fools. (par. 1)

Between 1990 and 1992, the X-Clan released two records that promoted the specificity

and beauty of African American people in a spirit of Black pride. At the same time they

openly criticized White racism and its practices and expressed outrage at the status quo in

songs like "A Day of Outrage – Operation Snatchback" off 1990's *To the East,*

Blackwards.

93

Perhaps most influential of all the Afrocentric hip-hop organizations was Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation. Bambaataa founded the Zulu Nation in the late 1970s, largely as an alternative to the violent street gangs that were organizing and destroying New York neighborhoods. While Bambaataa's own music is rarely overtly political, his was a message of Black unity and afrocentricity. He promoted non-violence and positive images of blackness.

The Native Tongues collective developed within the Zulu Nation and included such socially conscious groups as De La Soul, The Jungle Brothers, and A Tribe Called Quest. None of these groups dwelled on describing the desperate conditions within impoverished communities (and many of their members were relatively privileged suburban youth). Instead, the Native Tongues drew from eclectic musical sources, especially American jazz, and focused on presenting positive and multi-faceted images of Blackness, avoiding the violence and misogyny that would come to dominate hip-hop lyrics in the gangsta rap era.

PUBLIC ENEMY

Public Enemy is perhaps the best known of all political rap groups. The group, including front man Chuck D, hype man Flavor Flav, deejay Terminator X, and the production team The Bomb Squad (Hank Shocklee, Keith Shocklee, and Eric Sadler), released their first album, *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* in 1987. Public Enemy took an explicitly political approach to all of their recordings from the lyrics to the samples to the

94

in-your-face, wall-of-sound production. Chuck D argued that hip-hop was first and foremost a tool for communication and famously proclaimed hip-hop "the Black CNN," a medium to inform and to politicize Black Americans. "Public Enemy very consciously attempted to have hip-hop serve the revolutionary vanguard, the way soul did in the 1960s" (Neal, "Postindustrial Soul" 375).

In 1988, the group released the seminal *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, which changed both the sound of and the stakes in hip-hop music. According to Alan Light, "Public Enemy was offering an extension of rap's familiar outlaw pose, but they grounded it in the realities of contemporary urban life, with a sharp eye for detail and a brilliant sonic counterpoint that raised rap to a new level of sophistication" (141). *Takes a Nation* was widely critically acclaimed, winning album of the year in the *Village Voice* Pazz and Jop Poll, the first hip-hop album to receive this honor.

On songs like "Bring the Noise" and "Prophets of Rage" front man Chuck D commands his audience to "listen for the lessons I'm saying" and explains that he is traveling "coast to coast, so you stop being like a comatose" (1988). He references Marcus Garvey and Nat Turner and contends, "they tell lies in the books that you're reading. It's knowledge of yourself that you're needing" (1988). On "Fight the Power," from *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990), not only do Public Enemy urge listeners to "Fight the power," they also explain their rhymes are "designed to fill your mind" because "what we need is awareness." Chuck D also argues that, "Elvis was a hero to most but he never meant shit to me" because he was "racist…simple and plain." This critique came at a time when the U.S. postal service had just announced plans to create an Elvis Presley

postage stamp, and D remarks, "Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps." Public

Enemy's song "By the Time I get to Arizona" from *Apocalypse 91…The Enemy Strikes*

Black (1991) similarly critiques Arizona's decision not to recognize Martin Luther King

Day, which had been declared a national holiday in 1983. Through songs and lyrics like

these Public Enemy not only offered critique of but also raised awareness around current

events that smacked of racism and "the good ol' days, same ol' ways" attitudes that kept

institutional racism operating in public policies (Public Enemy, 1991).

GANGSTA RAP

After Public Enemy, political rap seemed to lose its edge. Few artists could

compete with the explicit and militant political music of Public Enemy and listeners'

focus shifted; a new genre, emanating from the West coast, began to dominate hip-hop

music. "[T]he broadly leftist ideological approach to radical politics that was embraced

by Public Enemy eventually gave way to political music that was more clearly tied to the

social milieu and local political context of hip-hop's primary audiences" (Brown 193).

This new political music was "gangsta rap." Although gangsta rap is rarely considered a

political genre, many gangsta rap artists, in fact, picked up the torch lit by Grandmaster

Flash and the Furious Five with "The Message." Much as "The Message" described a

socio-economic circumstance, perhaps raising consciousness but offering little by way of

suggestions for solutions, the gangsta rap genre consistently offered vivid and dramatic

social critique. Critics such as Clarence Lusane point to the two sides of the gangsta rap

genre. "The macho boasting, misogyny, violent fantasies and false consciousness exist side by side with an immature, but clear, critique of authority, a loathing of the oppressive character of wage labor, a hatred of racism and an exposé of Reaganism" (357). Lusane goes on to point out the importance of voices that emanate from the inner cities.

> Dismissed by many as vulgar, profane, misogynist, racist, anti-Semitic, and juvenile – accusations that carry a great deal of validity – gangsta rap, at the same time, reflects and projects what scholar Robin D. G. Kelley calls "the lessons of lived experiences." In a sense, Cube, NWA, Too Short, the Geto Boys and others are the "organic intellectuals" of the inner-city black poor, documenting as they do their generally hidden conditions and lifestyle choices. (357)
> NWA (Niggers With Attitude) and their star rapper, Ice Cube, are amongst the

most prominent of the gangsta rap artists. With songs like "Fuck the Police" and "Dopeman," NWA brought a new level of outrage to mainstream hip-hop music. "Lacking a cohesive ideology but possessing an accessible critique of poverty, economic exploitation, and police brutality in postindustrial Los Angeles, NWA …ingratiated them to those who shared their experience and craved a funky beat" (Neal, "Postindustrial Soul" 376). NWA's 1988 album *Straight Outta Compton* enjoyed mainstream success, hitting number thirty-seven on the Billboard 200 and selling over three million copies with virtually no radio play.

Ice Cube went on to enjoy a solo career and his music remained consistently socially aware and angry. In his own music, Ice Cube refused to allow the blame for the destruction of Black communities to rest exclusively on the white supremacist power structure. "Central to Ice Cube's political agenda is a critique of the nihilism that exists throughout lower-class American society" (Boyd 335). In his music, Ice Cube

97

emphasizes "public self-criticism to force African Americans to deal with internal problems and not use racism as an answer to all questions of oppression" (Boyd 337). On songs like "Us" from *Death Certificate* (1991), Ice Cube observes,

> …400 peers
> Died last year from gang-related crimes
> That's why I got gang-related rhymes
> But when I do a show to kick some facts
> Us Blacks don't know how to act
> Sometimes I believe the hype, man
> We're messin' up ourselves and blame the white man

In this song and others, Ice Cube pushes past merely telling stories of ghetto life and urges listeners to look at the ways in which they are complicit in their own oppression.

Simply telling stories may not be enough. As Dyson explains, "While rappers like N.W.A. perform an invaluable service by rapping in poignant and realistic terms about urban underclass existence, they must be challenged to expand their moral vocabulary and be more sophisticated in their understanding that description alone is insufficient to address the crises of black urban life" ("The Culture" 65). Gangsta rap offered social critique but often glorified attitudes and behaviors that perpetuated problems rather than working to reverse them.

For the interviewees in this project, one rapper, Tupac Shakur, was consistently invoked as *the* artist who best represented gangsta rap's potential to give voice, to raise consciousness, and to suggest solutions. Shakur was born into Black revolutionary politics. His mother was a Black Panther, his step aunt Assata Shakur remains a political fugitive to this day, and many of his family members were jailed for their participation in the Black Power movement.

98

Shakur is probably best known for his violent and unsolved murder at the hands of a drive-by shooter in Las Vegas in 1996. Many Shakur fans see him as a martyr whose death represents precisely how dangerous his lyrics were to the White power structure. In songs such as a "Violent" (1991) and "Words of Wisdom" (1991), Shakur not only describes the conditions in Black inner-city communities but also urges community members to unite in black solidarity and to respect themselves enough to avoid the tragic pitfalls associated with "thug life."

"Violent" from Shakur's debut album *2pacalypse Now* (1991) begins with the declaration, "They claim that I'm violent, just because I refuse to be silent." He goes on to claim that he "will rebel against any oppressor." Shakur also explains that he is not simply urging violence out of anger or boredom. The violence he recommends is "self defense." He tells listeners:

> …fight back, attack on society
> If this is violence, then violent's what I gotta be
> If you investigate you'll find out where it's coming from
> Look through our history; America's the violent one

The rest of the verses go on to tell a story about two young men who are harassed and threatened by police. They proceed to beat, shoot, and kill two police officers over the course of the song. In the final verse, Shakur describes the scenario as "a lesson to the rednecks and the crooked cops." With lyrics like these, Shakur earns his reputation as a politically complicated and controversial lyricist.

On the track that follows, "Words of Wisdom," Shakur continues his critique of American racial politics and policies as well as his claims that he and Black communities

must rise up and work for change even if that struggle requires violence and bloodshed.

The song opens with the lyrics:

> Killing us one by one
> In one way or another
> America will find a way to eliminate the problem
> One by one
> The problem is the troubles in the black youth of the ghettos
> And one by one we are being wiped off the face of this earth
> At an extremely alarming rate
> And even more alarming is the fact that we are not fighting back

Shakur goes on to dedicate the song to "the masses, the lower classes, the ones you left out" and then urges listeners to "get up" because "it's time to start nation building." After referring to the United States as "Amerikkka," Shakur charges the country

> …with the crime of rape, murder, and assault
> For suppressing and punishing my people
> I charge you with robbery
> For robbing me of my history
> I charge you with false imprisonment
> For keeping me trapped in the projects

Finally, Shakur claims that he is "America's nightmare" but only because he is

> What you made me
> The hate and the evil that you gave me
> I shine as a reminder of what you have done to my people
> For four hundred plus years

Shakur agrees that authorities and the power structure

> should be scared
> You should be running
> You should be trying to silence me

Although Shakur does not shy away from violence and willingly discusses the drug trade and Black-on-Black violence in many of his lyrics, he also consistently promotes a Black

nationalist-inspired politics that not only critiques and expresses outrage but also suggests solutions and urges action.

Unlike most other gangsta rappers, Shakur also spoke out against misogyny and promoted awareness of and respect for the challenges faced by women in songs like "Brenda's Got a Baby" (1991) and "Keep Ya Head Up" (1993). "Brenda's Got A Baby" tells the story of a twelve-year-old girl who "really never knew her moms and her dad was a junky" and who becomes pregnant as a result of being molested by her cousin. Her family is unconcerned with her pregnancy "as long as when the check came they got first dibs." She has the baby alone in a bathroom and tries to throw it away but retrieves it when she hears it crying. In the final verse, Shakur raps:

> Now Brenda's gotta make her own way
> Can't go to her family, they won't let her stay
> No money, no babysitter, she couldn't keep a job
> She tried to sell crack but ended up getting robbed
> So now what's next? There ain't nothing left to sell
> So she sees sex as a way of leaving hell
> It's paying the rent, so she really can't complain
> Prostitute found slain and Brenda was her name

In this song, Shakur illustrates how women's issues "affect the whole community" (Shakur).

"Keep Ya Head Up" from Shakur's 1993 release *N.I.G.G.A.Z. 4 Life* is only slightly less depressing and highlights his understanding and sympathy for everyday women. Here Shakur addresses his "sisters on welfare" and raps that he "cares, even if nobody else cares." He urges women who are with men who do not love or respect them

to leave them because "you don't need him." Again, Shakur expresses his concern for his community, which is so comfortable with misogyny, rapping:

> And since we all came from a woman
> Got our name from a woman and our game from a woman
> I wonder why we take from our women
> Why we rape our women
> Do we hate our women?
> I think it's time to kill for our women
> Time to heal our women
> Be real to our women
> And if we don't we'll have a race of babies
> That will hate the ladies that make the babies

In a chorus sampled from the Five Stairsteps' "O-h-h Child" (1970), Shakur urges women "you got to keep ya head up." While Shakur's politics are far from simple and his rhymes are often conflicting and contradictory, his lyrics represent the ways in which gangsta rap can go beyond mere description and work to suggest individual reflection, solutions, actions, and positive social change.

CONSCIOUS RAP

Contemporary political rappers are more frequently referred to as "conscious" rappers. Typically, conscious rappers avoid the stereotypical topics that dominate mainstream music such as materialism, gratuitous sex, and boasts about one's violent, macho toughness. Similarly to the groups involved in the Native Tongues collective, contemporary conscious rappers may not perform explicitly political music or write protest songs. Instead, they present diverse and generally positive images of blackness while promoting healthy relationships and lifestyles.

Rappers Mos Def and Talib Kweli are amongst the most successful and well-known of contemporary conscious rappers. The two recorded together as Black Star and have recorded separately as well. Black Star's self-titled debut (1998) features tracks such as "Definition" in which they lament the deaths of Shakur and Biggie Smalls and declare, "There's too much violence in hip-hop." "Thieves in the Night" is based on a passage from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. On this track, Def and Kweli critique hip-hop culture's focus on money, materialism, and violence. In the chorus where they paraphrase Morrison they rap:

>Not strong, only aggressive
>Not free, we only licensed
>Not compassionate, only polite
>Now who the nicest?
>Not good but well-behaved
>Chasing after death
>So we can call ourselves brave?
>Still living like mental slaves
>Hiding like thieves in the night from life

Finally, on "Brown Skin Lady" Def and Kweli sing the praises of Black women's beauty and express their understanding of the challenges to this belief that Black women face, declaring,

>Without makeup you're beautiful
>Whatcha need to paint the next face for
>We're not dealing with the European standard of beauty tonight
>Turn off TV and put the magazine away
>In the mirror tell me what you see
>I see evidence of divine presence

Although Black Star's lyrics lack the angry revolutionary zeal of Shakur or the narrative impact of NWA, they challenge the codes of mainstream hip-hop by avoiding clichés,

expanding appropriate topics for discussion, including literary references, and asking listeners to reflect upon their contributions to their communities. In these ways their work exemplifies the genre.

Rapper and activist Boots Riley and his group The Coup create more explicitly political music as the group's name suggests. The Coup's songs such as "Five Million Ways to Kill a CEO" (2001) pose direct challenges to the capitalist exploitation. Riley has worked as an activist and community organizer for years and uses hip-hop music as a forum for delivery of his political message.

Contemporary rappers Mystic and Jean Grae also record socially conscious and politically charged music. Mystic released her sole album, *Cuts for Luck and Scars for Freedom,* in 2001. On it, she sings and raps about the economic and social problems facing the poor in America's ghettos with beauty and eloquence. For example, she dedicates the song "The Life" to:

> soldiers who bust they guns
> In the name of freedom not the game of funds
> True queens who raise they kids
> Implement the knowledge, show 'em how to live
> This is for those who stand in line to feed their babies
> While we're running out of time
> This is for the injustice, behind bars
> Our lovers, our leaders, our people

In the song "Ghetto Birds," Mystic critiques the nihilism, materialism, violence, and misogyny that she argues run rampant in hip-hop communities. Furthermore, she indicts law enforcement and government policy for perpetuating the situation. As Mystic describes it,

they got us killing ourselves numbing our brains
they bugging our phones and fanning the flames
we damn near got our hands out begging for more
forget creeping through the window
they're walking through the front door
the mystery ain't no mystery at all
think you doing big things (love) they let you ball
like they let our babies die and lock us in cells
like our youth ain't got no options it ain't hard to tell
it's a war going on that you're thinking that you safe from
but you're like me in the scope of their gun
…
our minds have been blinded by a twisted system
they got us thinking if we're paid then we're different
we're educated to destroy ourselves
to piece by piece dismantle true self
it's nowhere to run nowhere to hide
even when we asking questions they only telling lies
my sore eyes weep like the Shenandoah flows
lord knows peace of mind is hard to hold
when our people seem resigned to destroying our divine
our warriors and soldiers can't make a front line

On this track, Mystic raises many of the very same issues that Public Enemy or Shakur does, and she elucidates these circumstances with passion and poetic aplomb. Unfortunately her name is rarely mentioned in discussions of contemporary conscious rap.

Grae regularly raps about social issues of particular concern to women as well as the effects of poverty and police brutality. She records on Kweli's Blacksmith Records and has worked with Kweli, Def, Dead Prez, and the Roots. Her association with many of the best known and most successful male rappers of the conscious genre very likely contributes to her inclusion in discussion about conscious rap. She is one female rapper who is regularly included on lists such as UGO.com's "Top 11 Conscious Rappers List."

105

This list acknowledges that Grae is the only woman included and explains, "The dearth of female rappers on this list doesn't mean that lady MCs have less to say than their male counterparts. In fact, on the whole, I'd say more women have had more to say in their rhymes, percentage-wise, than the men. It's just that the overall ratio of men to women in hip-hop is so skewed" (Swiderski).

Women's contributions to political hip-hop and hip-hop in general tend to be diminished or erased within popular and critical writing. The examples here illustrate that women are absolutely participating in hip-hop's political arena and their contributions deserve recognition.

POLITICAL LYRICS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

While the negative influence of the materialistic, narcissistic, violent, and misogynist lyrics and images in hip-hop has been widely studied and discussed, relatively little has been made of the potentially positive impact of the sorts of images and messages contained in the work described above.[10] If we truly believe that hip-hop and other music can have negative effects on listeners, then it is only fair that we also consider the potential positive influence that music might have as well. As Dyson points out, rap "expresses the desire of young black people to reclaim their history, reactivate forms of black radicalism, and contest the powers of despair and economic depression that presently besiege the black community" ("The Culture" 67). Political hip-hop can

106

provide a means of expression, connection, identification, and inspiration. Critics may argue that political hip-hop has failed to spark a viable hip-hop political movement but that does not mean that it has failed to function as a positive force in the lives of listeners.

One of the most commonly cited positive impacts of hip-hop is its value as an expressive form that sprang from traditionally underrepresented, misrepresented, and frequently invisible communities. As music journalist Alan Light explains: Hip-hop music "by definition has a political content; even when not explicitly issue-oriented, rap is about giving voice to a black community otherwise underrepresented, if not silent, in the mass media" (144). Light goes on to point out that this "grassroots," bottom-up expressive approach allows the music to speak to audiences in ways that other musical forms are less likely to achieve. Hip-hop music "has always been and remains (despite the curse of pop potential) directly connected to the streets from which it came. It is still a basic assumption among the hip-hop community that rap speaks to real people in a real language about real things" (ibid).

Hip-hop's connection to the "streets," to real people in real communities is, indeed, consistently regarded as one of its greatest strengths. Hip-hop music, it is argued, "gives voice" to previously unheard players in the American socio-political system. According to journalist and English professor Angela Ards, "For many activists, the creation of hip-hop amid social devastation is in itself a political act." She quotes activist Jakada Imani who explains "'To – in front of the world – get up on a turntable, a

---

[10] See, for example, Terri M. Adams & Douglas B. Fuller, Imani Dawson, Rana Emerson, Joan Morgan, Brent Staples, S. Craig Watkins, and Stephen Wester, et al.

microphone, a wall, out on a dance floor, to proclaim your self-worth when the world says you are nobody, that's a huge, courageous, powerful, exhilarating step'" (314). While such steps may seem insignificant, they are key moments in the process of building a political movement. As Ards astutely observes, "Concerted political action will not necessarily follow from such a restoration of confidence and self-expression, but it is impossible without it" (ibid). NHHPC list member I Medina Peaceful Earth recognizes the limits of hip-hop's political potential, but also argues that positive hip-hop music "provides powerful inspiration for folks to continue to work for change and may provide a certain level of public affirmation for those who think similarly, and may assist some people in changing their minds and their reality" (Earth, 12 September 2006).

Hip-hop's rise from local, underground musical scenes to a global multi-million dollar, multi-media phenomenon may have contributed to the degradation and dilution of its political potential, but it also allowed hip-hop communities actively to counter assumptions, stereotypes, and images widely circulated *about* them with messages and images circulated *by* them. "For African-American youth, hip-hop music allowed them to counter the iconography of fear, menace, and spectacle that dominated mass-mediated perceptions of contemporary black life by giving voice to the everyday human realities of black life in ways that could not be easily reduced to commodifiable stereotypes" (Neal, "Postindustrial Soul" 372). Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five did this with "The Message" when they described the abject conditions in their neighborhoods and the ways in which children learn to navigate them. Shakur employed this technique in "Brenda's

Got a Baby" as he humanized and created sympathy for the much-maligned teen "welfare queen."

Not only has hip-hop worked to complicate and humanize stereotypes of the people who populate America's inner cities, but it has also made public the philosophies and ideologies espoused by many of the young people living within these communities. Hip-hop music "articulated publicly and on a mass scale many of this generation's beliefs, relatively unfiltered by the corporate structures that carried it. Even when censored with bleeps or radio-friendly 'clean' versions, the messages were consistent with the new Black youth culture and more often than not struck a chord with young Blacks" (Kitwana, "Challenge" 344). In doing so hip-hop has served as a site of identification for a generation (or two) of urban youth of color. This sort of identification allows listeners to feel connected to artists and to each other and to feel a part of a community.

Communities form around what activists refer to as "consciousness raising." Consciousness raising occurs when individuals become more aware of their particular needs and goals as individuals or as a group, when they become aware of their circumstances and begin to consider the systemic causes of those circumstances. When individuals begin to understand that their poverty is not the result of some failure of their own but is instead a key aspect to the survival of the socio-political system within which they live, their consciousnesses have been raised.

Study participants described the ways in which hip-hop caused them to think differently about the world in which they lived. Gator, for example, explains that hip-hop

really should be for the youth and that artists need to be responsible and work to raise youth consciousness. He describes how Shakur talked about the drug trade in Shakur's neighborhood but points out that Shakur also talked about the "outcomes" and the "consequences" of participating in it. Gator goes on to say, "I think we have to do that, especially with the youth because that's really who it all is for and if we can't guide them in a direction to where they're conscious about what they're doing then they're going to do it unknowingly" (17 July 2007). Gator perceives hip-hop as a tool that can help listeners understand the ways in which they are connected to others in their communities both physical and imagined.

Participants also commented on hip-hop's educational role as well. Kenavon Carter, for example, describes the importance of the music in his knowledge of African American history. He explains that he is involved with hip-hop activism and organizing partly because hip-hop music was the site of his first exposure to African American history beyond Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X. It is where he first heard of Huey Newton, Stokely Carmichael, and Angela Davis (12 March 2008). Ards notes the connection between the consciousness-raising effect and the education effect of political hip-hop music. "From PE [Public Enemy] and others like KRS-ONE, X-Clan and the Poor Righteous Teachers, urban youth were introduced to sixties' figures like Assata Shakur and the Black Panther Party, then began to contemplate issues like the death penalty, police brutality, nationalism, and the meaning of American citizenship" (Ards 313). Carter and Ards argue that exposure to African American history and to the history of struggle against racist and classist oppression provide listeners with a sense of

110

purpose and belonging that potentially connects them with other listeners and sets the stage for community building.

Dyson is quick to point out the value of hip-hop's function as a teacher of history. He writes,

> Rap has…retrieved historic black ideas, movements, and figures in combating the racial amnesia that threatens to relegate the achievements of the black past to the ash heap of dismemory. Such actions have brought a renewed sense of historical pride to young black minds that provides a solid base for racial self-esteem. Rap music has also focused renewed attention on black nationalist and black radical thought. (Dyson, "Challenge" 66)

While the value of Black Nationalism to the contemporary political scene may be debatable, exposure to political philosophy, strategies, and concepts seems to me an indisputably valuable experience. As the examples in the previous sections illustrate, hip-hop lyrics often politicize the everyday contexts in which listeners live. Shakur and NWA, for example, cast police brutality as a political issue and a community concern. Riley critiques capitalism as oppressive and promotes "boosters" who steal from retail outlets and sell to the public, as a positive alternative. References to Black political leaders like Nat Turner, Malcolm X, and Assata Shakur provide a historical context for contemporary civil unrest.

A number of scholars of African American culture point to the erosion of the Black Public Sphere or Black community institutions as a factor in the problems facing African Americans today (see Gilroy; Neal, "Postindustrial Soul"; Boyd). This is in some ways a Black Nationalist argument that points out the ways in which integration and a push toward assimilation have limited and depleted the resources that stayed within

111

communities that were effectively shut out of mainstream public life. Black institutions like churches, schools, and entertainment circuits once provided spaces in which African Americans could meet, exchange ideas, share resources, and develop strategies relatively outside the earshot and ever-watchful eye of the white power structure. Critics point out that these spaces have become fewer and less influential and argue that this hurts Black communities. According to Neal,

> The erosion of the Black Public Sphere provided the chasm in which the hip-hop generation was denied access to the bevy of communally derived social, aesthetic, cultural, and political sensibilities that undergirded much of black communal struggle throughout the twentieth century, fracturing the hip-hop generation and the generations that will follow from the real communal history of the African-American diaspora. ("Postindustrial Soul" 383)

Neal's "Black Public Sphere" may be a part of a nostalgic discourse that laments the loss of a cohesive community that never truly existed. Nevertheless, the notion of such a loss is a powerful discursive influence within hip-hop scholarship.

Defenders of hip-hop argue that it has contributed in valuable ways to the mending and rebuilding of these communities. Neal, for example, argues that hip-hop has been, in some ways, a response to the erosion of community institutions. He explains, "Like bebop before it, hip-hop's politics was initially a politics of style that created an aural and stylistic community in response to the erosion of community with the postindustrial city" ("Postindustrial Soul" 371). Tricia Rose also points to the ways in which hip-hop has helped to revive African American pride in local communities and to bring communities together. "Rappers' emphasis on posses and neighborhoods has brought the ghetto back into public consciousness. It satisfies poor youth black people's

profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized and celebrated" (Rose

Black Noise, 11).

The knowledge of shared experience, the raised consciousness with regard to systemic oppression and class struggle, and the gained understanding of African American political and social history all contribute to hip-hop's community-building potential. In these ways hip-hop music might contribute to a sense that the listener is neither alone, nor crazy, nor solely responsible for her misfortune. Hip-hop communities serve as support groups, as communities of practice in which promoters of social change learn and develop and as imagined communities within which members experience a sense of belonging. These communities may not assuage those commentators who mourn the loss of cohesive community, but that unified community was likely imagined as well.

CHALLENGES TO MAKING POLITICAL MUSIC EFFECTIVE

Nearly from its inception political hip-hop faced challenges from the official power structure that hindered community building and political effects. As Neal explains, "[P]olitical hip-hop was also challenged by efforts of segments of mainstream culture to control or 'police' hip-hop, efforts that would ultimately transfer control of the genre away from its organic purveyors and limit access to the form in communal settings where alternative interpretations could be derived which countered mass-mediated presentations of the genre" ("Postindustrial Soul" 377). As many gangsta rappers argued in their

rhymes, the White power structure was frightened by what they had to say and determined to shut them down.

Challenges to the dissemination of political hip-hop came from a variety of institutions. In 1994, at the urging of C. Delores Tucker of the National Political Congress of Black Women and the Black Congressional Caucus, Congress held hearings to investigate rap lyrics. George Lipsitz describes the situation as a "moral panic" and notes the "long and dishonorable history" of moral panics about popular music in the United States. According to Lipsitz, each of these panics

> served as occasions where antiyouth and anti-Black discourses have blended together. It should not have been surprising, then, that hip hop would face the same fate. The moral panic over hip hop in the early 1990s took a novel turn, however, when … African American elected officials decided to take leading roles in attributing youth crime, drug use, and social disintegration in their communities to the popularity of "gangsta rap" music. (156)

Lipsitz suggests that the congressional hearings represented an attempt "to obscure the social causes and consequences of disturbing social changes" and to place blame for the conditions in the country's inner cities squarely upon the shoulders of these communities' residents rather than to accept government and social responsibility (157). Challenges to political hip-hop also came from law enforcement and from insurance companies. Additionally, hip-hop's engagement with the mainstream recording industry and its development into a popular culture giant has contributed significantly to a perceived decline in its political potency.

Claims that law enforcement agencies felt gangsta rap posed a threat to them were by no means unfounded. In 1989, the FBI sent a letter to NWA's label, Priority Records,

complaining that the group's song "Fuck the Police" "encouraged violence and disrespect for the law enforcement officer" (Lipsitz 164). In response to the FBI's letter, police officers around the country coordinated efforts to prevent NWA from performing publicly. Officers refused to serve as security at NWA concerts, making it impossible for concert organizers to acquire insurance coverage for shows and thereby decreasing NWA's ability to tour and to perform. According to Neal,

> The policing of NWA reflected an increasingly common trend to criminalize hip-hop artists, their audiences, and the music itself. Thus seemingly random, incidental acts of violence and criminal activity occurring at hip-hop concerts were characterized as social[ly] [sic] intolerable communal acts capable of destroying the civility of mainstream society. ("Postindustrial Soul" 378)

Hip-hop became the new heavy metal amongst pundits who preferred to hang the blame for society's ills on artists and their work rather than to consider real strategies for improving the lives of the nation's citizens. Ignoring the other social critiques and political messages embedded within the genre, critics vilified the music and attempted to diminish its cultural reach.

Throughout the 1990s, putting on hip-hop concerts became increasingly difficult as venues would not book them out of fear of violence and property damage and due to outrageous insurance rates. The mainstream media fueled the fear and stereotypes by overexposing incidents of violence occurring at hip-hop shows and ignoring the majority of hip-hop events which went off without a hitch. Excessive security measures that many audience members found offensive and degrading limited listeners' access to shows and clubs. These and similar official approaches to hip-hop made it increasingly difficult for

115

hip-hop artists and their allies to continue to pose challenges to the institutions and ideologies of the status quo.

In many ways, these official attempts to censor, regulate, and silence hip-hop were so successful that few young people today even recall a time when hip-hop seemed to pose a real threat to authority. Contemporary mainstream hip-hop rarely raises the sorts of issues that rappers were raising in the early nineties and, although some activist groups continue to express concern about the content of hip-hop lyrics, official public agencies seem relatively unconcerned about the goings on in hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop audiences have grown accustomed to heightened security measures and excessive police presence at hip-hop events. Gate security at concerts typically includes pocket checks, pat downs, and metal detectors. During the National Hip-Hop Political Convention in Las Vegas in the summer of 2008, for example, the Las Vegas Police Department mandated that the host hotel require each conference registrant to sign a "No Parties" agreement upon check-in. The agreement forbade guests to have more than four people in their room at any given time. This was the first time the hotel had ever required this agreement for any convention. Most participants were aware of stereotypes of hip-hop enthusiasts as criminals and "thugs," but most experienced these stereotypes as effects of age, race, and gender. Police remain hostile toward young, Black men, but amongst the participants in this research there seemed to be little sense that hip-hop was responsible for creating or perpetuating this hostility.

Although political hip-hop has a history and evidently has enough power to threaten, political hip-hop has its own problems as a subgenre. Audiences do not,

generally, listen to music mostly to be informed or to become politically activated. As Todd Boyd puts it: "Progressive politics minus the ability to flow lyrically and pump out phat beats has no place in rap culture" (328). Listeners are less likely to be attracted to music with a strong political component but inadequate musical chops. They are also more likely to attend to the political messages embedded within music that also moves them on an emotional and aesthetic level. As Brown explains, "it is precisely because music is so entertaining that it carries such great potency as a venue for political expression. It conveys more than the written or spoken word. Through rhythm and tone, music becomes a powerful link between the emotionally rich ideas of a political thinker and the listeners" (10). Chris Harris agrees with this assessment arguing, "It's the sound…that's why people listen to music…it's the sound definitely that draws people there" (20 February 2008). Gator also points out that it is precisely the combination of fresh and innovative sound and potent lyrics that make Tupac Shakur the hip-hop artist for whom he has the greatest admiration (17 July 2007).

Because hip-hop began as a music that was intended to keep a party going, it has been described as, essentially, a dance genre. Its status as a music of the community has also impacted its role as dance music. During the first decade of hip-hop's history the mainstream music industry did not embrace hip-hop music. Even Black radio stations were reluctant to play it since its aesthetics usually differed significantly from the R&B and Quiet Storm formats such stations typically embraced. This worked to keep hip-hop within communities; it was played at parties in parks and recreation centers and in clubs and sold out of trunks on the streets in neighborhoods. In order to reach their intended

117

audiences, artists had to ensure that their work would be appropriate in these settings.

According to Neal, "it was imperative for its survival that hip-hop be conducive to the

types of public spaces where black youth were most likely to convene. Dance halls or

clubs continued to be the most accessible spaces for black youth to congregate, so the

challenge for those interested in presenting hip-hop as political discourse was to make

sure the music was danceable" ("Postindustrial Soul" 374). Before hip-hop music

became a mainstream success, disseminating the music required a literal connection to

hip-hop communities.

Inattention to this scenario on the part of political artists has often been described

as one of the reasons that political hip-hop has failed to reach mass audiences on a regular

basis. For example, Neal claims,

> The failure of explicit political discourse to remain an integral part of hip-hop was
> influenced by various dynamics. Placing a premium on lyrical content, artists like
> Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions featuring KRS-One, Paris, X-Clan,
> …and the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy all failed to grasp the significance of
> producing music that would be considered danceable by the black masses they
> aimed to attract. ("Culture" 376)

At a panel discussion on hip-hop and politics at the 2008 South By Southwest music

festival in Austin, Texas, numerous panelists and audiences members argued that artists

are hard-pressed to maintain a political posture in their work because "the people aren't

trying to hear that." The common perception amongst many artists and audience

members is that political hip-hop does not have the "phat beats," the boom, the sonic

power, and the funky soul that make hip-hop fun. Furthermore, the argument goes,

people listen to music to escape their problems not to be reminded of them.

118

As hip-hop's popularity has expanded so too has the community of individuals who listen to the genre. Hip-hop's mainstream success, as with *any* popular media in the United States, has depended on its appeal to White listeners. This "mass" audience, all of whom may experience a sense of belonging to a hip-hop community, also poses problems for artists who want to speak to and for "their people." "Rap forfeited whatever claim it may have had to particularity by acquiring a mainstream white audience whose tastes increasingly determined the nature of the form" (Samuels 153). Discursive debates regarding the relative value of "mainstream" hip-hop versus "underground" hip-hop speak to the influence of a mass audience. Community members who are invested in the community's exclusivity are perturbed when artists seem to want to appeal to what they critique as the community's lowest common denominator (LCD).

Additionally, critics argue that white audiences remain invested in stereotypical images of blackness: the thug, the pimp, and the hypersexual female. Accordingly, White hip-hop listeners engage in a sort of "slumming" and rebellion, consuming Blackness and images of Black resistance to mainstream norms of civility as a reaction to their parent cultures. In *The Hip Hop Wars*, Tricia Rose argues that contemporary commercial hip-hop "represents a new fascination with old and firmly rooted racial fantasies about sexual deviance (pimps and hoes) and crime and violence (gangstas, thugs and hustlers). These images drive the racial subtext of white consumption of commercial hip-hop" (229). Additionally, she argues, White fans tend to lack both context for understanding hip-hop's caricatures as stereotypical and connections with black communities that could challenge these stereotypes. White consumption of mainstream hip-hop music, Rose

contends, "is compounded by a general lack of knowledge of the history of black culture or racial oppression, the workings of white privilege and power, and few lived experiences with black people" (228). David Samuels agrees, explaining in his essay "The Rap on Rap: The 'Black Music' that Isn't Either," "Rap's appeal to whites rested in its evocation of an age-old image of blackness: a foreign, sexually charged, and criminal underworld against which the norms of white society are defined, and, by extension through which they may be defied" (147). White hip-hop listeners are, essentially, "eating the Other," without ever having any real contact or interaction with the Other's culture (hooks). Although this dynamic is, in itself, problematic, the real problem for hip-hop music arises when artists direct their work specifically toward this white audience, selling the myths and stereotypes of Blackness rather than challenging and debunking them.

While I agree that it is wise for community members to assess their social position *vis-à-vis* stereotypes of blackness, I would argue that these critics display a significant investment in the discursive construction of hip-hop as "a black thing." This critique also places "blame" on listeners rather than on producers for hip-hop content that critics perceive as negative. My observations suggest that Black listeners are just as likely to enjoy music that employs stereotypes as white listeners are. A mass audience tends to pose such problems, especially in comparison to a nostalgically imagined 'old school' hip-hop community.

As hip-hop music became a massive mainstream success, embraced by the major media conglomerates, developed into a radio format in itself, exploited in advertising,

film, and other media, the rules of the game shifted. Hip-hop is often discursively constructed along two poles with mainstream hip-hop on one side and underground hip-hop on the other side. Within this discursive terrain, each of these poles is heavily value-laden as well; mainstream hip-hop represents the LCD whereas the underground represents authenticity. Clarence Lusane describes the two co-existing faces of hip-hop, writing, "On the one hand, rap is the voice of alienated, frustrated and rebellious black youth who recognize their vulnerability and marginality in post-industrial America. On the other hand, rap is the packaging and marketing of social discontent by some of the most skilled ad agencies and largest record companies in the world" (351). This discursive construction ignores the possibility that "alienated, frustrated" youth might genuinely construct fantasies of wealth, power, and pleasure instead of dwelling on social ills. Furthermore, it imposes a politics of exclusion on the hip-hop community, insisting that "real" hip-hop music excludes frivolity and fun in favor of more "serious" matters.

Jeff Chang points out that the distinctions between underground/political rap and mainstream rap are artificial and created by the market as a means to simplify distribution and promotion strategies. Chang asks, "What materially separated Jay-Z from a rapper like Talib Kweli? The answer," he responds,

> was marketing. Media monopolies saw Jay-Z as an artist with universal appeal, Kweli as a 'conscious rapper.' A matter of taste perhaps, except that the niche of "conscious rap" might be industry shorthand for reaching a certain kind of market – say, college-educated, iPod-rocking, Northface backpacking, vegan, hip-hop fans. In this late-capitalist logic, it was not the rappers' message that brought the audience together, it was the things the audience bought that brought the rappers together. (*Can't Stop* 448)

As Pierre Bourdieu points out, however, individuals create such distinctions themselves, and communities use such distinctions to define the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Still, these distinctions are not nearly as dichotomous as the discourse of "mainstream" versus "underground" suggests. Most listeners, though they express preferences, are familiar with and listen to "mainstream" and "underground" and "conscious" hip-hop as well as music from a wide range of other genres. Hip-hop community members engage in conversations that employ the discursive dichotomy, but community development depends on many additional factors beyond listening to a specific set of lyrics.

Hip-hop music has a long tradition of social awareness and political involvement. From its earliest roots in Black spoken word performance traditions to descriptive tracks like "The Message" to the socially conscious work of rappers like Boots Riley and Mystic, hip-hop has consistently included a politically committed vein. Such music has the potential to contribute to social change music by inspiring and educating listeners and helping to connect listeners into communities. Such music has also consistently faced challenges including congressional hearings, vilification in the mainstream press, and excessive policing at hip-hop centered events. Hip-hop music with explicitly political intent is often discursively constructed as diametrically opposed to mainstream hip-hop. This discourse serves to promote an exclusionary politics within hip-hop communities whereby "real" hip-hop and "real" community members eschew "mainstream hip-hop in favor of the more authentic "underground" music. This discursive construction is not, however, consistent with the actual practices of hip-hop audiences nor with the ways in

122

which hip-hop communities are constituted. The following chapters consider some of the

other factors beyond the lyrics and the music that contribute to hip-hop community

building.

Chapter 4: Hip-Hop's Political Concerns

Many pundits, both those who are skeptical of hip-hop's political potential and those who believe in its power to contribute to social change, compare hip-hop culture to the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century, arguing that the earlier movement had the advantage of clear, shared issues and goals. In his book *Hip Hop Matters*, S. Craig Watkins points out that this generation of activists faces a different situation than the one in which the Civil Rights Movement occurred, explaining that current hip-hop political movement occurs in a climate in which "there is no single great issue around which the hip-hop movement can rally" (151). Watkins also points out the degree to which the hip-hop political community has worked to distance itself from the civil rights movement.

Although she recognizes the importance of separating hip-hop politics from the Civil Rights Movement, hip-hop journalist Angela Ards argues that hip-hop political programs and politics must expand upon the work of preceding political movements. She agrees with Watkins that "a mature hip-hop political movement will have more than a race-based political analysis of the issues affecting urban youth," pointing out that "the face of injustice is the color of the rainbow, so a black-white racial analysis that pins blame on some lily-white power structure is outdated" (320). Likewise, hip-hop activists, according to Ards, are "beginning to shift focus from civil rights to human rights" (321).

Watkins considers hip-hop's political potential and the challenges the hip-hop community faces in its efforts to establish itself as an effective political force. Watkins points out that in order to constitute a movement, hip-hop "will have to define and identify its constituency – who it proposes to speak for. Doing so leads to the second and equally important challenge, defining its mission and vision" (253). Commentator Charles Jones agrees and describes the difficulty of the situation more bluntly, writing,

> Hip-hop is a culture; it's not an ethnicity, an ideology, or anything else that would constitute it as a political 'identity.' So the recent organizing around creating a hip-hop political agenda may be all for nothing, especially if organizers don't stop making some overly idealistic, and drastically wrong assumptions about who the hip hop generation actually is and who if anyone, identifies 'as hip-hop.' (par 1)

Watkins agrees that hip-hop culture is not synonymous with black youth culture, explaining that hip-hop is "made up of several factions," separated by age, region, race, and ethnicity (149). He points out that the "clash between those who see hip hop as a source of profit versus those who view it as a source of politics is also intense" (149). The diversity within the community presents hip-hop organizers with one of their greatest challenges. Watkins notes, however, a general consensus in some areas. According to him, "there is widespread agreement that racial politics will be a major part of the mix. There is also reasonable consensus that hip hop will be an urban based movement" (150). He argues, though, that, beyond these general points, "the prospects for sustaining consensus regarding hip hop's political future quickly diminish" (150).

The hip-hop political movement most frequently describes itself and its constituents as "the hip-hop generation," but even people who are ostensibly members of this group are not sure whom this umbrella category includes. As one member of the

125

National Hip-Hop Political Convention (NHHPC) listserv asks: "Is the Hip Hop generation people between a certain age range (this is what I consistently see, I think 18-35) but does this really mean everybody in that age range, including Republicans, Democrats, Independents, grassroots organizers, etc? Are they people between a certain age range who listen to Hip Hop or grew up on Hip Hop music?" This same member also sees hip-hop politics as difficult to define. Again she asks, "Is Hip Hop politics when you use Hip Hop for social change…and what does that entail?" (Earth, 14 September 2006).

Hip-hop communities are imagined communities that are discursively constructed. Boundaries are drawn diversely and understandings of the values and norms that community members share vary significantly among individuals who, nevertheless, consider themselves members of a "hip-hop community." The community that is represented by the National Hip-Hop Political Convention allows members to function as one example of such and imagined community. It is also a community of interest in which members share pleasures in hip-hop music and culture, in (American) politics, and in news and sometimes gossip from and about communities of color, especially Black and Latino communities. Furthermore, it serves as a community of practice for activists who hope to use hip-hop music and culture as tools for organizing and educating. Members debate issues as well as best practices. They come to the listserv with questions and to vent concerns. At times, the NHHPC also seems to play the role of a support group wherein members offer a sympathetic ear when others experience fatigue and disappointment or anger. For many members of the NHHPC listserv, local organizing

126

committees (LOCs) function as local communities in which members not only share values and aspirations but also physical proximity.

Former NHHPC national chairperson Troy Nkrumah recognizes the challenges and obstacles described by Watkins, Ards, and NHHPC members. He explains that the organization's "base is the hip hop generation. We speak and work for the[ir] rights (as defined by a variety of activists within the Hip Hop Activist Community)." He points out, however, that the hip-hop generation is a very diverse group of people and that a single organization most likely never will be able to represent that entire group's constituents.

> We could never speak for all in the hip hop community... we still got a lot of knuckle heads that are lost and destructive to the community. We still got a lot of 1980's thinkers who will turn down comradery because of someone's sexual orientation or religion. We still got fools slangin rocks to pregnant women... but these are not the folks that direct the political ideology of the hip hop political movement. The directions come from the folks in the community, on the streets, in the media, in the churches, in the jails that are doing the political organizing and mobilizing all over the country to save our generation. So we can rightfully call ourselves the National (because we are all over the country working through LOC's and Affiliates) Hip Hop (because we come from the hip hop generation and use Hip Hop as a tool to educate and liberate, not just entertain) Political (because we are a political organization not a social club or networking group) Convention (because it is about coming together to get work done and building a movement, not just to put on shows or do workshops). (9 October 2006)

While organizing such a geographically, ethnically, economically, and culturally diverse group of people remains one of the greatest dilemmas facing the NHHPC and debates occur on a regular basis amongst members, the group has come to a consensus as to which issues matter most.

The NHHPC developed a political agenda at its first convention in Newark, New Jersey, in 2004. The original agenda included five points: Criminal Justice, Economic

127

Justice, Human Rights, Education, and Health and Wellness. Each point included a list of demands and expectations as well as "action items" for members to carry out in their own communities.

The National Hip Hop Political Agenda was developed and has been amended within the group and by consensus. The group added Gender Justice after the 2006 convention. As National Steering Committee member, Jay Woodson explains, "The Agenda has been and will hopefully evolve through a quasi-democratic process. As hip hop is a resistant culture, the majority of the political hip hop communities decide on a social justice line when it comes to issues in our communities." The Agenda is intended for use within local organizing committees to guide the projects and initiatives of those local groups. Woodson describes it as

> a beginning point for deeper understanding of where and what direction political hip hop communities are … going …. The Agenda can and should be used as a guide to what direction to move in on particular campaigns…. The Agenda can eliminate the need for a deep dialogue or survey about what political hip hop communities feel in regards to issues. (4 October 2006)

Leaders within the NHHPC such as Woodson, who serves on the Steering Committee, hope that the Agenda can express the values and attitudes of multiple local hip-hop communities. The group put the agenda together as a document that could represent many communities on a national scale. Thus, as a community, the NHHPC formed based on shared interests in hip-hop music and culture as well as a shared sense of the most pressing contemporary issues. As this chapter illustrates, however, the group's diverse membership often strains to reach agreement with regard to the characteristics of the community and the issues most salient to it.

128

Perhaps the most mentioned and passionately described issue for hip-hop heads is violence within communities, which police brutality exacerbates and perpetuates. Related to this issue is the outrageously and disproportionately high rate of incarceration among Black and Brown men. Other important concerns within the NHHPC include economic issues such as poverty, lack of jobs, and lack of resources, including quality education, recreational activities and ownership of homes and businesses within Black and Brown communities. Additionally folks are concerned with media consolidation, issues of representation, and minority ownership of media outlets. Finally, there are a set of interconnected concerns around "identity politics" including gender and race. These discussions often lead to conversation about the need to build coalitions and to work with people and groups who may not be exactly like oneself but who share common values and can work toward the same ends.

Each of these issues matters differently to individuals within diverse local communities. If excessive violence is an issue in my local community and I fear for my own or my family's safety, I am likely to urge communities of practice to which I belong to make these issues a top priority. I am also likely to imagine that such issues are utterly central to hip-hop communities. In other words, individuals' lived experiences within their local communities will inevitably affect the way in which they imagine larger communities with which they identify and the roles that they expect these communities to play.

In many ways each of the issues that arose from this research overlaps and impacts the others. Poverty and lack of job opportunities, for example, are likely to

contribute to high rates of violence and incarceration. Clearly systemic racism has a hand in each of these issues from media representations to the difficulty of working within coalitions. This chapter aims to explore these issues while also considering the ways in which they overlap and contribute to the others. Although to some extent I do attempt to address the issues in the order in which they seemed to be stressed by the participants in my research, I want to make clear that for most of the participants ranking these issues in order of importance was neither feasible nor desirable. All of these issues seem pressing and urgent though some are more necessary for day-to-day survival than others.

VIOLENCE AND POLICE BRUTALITY

Many of the interviewees who took part in this research have been victims of violence or police brutality; others mentioned friends or family members who have been victims. Interviewees and listserv participants continually pointed out that police offer no assistance in combating the violence in their neighborhoods. Instead, police participate in and perpetrate violence against community members, a circumstance that makes people wary of calling police for assistance and reinforces the "no snitching" attitude that protects even violent offenders within communities. While most socially concerned individuals see violence within communities as a problem, many were wary of police intervention as a viable solution.

After the 2008 NHHPC meeting, James Price, a member of the Austin Local Organizing Committee (LOC) arrived home to find his neighborhood under police surveillance. Signs posted throughout the neighborhood announced the presence of this

surveillance and a surveillance vehicle was posted on the outside edge of the cul-de-sac on which James lives. LOC members who were with James when he arrived home attempted to speak with the surveillance officers but their efforts were rebuffed. As the surveillance continued, James and his neighbors experienced harassment and felt their movement and ability to associate freely was being impinged. At James's request, the Austin LOC conducted a survey of his neighborhood in the hope that it might help to organize the local community. James hoped that he could bring his neighbors together and use their collective power to decrease the harassment and interference that he and others were experiencing with the police. The survey asked residents to list problems that they faced in their communities and to describe the changes that they would like to see. Amongst the seventeen residents surveyed who responded to a question asking them to list issues "affecting you, your family and/or your community and neighborhood," eleven listed safety as one of their top three concerns.

Twenty respondents answered "How do you feel about the police presence in your neighborhood?" Of these, ten said that the police make the situation in the neighborhood worse or simply that they wished the police would leave. Many went on to describe police harassment, including being followed, unjustly cited or arrested, and physically assaulted. Seven others, however, appreciated the police presence in the neighborhood because they felt safer. These respondents were more likely to have witnessed or experienced violence amongst residents and saw the police as a line of protection from violence within the neighborhood.

131

The Austin LOC also sponsored a bar-b-que and block party in the cul-de-sac,

offering free food, live music, and information, including a "Know Your Rights"

presentation and information from the local American Civil Liberties Union. The goal of

the event was to build dialogue amongst neighbors to determine common concerns and to

begin to build toward solutions. Participants were encouraged to join the Austin LOC as

well. The event took place on an unfortunately cold day and drew only a small crowd.

Toward evening a fight broke out amongst residents, and one young woman charged

another with a hammer. No one was hurt, but any sense of solidarity that had been built

during the day was shattered by this violence. A few individuals did join the LOC, but no

further events were held in this neighborhood. This incident provided evidence that,

although residents may not appreciate the presence of the police or the role that they play,

police officers are certainly not the sole perpetrators of violence within this community.

On the one hand, research participants described injustice and sometimes

unspeakable violence perpetrated by police. Hip-hop artist and activist Paradise Gray

speaks eloquently and passionately on the subject of violence and police violence within

his community. After an incident in Pittsburgh in which a police officer allegedly pointed

a gun at a seven-year-old girl and threatened to shoot her, Paradise wrote:

> I will not sit back and watch Police or anyone else put guns in 7 and 8 year old
> little girls' faces and threaten to blow their heads off…. I am angry right now.
> But, I am not as angry at the police officer as I am at myself and everyone around
> me. We have been attempting to organize and motivate others around us, but we
> are not doing as good a job of putting good people together to combat problems in
> our communities as we should…. I long for a time when we have our shit together
> so well that we stop this from happening before it starts. A time that the police
> department would better screen their officers for drug addiction, steroids, greed,

corruption, racism and such things because they would fear the repercussions of letting these monsters loose in our communities. ("Officer")

Gray makes it clear that people believe that they are not only unable to rely upon police for intervention and protection but also that they are faced with the additional responsibility of protecting themselves and their communities from police as well.

On the other hand, respondents saw violence within their local communities as prevalent and deeply rooted in social conditions rather than mainly associated with police brutality. Gator, a 21-year-old Austin resident who lives within blocks of the street on which the survey was conducted, revealed that two of his friends were recently murdered and that such violence is a part of his life. He explains that he is "not trying to say that [he and his friends] are used to this but there's … a cycle" (17 July 2007).

Gator brings his lived experience in his local community to his communities of practice as both an artist and an activist. Gator explains that in his music he raises important issues that impact his life and those around him, saying, "From police brutality down to domestic violence to women and up to poverty and you know…. We talk about it all. We have this mentality," he continues, "of wanting to change something within our community because we see it everyday" (17 July 2007). Although Gator did not believe that more police were a solution to the daily violence within his community, he also did not see them as the root of the problem. Instead, Gator described poverty and lack of resources as catalysts for violence. Gator deals with economic issues and violence in both his artistic and his political communities. Because of his experiences and his

133

contributions, Gator "imagines" a hip-hop community that perceives and treats these issues as pressing and salient.

ECONOMICS

Many of the local communities to which participants belong experience poverty and a lack of resources. Much of the violence that thrives within the communities can be directly linked to economic factors. When young people have no resources and no choices, they often also have no hope. Lack of hope breeds a failure to imagine a future; failure to see a future can lead to a sense of futility and fatalism about life and a lack of respect for their own lives and the lives of others. According to Watkins, "The key issue that has always permeated hip hop – providing young people real life chances and choices – is and has always been bigger then hip-hop" (253). Economic justice is so central to hip-hop politics that its importance often goes unspoken and is simply assumed within discussions. When it is explicit, it is often in the form of discussion of reparations or handling catastrophe.

At the end of August in 2005, the violent Hurricane Katrina ravaged the U.S. Gulf Coast, costing thousands of lives and destroying homes and infrastructure throughout the region. Hurricane Katrina and its impact on the city of New Orleans prompted many mainstream media outlets and their viewers to contend with the racialized poverty that persists throughout the nation. Unfortunately, the inept and inadequate response of the

134

U.S. government to the disaster led many to believe that, as rapper Kanye West so bluntly put it, "Bush doesn't care about Black people" (*Concert for Hurricane Relief*).

Several hip-hop activists and activist groups have worked tirelessly both in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane and in the nearly two years since to help victims of the hurricane and to protect their rights within New Orleans. One such group, the Hip Hop Caucus, makes explicit the link between violence and poverty, quoting Mahatma Gandhi who said, "Poverty is the worst form of violence" (Yearwood). In a press release sent out over a year after the hurricane hit, the Caucus describes the problem:

> After Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast region, the truly deep and persistent poverty that exists in our country was exposed to the nation and to the rest of the world. Initially there was a unified outcry at the shocking scenes of abandonment and failed government response. Today, however, the same people who were abandoned on rooftops and in the Superdome continue to be neglected by all levels of government and excluded in the rebuilding process….The reality is people are killing and people are dying because they have lost hope…. [W]e have to work together as community leaders, national leaders, celebrities, elected officials, police, members of Congress and citizens to resolve both the physical violence resulting from guns and crime, and the greater structural violence of poverty and inequality. (Yearwood)

While a disaster like Hurricane Katrina brings public attention to racialized poverty, little by way of structural solutions has emerged from the disaster or its aftermath. Racialized poverty remains a key issue in hip-hop politics.

Although efforts to improve the lives of victims of disaster are important, they do little to address the daily struggles that impoverished people around the country face. Hip-hop blogger I Majestic Allah points out in a blog, "A Pot to Piss In, A Window to Throw It Out Of," that "most of the individuals that I [come] into contact with on a daily basis [have] neither." He goes on to say that this holds true not only for individuals, "it

was valid for the collective as well…. When you look at the state of the black community in general…it's obvious that the lack of economic power has crippling effects on other dimensions of our lives…. If you don't have the ability to access resources, then the power to create the world you want will be somewhat limited" (Allah, "A Pot"). Journalist James Clingman, Jr. explains that Black Americans have an unemployment rate of "48 to 50% in Black urban centers throughout the country," an unemployment rate, he notes, that "remains twice the national rate that it was for all Americans during the Great Depression of the 1930s" (par. 5).

Young interviewees consistently mentioned that their local communities lacked resources and jobs, making their choices very limited. James, for example, pointed to the lack of employment opportunities nearby as one of the major problems facing young men in his neighborhood (Price, 18 October 2008). Because of this perceived lack of options, many of his peers have turned to black market economic activities. Indeed in the NHHPC Austin LOC survey conducted in James's neighborhood eleven out of seventeen respondents listed "availability of jobs" amongst their three most serious concerns about the community and ten listed "provide more jobs" as "the first thing that [they] would do to make [their] community safer."

Gator also commented on the economic disadvantages with which he grew up and the struggle necessary to overcome such a situation. He designates Tupac Shakur as his favorite artist and asserts that he and Shakur experienced many of the same conditions in their communities and personal lives. Gator explains that his own mother is an addict who lives on the streets and gave up all her children. He describes dropping out of school

and the temptation to participate in drug sales in order to make ends meet. He finds that few healthy, positive routes exist for young people to make their way out of the violence and drugs that permeate his community. He explains, "The youth don't have too many outlets, especially in the ghetto communities. They don't have outlets except selling drugs so they feel like, 'If I'm not getting no clothes, if my mom can't afford to get me clothes, this is how I've got to get it.'" Gator blames a lack of community leadership and educational and recreational options in addition to economic factors. Here, Gator is moving from lived experience in a local community to identification with a rapper who represents hip-hop culture. This leads to identification with hip-hop culture as a whole and a sense of belonging to an imagined hip-hop community. In this way, Gator imagines that his concerns about his local community are also those of the "hip-hop community."

Half of the respondents to the Austin LOC answered "have more social programs and activities for young people" as the "first thing you would do to make your community safer." Many respondents also pointed to poor schools and lack of educational opportunities as factors contributing to violence and poverty within communities. Gator listed educational opportunities and after school programs for youth among the three issues around which his activism has focused. Correspondingly, in the NHHPC Austin LOC survey, thirteen of the seventeen people who listed issues affecting them and their communities listed education among their top three. The neighborhood in which this survey was conducted includes a middle school that was closed, "revamped," and reopened due to low test scores during the summer after the survey. The high school into which the neighborhood feeds is at risk of the same fate unless it is able to raise its

137

test scores this school year. Community members' perceptions that their educational resources are inferior are borne out by this sort of data.

Most survey respondents believed that a lack of economic and social resources was the biggest problem facing their community. Again, out of seventeen who chose to list the issues about which they were most concerned only three did not include either education or lack of jobs amongst their top three. Residents in these local communities are bound not only by physical proximity but also by shared deprivation and challenges. Austin LOC attempts at organizing, however, suggest that residents are not bound by shared interests, a sense of belonging, or a feeling of solidarity.

MEDIA JUSTICE

Hip-hop music and the video images associated with it are unquestionably the most public face of the hip-hop community. These images have a tremendous impact on the associated style industries promoting the sale of everything from Courvoisier to spinning rims to Coogi Jeans. This situation feeds a discursive debate within hip-hop communities regarding hip-hop's impact on local communities and what kinds of responsibilities successful hip-hop artists ought to have to these communities. Some community members claim that hip-hop music does as much harm as good, since money flows out of communities into hip-hop industries, but never flows back in.

Members of the NHHPC are concerned both with issues of representation in the media and with issues of media access and media ownership. Gator, for example, argues

that all the talk in hip-hop lyrics of "ridin' on rims" and wearing "bling" misrepresents individual artists and hip-hop culture. He explains that many rappers who make such claims in their lyrics "ain't never rode on twenty inches. They don't have a diamond chain. That's what really makes the situation worse is you don't even have what you're talking about or do what you're talking about. Basically, you're just putting this in somebody's ears and they're going to think this is what hip-hop is all about" (17 July 2007).

While most hip-hop community members are quick to defend hip-hop against attacks from the outside, significant critique of hip-hop content emerges from within hip-hop communities. In an essay on the economics of hip-hop, J. Michael Carr, Jr., writes,

> the Hip Hop Nation's paramount strength is that it promises great financial reward. Corporations and politicians seeking a bountiful return on investment or political capital need to look no further. With an estimated $14 billion in net revenues, the hip hop industry is both liquid and solvent…. Nevertheless, bling aside, the hip hop industry's weakness is that it is socially depleted…. Hip hop has become more interested in pimped out rides and cribs than with the struggle that the hip hop art form brought to the media's attention over 30 years ago in the first place. (par. 3)

Carr argues that hip-hop music is not playing the role that it could, and perhaps should, play in forwarding a hip-hop political agenda.

Critiques of hip-hop as too violent, too misogynist, and too materialistic will likely be familiar to most people. It is precisely this sort of concern that led one member of the NHHPC listserv to question whether gangsta rap is hip-hop and why hip-hop heads should embrace it when it contributes so little positivity to the community. This question led to a heated debate in which many defended gangsta rap and pointed out that hip-hop

139

does not need gatekeepers. Rafiki Cai, who posed the original question, explained that it was not his intention to police the boundaries of the genre but instead to fortify the community against negative influences. Near the end of the debate, he wrote, "To echo the Honorable Louis Farrakhan, there should be a vigilant concern for what we put onto the sacred airwaves" (Cai, 26 December 2006). The airwaves, he asserts, should be "sacred" because they are one of the major means by which community members exchange information. Cai sees radio as a tool for education and empowerment within the imagined community. His argument and his use of the word "sacred" suggest that his perception of the community is both idealized and ambitious.

Critiques such as Cai's are often met with fear that the next step will be censorship, an option that few if any of those involved in hip-hop activism see as positive or even viable. Bavu Blakes claims that the foremost issue in hip-hop politics is "freedom of expression…and having a voice" (5 March 2008). For Gator hip-hop is all about "speaking and expressing your self" and this is a right that must be protected despite any negative impacts that hip-hop might have (17 July 2007). NHHPC list member Zenzele Isoke asks bluntly, "How can people who embrace hip hop as a form of artistic expression embrace censorship of any kind?" (Isoke, 11 May 2007). Cai argues that, while he is against censorship per se, he still sees a need for "an appreciation of common values and decency and frickin' fresh (emotional and mental) air." He suggests the creation of "pay per listen" stations "where freedom of speech can flow all it wants" but implores that the "air that is shared in the 'common', for heart's sake let's make it breathable" (Cai, 11 May 2007). Here, Cai expresses a desire for an inclusive community

that respects the needs of its youngest, most "innocent" members and the desires of those who want to keep it positive. Others argue that his approach amounts to "policing" boundaries and excluding legitimate community members. Such disagreements illustrate the limits of unity and shared values within the NHHPC.

Cheryl Aldave is also anti-censorship but very outspoken with regard to her wish for more positive hip-hop. She writes, "[S]everal of us parents on this board are just FUCKING TIRED of negative portrayals of blacks and women being EVERYWHERE and we have a right to say it damnit, that we want it to change." (28 December 2006, 2:45 pm). Though others suggested that Cai and Aldave were blaming artists who never signed up to be leaders and promoting censorship, Aldave made the point that her wish was not for censorship but for balance. The point, she explains, is "NOT [to] DESTROY or censor certain types of rap music. [T]hose of us of a certain age remember when there was more balance…that's it…balance…of the TYPES of music FREELY available to the mass public" (Aldave, 28 December 2006, 2:45 pm). Aldave appears to recognize that hip-hop culture as a whole does not necessarily share her values. She aspires, however, to contribute to change in the culture through her participation in the discourse circulated within communities of practice. Aldave is a writer and a deejay as well as an activist, so she can influence the culture via participation in a variety of communities.

Some participants in this research also commented on the lack of access to media ownership and media conglomeration as major concerns for anyone interested in media justice. Aldave lists these issues as amongst the most important to hip-hop politics. As Aldave puts it, "The RIAA and radio conglom[erate]s like Clear Channel – pure evil

defined" (Aldave 2 December 2006). Community members argue that mass

conglomeration limits the impact that local hip-hop communities can have on mainstream

music. Within the conglomerated radio system, a very limited number of hip-hop

performers enjoy any exposure in mainstream outlets. Hip-hop community members are

not, generally, the ones making these decisions. Instead, businessmen within the music

industry, who are consistently constructed as "outside" hip-hop communities, are

responsible for them. As fewer alternative outlets remain, it becomes increasingly

difficult for lesser known artists to have any kind of impact beyond their local

communities. Even in a place as musically sophisticated as Austin, Texas, most artists

struggle to secure airtime on any of the independent radio and television stations, let

alone on mainstream outlets. Gator argues that it is not worth aspiring toward radio play

although he believes that "any of [his group's] songs could get radio play just because of

how the song is"; he also argues that corporations exert too much control over

mainstream music, which has led to a situation in which "it's not your art anymore, it's

everybody's art" (17 July 2007). Gator feels satisfied with getting his music to the people

via alternative routes.

Aldave reasons, however, "if ordinary people don't have equal media access our

voices will not be heard, and to me some of those ordinary people may be 'conscious' or

other rappers who don't claim the gangsta label who deserve equal airtime for their talent

to at least be given a chance to be heard" (28 December 2006, 4:29 pm). Aldave's

comment points out the ways in which lack of access to media outlets impacts both

142

artists, who find it difficult to get their message out there, and listeners, who have limited

access to a variety of hip-hop music unless they are willing to pay for it.

This issue is bigger than hip-hop and many NHHPC members are extremely

concerned with the impact that media conglomeration has had on hip-hop music and its

practitioners. As Aldave explains,

> [I]n the big scheme of things it's about more than hip hop. It's about the corporate
> takeover of many radio outlets around the country – outlets that used to be used
> for a lot of community uplift. [T]his is about corporations shutting down smaller
> radio stations or buying them out to decrease competition, and to an extent this is
> also about public access TV. (28 December 2006, 4:29 pm)

Paradise Gray points out that while many critics choose to blame artists for promoting

violence and greed, they are aiming at the wrong targets. He writes, "The point of attack

is 'NOT THE ARTISTS' or 'The MUSIC'[;] we have to serve notice on the corporations

who have usurped the music and stolen our culture and replaced it with the current

business of Hip-hop." For Gray, the situation calls for a fairly radical solution. It is, in his

opinion, simply not enough to be "conscious." We need instead to be in control. "The

label system and the radio/media companies are corrupt! We don't need to fix the system

for them, we need to reclaim it for ourselves" (Gray, 26 December 2006).

Hip-hop artist and activist Immortal Technique agrees. He sees attacks on

corporate media as futile and argues for the development of independently owned and

operated media. He explains:

> We cannot oust everyone that we don't agree [with] on the radio, and because we
> have no control over this industry that is not going to change anytime soon. To
> rally and to protest the commercial aspects of radio is tantamount to spitting at the
> sun in an attempt to extinguish its flame. We must move past our egos of being

famous for being rappers and singers and control aspects of the hardworking industry, distribution, radio work, INDEPENDENT MEDIA especially on the WEB!!!!!, CD manufacturing. IF we embedded ourselves in all these things to favor the Hip Hop we see as addressing real issues HALF as much as these industry roaches suck dick for some fake shit to make a dollar we would push our agendas much further. (Technique, 28 December 2006)

Ultimately critiques of mainstream media outlets as well as those of mainstream hip-hop music amount to disagreements with those approaches to the problems of media justice. Technique points out that the best way to counteract these approaches is not to complain or to protest but instead to be the change that community members want to see.

IDENTITY POLITICS

Identity issues that were central to social movements of the 1980s such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation remain important points of contention within the NHHPC. This is partly a question of who owns the hip-hop movement. Some argue that hip-hop and the social justice movement that has grown up around it ought to remain focused on and aligned with the largely poor Black and Brown people who are identified as its originators. As Rosa Clemente so passionately explains, "Hip Hop grew out of Black and Brown youth, specifically African-American, Jamaican and Puerto Rican. Hip Hop is the resistance to white supremacy and oppression which includes patriarchy. Hip Hop is and should be the voice of the voiceless" (Clemente, 3 October 2006). Others argue that agreement on issues is much more important than individual identity. One list member, for example, contends,

144

> There is a broad range of people who consider themselves to 'be hip hop.' And we could argue to death about who is and who is not, and what overall political ideology defines a hip hop party, but if the concentration remains on a narrowly defined platform with a few core issues and money and sweat equity are invested in candidates who support those core issues, I think success of such a movement can be measured. (Gabriel C., 15 September 2006).

Nonetheless, discourses related to specific identities of gender and race consistently circulated on the NHHPC listserv.

Debates about gender in hip-hop often center on lyrics and images of women in hip-hop music and videos. Kevin Powell addresses these issues and points to the ways in which they connect with lived experiences of African American men and women. In his collection of essays *Who's Gonna Take the Weight?: Manhood, Race, and Power in America*, Powell sums up the problem:

> [I]t is really about how we men, we Black men, in the context of hip hop, are so powerless in relation to White America, in relation to White American men (who many of us, dumbly, aspire to emulate), that we, at every turn, oppress women, Black women, by our despicable name-calling ("bitch," "ho," "gold digger," "chickenhead," etc.) and by our despicable actions (domestic violence, rape, sexual assault). What we fail to understand is that when we Black men view Black women only as sex objects, as impediments to our progress, as our enemies, is that we have internalized the very same stereotypes and hatreds the larger White society has had about Black women dating back to slavery: that Black women are immoral, oversexed, greedy for money and material things, and never to be trusted… (121-122)

The lyrics and images within hip-hop music and culture often do promote an attitude toward women that denies their full humanity. Critics argue, as does Powell, that the music and its associated images are powerful enough to pass these attitudes on to generations of young men and boys who then grow up with the impression that women, other than their mothers, are things instead of people (See Watkins and Morgan, for

145

example). "Black men in hip hop," Powell continues, "have fashioned this ridiculous extreme of what Black women are in our minds: either 'queens' or 'bitches' with no in-between, no depth, no complexities, no realities other than to service Black men in one way or the other" (4). Gator confirms Powell's analysis; he discusses the claim that rappers use the terms "bitch" and "hoe" because some women *are* bitches and hoes "who just want you for money and just want to do you bad" and states that he agrees "a little bit because that's where he's from," noting how common these terms have become amongst his peers. He concedes, however, that this sort of language can be destructive and argues that he is "trying to grow as a man … striving to get better and have a different opinion" (17 July 2007).

Several women on the NHHPC listserv also confirm Powell's claims, making the point that it is not the language per se that is the problem, but the "mentality and the institutional structures…that make it okay for Snoop to parade his sisters on dog leashes" (La'Keisha Gray, 11 May 2007). Similarly Isoke points out that "sexism, misogyny and homophobia *on the streets*" [emphasis added] do not raise the same critical cacophony that they do when found in hip-hop lyrics. Furthermore she asks, "Why are we not making the astronomical rates of childhood sexual abuse, rape, gang rape, familial abandonment, and deceit in predominantly black and urban communities an issue the same way we make police brutality an issue?" (Isoke, 11 May 2007). In her interview, Nicole Porter emphasizes her concern with the lack of attention to women's issues within hip-hop political activism. Like Isoke, she comments that violence amongst men consistently overshadows violence against women as an important issue. She argues that

146

this situation needs to be rectified if hip-hop activism is going to contribute to true social change and move toward true social justice (Porter, 13 February 2008).

Similar arguments play out in terms of the role of women in hip-hop activism and in terms of the importance of "women's rights" in a hip-hop political agenda. In the fall of 2006, after the second meeting of the NHHPC in Chicago, the national steering committee sought the listserv's input on changes to the Political Agenda. The first (and last) change discussed was the addition of "Womanism or Gender Rights" to the National Agenda. The committee asked for listserv members to agree or disagree with the addition of a gender rights plank, to agree or disagree with the wording of the plank, and to answer whether "Gender Rights" should be added to the "Human Rights" plank or added as a separate category.

Rosa Clemente responded, "The fact that this is even a question is disheartening, distressing, crazy, etc.… We are acting like violence and oppression of women in the world and the U.S. don't happen. If we in hip hop are supposed to be forward thinking and innovative, why is this even a question?" (28 September 2006). Clemente's comments illustrate that the hip-hop community she imagines is "forward thinking and innovative." The fact that the addition of gender rights to the Agenda generated such an intense debate suggests that the community to which Clemente belongs is not, in fact, as progressive as she believes it is.

The vote, overall, was in favor of adding the plank, and it was added as "gender justice," but not without a lively, heated debate. Many argued that any organization committed to social justice must commit itself to gender justice and gender equality and

implored the group to recognize the centrality of women's issues to all social justice

issues. Others expressed concern that the inclusion of a "Gender Justice" plank might

alienate more conservative potential members, such as Black nationalists and young

people who have not been exposed to various civil rights campaigns. The intense debate

also included discussion of homosexuality and homophobia as the group attempted to

define and delineate exactly what is meant by "gender justice" and to determine the

extent to which these issues are relevant to hip-hop communities.

Early in the discussion one female listserv member argued that any movement

that defines itself as "progressive" must adopt fresh attitudes toward gender politics.

Dawn-Elissa Fischer writes,

> we cannot afford to ascribe to the rampant sexism and gender violence of the rest
> of society, if we purport to be working toward something transformative or at
> least something that transgresses the status quo. Race and class don't trump
> gender in the fight for social justice; we tried that already…. As an organization,
> we can continue "business as usual" and stunt progression, or we can blaze a new
> trail and make different choices than our parents' generation when it comes to
> dealing with these issues. (13 November 2006)

Fischer's comments demonstrate that she sees the hip-hop political movement as a

progressive one. As such, she argues, it *must* take a progressive approach to gender

issues.

List member Isoke makes the point that gender issues run much deeper than just

women's rights. "I think that this issue is much bigger than 'women's rights,' this issue is

about 'gender justice.' There is a difference. When we deal with gender, we deal with

poverty, and the racial injustices that emerge as a result of that poverty." She goes on to

say that any freedom struggle must deal directly and aggressively with the issues that

148

most affect women because these issues are central to ending oppression. "Black freedom struggle is not just about Black men. And it is certainly not about trying to reclaim a romanticized history of kings and queens…. Black freedom struggle is about ending all oppressions that prevent Black people from achieving full human liberation" (3 October 2006). The community that Isoke imagines is not only progressive, but also Black. Despite discourses of coalition building and diversity within hip-hop, NHHPC members consistently demonstrated this discursive slippage between hip-hop communities and Black communities.

Some listserv members expressed concern that the addition of a "Gender Justice" plank might offend and alienate more conservative hip-hoppers. When one participant asked: "What about 'hip-hoppers' who are homophobic?" (Allah, 4 October 2006). Another responded:

> What about hip-hoppers who are gay? As progressives, "revolutionaries" and "hip-hoppers" why should we consider and be sensitive to the feelings of those who hate? Yes, homophobia is hate, ignorance and wrong. As educated and caring individuals, we should be setting the example for the Hip Hop community not reflecting the worst aspects of it. If this agenda and movement is just a reflection of culture and has no part in altering the direction and manifestation of that culture, then what is the point? Do we take into consideration what racist, imperialist, sexist, hip-hoppers think? I hope not." (Lewkowicz, 4 October 2006).

This comment is rife with assumptions about who belongs to this group and the values and beliefs that group members share. That the debate continues implies that the imagined community is at odds with the community as a collection of individuals each with distinct values and beliefs.

One list member points out that the focus on "progressive" politics may

dramatically decrease the members of the hip-hop community who might identify with

the social movement. I Medina Peaceful Earth writes,

> [I]f people defined as "homophobic hip hoppers" are not welcomed in this group, as someone earlier stated, then 1) You do not have the point of view of and are not the voice of the whole "hip hop political movement/generation," or the voice is pretty narrow, and 2) then you are disregarding a whole lot of young people who I would think you would want to participate in the broader agenda...not only the masses of 15-21 year olds who know nothing of this group, but other folks who are in this group who work hard every day to positively impact the lives of young people (for example, I bet a lot of those 20,000 young people who walked out of school against the war would fit within your description of "bigots, homophobes, etc [sic]). Would you call them bigots or figure out ways to engage them starting with where they are at and their immediate needs[?] (5 October 2006).

Earth points out one of the greatest challenges of working within a group that is as

loosely defined as the "hip-hop generation." As Watkins observes, this group is

constituted from a wide range of people whose differences are at least as profound as

their similarities (150-151).

Individuals experience a sense of belonging to a hip-hop community, and they

imagine that other members of this community share their values, beliefs, and interests.

Debates like this signify a lack of unity and coherence amongst the individuals, but they

do not necessarily indicate an absence of community. In these situations, the cracks in the

ideal imagined community become visible. At the same time, the community of practice,

in which participants expect to disagree, to challenge each other, and to learn from one

another, is at its most vibrant when this sort of dialogue emerges.

150

Racial differences are also hotly debated within the discourse of the NHHPC. As Clemente emphasizes, hip-hop sprang from and has mostly been associated with African Americans and to a lesser extent Puerto Rican Americans. Hip-hop activism has often focused on Black and Brown people and issues of concern specifically to these communities. However, not everyone agrees that this is appropriate. Watkins, for example, argues that "Efforts to mobilize a political base in hip hop typically start with the false premise that the movement is essentially black." He sees this not only as a mistake, but also as a potential weakness, writing, "Not only does the premise disregard hip hop's rich history and cultural legacy; it also limits its reach and potential impact" (150).

Although the NHHPC welcomes people of all racial backgrounds, listserv members often speak of "us" and an assumed blackness. NHHPC member Troy Nkrumah explains that "Hip hop politics were birthed out of Black Nationalism and the Brown Power movement … it is the child of those two movements and as the child it faces some of the same issues as its parents with additional more modern issues." He goes on to note that others are welcomed to the table but should be prepared to confront and deal with racial issues that arise. Hip-hop's historical roots do not, he explains,

> mean that [the hip-hop political movement] is just for Black or Brown people …
> one of the modern additions is the diversity of the movement … but never ever
> ever forget who your parents are!! Cuz it lets you know who you are … and white
> folks should feel honored to be allowed to now be a part of a movement that for
> generations excluded them because they (the whites) had no personal or historical
> relationship to the movements, outside of being on the wrong side of it. The hip-
> hop political movement is your chance to be on the right side of history for once
> … Understand that … respect that please. (14 September 2006)

Since few members of this group are sure exactly what constitutes criteria for membership within hip-hop culture, identity politics are likely to remain issues within its politics. For this reason, most pundits and activists alike agree that coalition building across races, classes, and sexes will be crucial to the movement's success.

COALITION BUILDING

Although hip-hop community members of color engage in debate and express significant concern about the role of White people within hip-hop politics, a general consensus exists that they will be welcomed as long as they are willing to engage in "the struggle that is inherent to Hip Hop" and to recognize and address their White privilege (Aldave, 2 December 2006). According to Watkins,

> Hip hop has always been a community of different voices, experiences, and perspectives. In a hip hop world divided by race and region, pop culture and political aspirations, age and perspective, the challenges are deep. Reconciling these tensions, however, is crucial especially now that a number of different initiatives are struggling to control hip hop's political destiny. (253)

NHHPC listserv member I Majestic Allah agrees noting, "The Hip-Hop umbrella is so large that it includes contrary parties…. In my estimation it has to be so large and broad that everyone has to get under and not begrudge the other party that's under there with you" (3 October 2006). Allah sees hip-hop culture as an inclusive community and draws very open boundaries for it. The communities that Watkins and Allah describe are likely to be communities of practice in which disagreement is expected and values are not assumed to be shared.

152

Others observe that building across difference is not a challenge unique to hip-hop. NHHPC listserv member Brother Enoch points out that there is always a certain amount of struggle and pain in working toward social change. Furthermore, he argues that this variety can, in fact, be a strength. He explains:

> It's PAIN for many of us, to disagree with people who you thought, "thinks just like me". The lowest common denominator of working together is not without some PAIN & DIFFICULTY. However, can I work with someone who is "Different than myself", if that person is Truthful, Dedicated, Committed, Honest and willing to Learn from others & Grow. We can disagree without being disagreeable with one another & just as there are different life forms that grow out the earth, WE must appreciate the different perspectives that come up out of us. The Blessing comes thru the outcomes of this "cross pollenization" [sic] and us "learning from one another", so that we can be "whole" and not imbalanced in working this tremendous "WORK" that is Necessary for our selves, Family, Community & Nation. Regardless of Land, Lables [sic] or Language, WE must BANG for TRUTH, and WE must BE Motivated BY Love, that Produces, "Respect & Consideration" for our people, that we will have disagreements with from time to time. The Bottom Line to ALL of these ism's is: WILL IT IMPROVE the: Health, Interests, Rights & Needs of ALL? (4 October 2006)

List member Isoke agrees and points out that organizing is about relationships and relationships always involve differences. "So the bigger question for me," she writes, "is how can the hip hop convention movement build coalitions with other coalitions so that we can better address the issues facing the hip hop generation, especially black and brown people?" (3 October 2006). Here list members refer specifically to "work," suggesting that for them, at least at times of disagreement within the community, the community of practice and the information and education that is gained from it is more compelling to them than a sense of belonging due to shared values and beliefs.

Building coalitions and working across differences are not simply about understanding each other and learning from each other. Indeed both theoretical and

153

practical reasons exist for individuals working for social change to bridge their differences and find common ground. From a theoretical perspective, recognizing the ways in which interlocking oppressions are at work in all peoples' lives, whatever their race, class, or gender, allows for a more holistic approach to social change work. As NHHPC list member Terry Marshall suggests "we must really begin to take a multiple-oppressions approach to issues. All of our oppressions are tied together. In real life people suffer oppression in different ways simultaneously. Therefore we must begin to fights these oppressions in real life ways!" (18 February 2007). Again, the emphasis is on the work that list members "should" do rather than on some abstract sense of belonging or the role of the community in identity formation.

From a practical perspective, coalitions are certainly vital to the success of any social movement because different groups will have different resources that they can make available to coalition members. Furthermore, different groups will have different constituencies to whom they speak and for whom they represent. In this situation, coalitions can help to bring very different people together with similar purposes. Earth sees coalition building as essential to reaching the individuals who are most disenfranchised and most in need of social change. This, she argues, cannot happen if individuals are not willing to work with groups that seem to have different concerns and values. She points out:

> you can't empower anybody if you are unwilling to understand where they're coming from, pushing your point of view on them. When empowering, you first look at the needs and priorities of the constituency you're trying to work with… If their priorities are different than yours, then how can you truly work with them? So this e-group is just a microcosm of larger implications. And I do agree with

154

> someone who talked about a bottom up approach, which is what I'm saying. If you go to communities, and say for instance eliminating patriarchy or homophobia or other hot button issues that have been in discussion the past couple of days, are not their priorities because they for instance may have day to day issues that they're dealing with (I can't get a job so I hustle, my school sucks and we can't take books home, there aren't enough businesses in my neighborhood, etc.), then you gotta meet people where they're at. (5 October 2006)

Earth makes the point that it may be necessary to work with groups who have conservative views on some issues and with people who may even seem bigoted or closed-minded in order to reach the people who most need help. NHHPC member, Temple of Hip Hop national organizer, and founder of Hip Hop Ministries, Inc., David "Minister Sever" Tavares also points out that these very people may be the next generation of activists. Reaching out to these young, disenfranchised people and allowing them the space to come to more progressive political positions in their own time may, in fact, be the best strategy for sustaining the movement (Tavares, 2 August 2008).

Nearly all the participants in my research spoke or wrote about the need to work across differences and many see this as *the* challenge for hip-hop activism. NHHPC list member Jarvis Johnson, for example, writes that all hip-hop activists share some things. "We all joined to make a positive change for our block, community, and nation." Indeed, he contends activists all share the desire to work across differences because the people in the community with whom they work,

> may not look like you, think like you or even walk like you. They may not talk like you, worship like you, or even have sex like you, but different people are still a part of your block, community and nation. There are still people who are suffering. There are still those who need a chance to live, grow, and learn that life is worth living and that disrespect and bigotry is not the norm. (5 October 2006)

155

Finally, he argues that hip-hop activists must overcome the challenges of working with people who are different from themselves if the movement is going to be successful. "We have to be better for our fore parents left us work to do. They did what they could right or wrong, now it is our time to decide what we will do with what we got. The choice is ours" (5 October 2006).

Coalition building discourse was much more common on the NHHPC listserv and in the academic literature than it was within the local communities in Austin. Although racial politics remained salient, Austin respondents consistently defined the hip-hop community along ideological rather than racial lines. Gator, for example includes anyone who is "down for the struggle" in his definition (17 July 2007). Harris, who doubts the existence of *a* hip-hop community, defines the term as "a local community of artists and listeners" or a strategy "to try to connect people." He does not, however, define it in terms of race and points out that that approach makes little sense "in the context of who actually supports hip hop" (20 February 2008). He also notes the divisions within hip-hop communities and sees class and "what level you're banking at" as a greater contributor to difference than race. Kenavon Carter consistently stresses "holding down your own block" and exerting influence at the most local level no matter the racial or economic makeup of the community. Amongst Austin respondents, a commitment to social change and a desire to work toward that change were consistently described as more important to belonging to the community than race or ethnicity.

Still, the general agreement within this community of practice is that the music is *only* a tool. As Watkins and Ards agree, one of the keys to the hip-hop community's

156

political success will be the movement's ability to *focus* its efforts in a way that can both unify current participants and attract other constituents. The NHHPC Agenda may be too broad and all encompassing to provide such focus. It could, however, offer direction for a step-by-step approach that begins by securing neighborhoods, protecting residents from violence, and assuring that communities have the necessary resources for survival. The next step might be to move towards improving education, health care, and access to independent media outlets.

Chapter 5: Electoral Politics, Grassroots Activism, and Hip-Hop Leadership

In the previous chapter, I outlined specific political issues with which members of the National Hip Hop Political Convention are concerned. While an issue-oriented approach is useful to understanding some of the interests of the hip-hop political constituency, concerns about the basic structures of our political system are perhaps even more deeply at the heart of this group's politics. The wide range of issues of concern to hip-hop communities demands a variety of approaches to activism, organizing, influence, and leadership. In this chapter, I take up two specific critiques of the American political status quo and describe the ways in which these critiques are discussed within the hip-hop community. First, I consider debates about the importance of voting and the divide between electoral and grassroots politics. Next, I consider the issue of leadership and the ways in which it is conceived and enacted within hip-hop communities, including the assets and deficits of politicians, community leaders, and rappers as individual leaders.

TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE

Electoral politics is rarely at the center of hip-hop politics; it is often described as a farce or a sham because the differences between the parties are difficult to distinguish and the entire system smacks of corruption. The U.S. presidential election of 2008, however, sparked interest and excitement among the participants in this research. It also

incited debates regarding the value of voting and the relative values of electoral and grassroots political action. Although the presidential election was exciting and Barack Obama's victory represented a real triumph for many listserv members, in the bigger picture of hip-hop politics Obama's success is, in fact, a very small step. Furthermore, while the importance of voting and participation in national electoral politics remains a topic of debate, members of the NHHPC contend that grassroots organizing and political participation at a local level is much more effective and necessary to social change.

The 2008 presidential election offered an exciting opportunity to explore NHHPC members' opinions regarding the power of the vote. As the news media stressed, voter turnout for this election was at a record high, especially among young voters and people of color. "Final figures from nearly every state and the District of Columbia showed that more than 131 million people voted, the most ever for a presidential election" ("Turnout…" par. 2). Fifty-three percent of "youth" voters, between eighteen and twenty-nine, cast ballots in the presidential election. This is "a 4% increase over 2004 and the highest turnout rate since the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1972" (Chang, "Impact…" par.3). Black voters also turned out at record rates: "Exit polls found that blacks constituted 13 percent of the electorate, a 2 percentage-point gain over 2004" ("That Huge…" par. 10). Many people registered and voted for the first time ever. "As would be expected, many young voters were first-time voters: 64% of 18-24 year-olds and 43% of 18-29 year-olds were first time voters" (Circle). About 6.5 million more people registered to vote in the 2008 election than were registered in 2004 ("That Huge…").

This was an historic election and many NHHPC members argued that voting in this election mattered in a way that many believe it often does not. This change was the result of a number of things, not the least of which was the presence of a Black man amongst the leading candidates for the presidency. This time the "difference" between the candidates of the two leading parties was visible in a way that it had never been before. The argument that the candidates were so similar as to be virtually indistinguishable, a common refrain in explanations for non-voting, was more difficult to sustain in the face of this obvious distinction. In April 2008, during the Democratic primaries Gallup reported that polling showed "Democrats closely divided in their nomination preferences, with 47% favoring Barack Obama and 46% backing Hillary Clinton. The race," the organization argued, was "at a virtual dead heat" ("Gallup Daily: Race…" par. 1). After Obama was selected as the Democratic nominee, the general election polling also ran very close through October when Obama began to take a significant lead over McCain ("Gallup Daily: Election 2008"). More so than usually, young voters and voters of color came out in record numbers to have their voices heard and their votes counted. As NHHPC list member Zidonia put it "whether you vote for Obama, McKinney, Nader, McCain or whoever, this election is historical & important to many people for many different reasons" (Zidonia, 4 November 2008).

Although Obama's blackness marked him as a different kind of candidate, some listserv members suggested that his policy positions and political connections indicated that an Obama presidency, despite the campaign promises for change, would simply bring about politics as usual. Indeed, a post was sent to the National Hip Hop Political

Convention (NHHPC) listserv on Election Day encouraging members to "boycott the elections." The post contained an article written by Reza Fiyouzat for counterpunch.org entitled "Don't Let the Bastards Have Your Vote: Boycott the Elections," which was originally published on October 30. The article begins:

> How long shall we allow the system to kick us in the head, take our money, insult us after taking our money, and still expect us to participate in its frauds? With every passing year, the differences between the two ruling political parties in the U.S. diminish further, and their outlook, conduct and even advertising campaigns merge so much so that their members can be mistaken one for the other. By now it must be clear that the "two-party" system is not only no such thing; it is corrupt to the bone. (par. 1-2)

The author then goes on to argue that the lesser-of-two evils argument is ridiculous and is a tool to excuse political non-participation between elections. He argues instead for a boycott of the elections that will bring attention to an opposition party building effort that should be undertaken in earnest as soon as possible.

Although opting out of electoral politics altogether may seem radical, even outrageous, the notion that electoral politics is a sham and a waste of time and energy is fairly common amongst NHHPC members. The basic idea is not only that the system is corrupt but also that it is racist and inherently exclusive of the underclass. For example, during the 2006 mid-term elections NHHPC list member Vision wrote,

> Whenever I think about the elections or the pundits talking about why the youth don't vote or about how the black youth vote spiked 11 percentage points in 2004, I'm like 'whatever!' You know what comes to mind for me? Dead Prez had a song called 'W4'. There was a line in that song that said, 'Niggahz in the hood got no faith in this F**ked up system, so thatz why we don't vote.' That sentiment rings so true! (21 September 2006)

Vision has a lot to say about electoral politics and appropriate ways in which to

participate in the political system. "I'm not opposed to voting," he writes. "I think if we

were to educate ourselves about the system, the issues that affect us and the politician's

particular stances—we could really use it to our benefit. But, the thing is, WE DON'T

BELIEVE!!" (21 September 2008). Vision argues that this cynicism about the system

maintains people of color's sense of alienation from it. He agrees to a certain extent that

Black folks are "apathetic" in relation to electoral politics, but he argues that this is the

result of a system that has systematically "stacked the cards against Black people" (21

September 2008). He points to incarceration rates, high school graduation rates, and

AIDS death rates as evidence of this claim.

Vision seems to suggest that politicians might attract these "apathetic" voters by

speaking directly to specific needs and interests and playing an educational role. He

argues that if people really understood how politics impacts them personally, they would

be much more likely to vote. As Vision explains:

> I don't care how much MTV tries to 'Rock the Vote' or how many t-shirts Puffy
> tries to sell; it doesn't bridge the CONCEPTUAL divide that exists between us
> and our participation in every aspect of this system. Until we know how Medicare
> Part D, the privatization of social security, the deal with stem cell research, etc.
> affects us on a very real every day level, we will never become a viable part of
> this system. (21 September 2008)

Vision wants politics to be tied to local communities and suggests that if people could see

connections between what goes on in electoral politics and what goes on in their local

communities, they would participate in politics.

162

The reaction to the "Boycott the Vote" article on the list and in the Austin community was strong and generally in disagreement with the author. Ann del Llano's initial reaction was blunt. "The concept of not voting is bullshit…. Don't join the oppressor and steal your own vote by staying home today" (4 November 2008, 2:30 pm). As the conversation developed and others argued that the author's point of view was well articulated and insightful, emotions cooled, although few minds seemed to be changed (and few seemed persuaded to boycott the election). Del Llano agreed that "[S]trategic third-party organizing…has many benefits and I support resistance there." Still, she remained unconvinced that not voting is ever an effective strategy. "I guess I can't visualize any possible scenario in the US where it would serve a group of people well to not vote at all" (4 November 2008, 3:59 pm).

Others agreed that voting is an important part of the political process and argued that engagement with the system is a necessary aspect of political involvement. One anonymous online respondent argued earlier that some NHHPC members "are so anti-structure that they choose to engage in struggle in other ways that don't include traditional politics" (Anonymous, 5 July 2007). She sees this as "a mistake" and argues that it is necessary to "at least know the system." She urges hip-hop activists not to be afraid to "get in there with them and know that game and how to use it for those that need it and are not benefiting" (ibid).

NHHPC list member Troy Nkrumah, however, completely disagrees. He argues, "as long as we (as a people) continue to allow ourselves to be fooled into participating in this system, or as long as we are under the illusion that this system works or that it can be

worked… Then we are not yet, as a people ready to discuss strategy for material change

… which does not come from within but from without" (4 November 2008). Nkrumah

explains that he does not participate in the electoral process because "if it keeps the same

unjust system in place" it is not "good enough" for him. He sees the electoral process as a

tool of imperialism, which works to fool citizens into feeling as though they have some

say in their political fate. "In four or [eight] years it might be a black or Latina woman

candidate, and the radicals will still be saying 'fuck the imperialists and its system,' and

the liberals will be saying … 'This is a historic time, its our opportunity…we have to

vote against the republican candidate'" (ibid).

Nkrumah's post raised the ire of many list members, suggesting that his views are

in the minority among NHHPC members. On the one hand, Kenavon Carter writes that

he agrees with much of what Nkrumah has written, but thinks that it is still important to

participate and that "It's not enough to just be vocal about destroying the system while

waiting for the masses to get a little more fed up with the state of affairs" (4 November

2008). He emphasizes the importance of planning and building the alternative if citizens

are dissatisfied with the status quo. On the other hand, Lester Spence was less than polite

in his response, writing,

> [T]alking about boycotting as if it were some form of revolutionary political act is
> bullshit. [T]alking about these brothers and sisters as if they're somehow being
> duped to make the choices they make is bullshit. [I]t is an excuse for not putting
> in real hard intellectual work, and real hard ass work in to make the revolutionary
> change that you want to see in the world…. what drove these folks was a belief
> that there was a possibility of change, that it could be accomplished within a
> lifetime, it could be accomplished with work, and "THE PEOPLE HAD TO BE
> PART OF THE PROCESS." (4 November 2008).

164

Spence's opinion is certainly the one more typical to the others expressed in response to the call to boycott the elections.

For most list members and most participants in this project with whom I spoke in the days immediately following the election, Obama's victory was cause for celebration. In a moving and politically astute essay, Tim Wise argues that those "incapable of mustering pride in this moment" who "cannot appreciate how meaningful this day is for millions of black folks who stood in lines for up to seven hours to vote, then your cynicism has become such an encumbrance as to render you all but useless to the liberation movement" (par. 4). Wise calls Obama's victory "a victory for youth, and their social and political sensibilities" (par. 18), "a victory for the possibility of greater cross-racial alliance building" (par. 19), and "a defeat for the demagogues who tried in so many ways to push the buttons of white racism" (par. 16). He also points out, however, that "none of these victories will amount to much unless we do that which needs to be done so as to turn a singular event about one man, into a true social movement" (par. 21).

Many participants in this research also express concern that when Obama was elected that celebration would ensue and folks would see the work as finished when it should in fact just be beginning. One Austin participant comments, "I fear that the celebration will come and go only to find ourselves within a community that is still disengaged, and therefore left feeling unheard and not understood – not to mention the reality of the social and economic issues that stare us in the face daily, no matter how much we desire to move past them" (Castro, 5 November 2008). Carter exclaims that he "wasn't prepared for the magnitude of the moment… For me it was like America finally

understood that I was not 3/5 of a human being… but a whole person with infinite possibilities." At the same time, he points out "structural racism still exists and our institutions need to be destroyed and rebuilt" (5 November 2008). Each of these respondents emphasizes the importance of continued political participation.

Most members of the NHHPC list agree that the odds of hip-hop activism having a significant impact are much better with Obama in office than the alternative. List member Cherryl Aldave took the opportunity on the eve of the election to send "Congratulations" to Obama *and* to call the NHHPC to action. She writes, "[W]e can all agree that we LOVE the spark of interest in politics and community organizing enabled by his campaign.… [I] have a lot of ideas for how we can use this momentum and [I] know others here do too. [L]et's not waste this moment arguing!!" (4 November 2008). The Obama campaign had mobilized thousands of young people and had excited people who had consistently ignored politics. For example, I Medina Peaceful Earth writes,

> At this time whether you love, hate or question Obama, the bottom line is that he has energized a significant portion of the population not just to believe in him, but everybody kinda sees that the country and how it currently runs is fucked up and unfair. People are open to alternatives. People are open to personal and collective change. People are awake! It truly is inspiring to see so many people engaged politically. (4 November 2008)

Many mainstream political commentators echo the notion that Obama's campaign had awakened and activated previously "apathetic" community members. This inspiration, this sense of involvement, and participation are especially important within hip-hop communities, which include some of the most commonly disenfranchised (prison populations and former felons, for example) and apathetic (young people of color) voters.

166

Hip-hop communities benefited perhaps more than any other group of voters from the political inspiration that Obama's campaign provided.

Hip-hop communities, members argue, should not be concerned so much about what changes Obama might create but instead with how to tap the enthusiasm and excitement he has created and to encourage these young people to continue to participate in politics and to work to create the change that they hope Obama can create. As member GRIME explains:

> hip-hop played a more important role in this election than any before, now it was not as important a role as it should be, but relatively speaking it was very significant. We are at a point in time in which a hip-hop political movement could actually be a force in electoral political as well as grassroots organizing, we still have an opportunity to capitalize off of the momentum that [O]bama has built in our communities. Tomorrow the real work begins, whether you voted for [O]bama or not he will be president and [I] think there is no better time than right now to engage the hip-hop community. The opportunity is there, we just have to take it, [I] think we all need to … do some real work next year because the door may never be as wide open as it is right now. (4 November 2008)

Carter describes the goal quite clearly when he states: "One thing that I hope will come about is that those hundreds of new young organizers that have been trained by Camp Obama in grassroots organizing use their invaluable skill sets locally after the election. These are the people we should be recruiting to work with us" (29 October 2008). Earth also recognizes Obama's campaign and potential election as an exciting opportunity. "So now we have a window of opportunity to really continue to push our initiatives, ideas, and alternatives before people go back to sleep." Regardless of whether he is elected, she writes, "be safe, be prepared, and keep fighting and organizing ON THE GROUND!" (4 November 2008).

Others argue that the hip-hop communities need not only to tap into the energy and enthusiasm created by the Obama campaign but also to use the campaign as a model. In fact, the Obama campaign drew many of its community mobilization strategies directly from grassroots organizing models. Carter reminds the list that "The model Obama has used is a basic grassroots organizing strategy" and points out that activists need to continue to get out into the streets and go door to door to bring people together and to build power on a local level. "We are duplicating that strategy to organize folks on the block in a particular neighborhood to combat racial profiling and police misconduct. Right now there is alot [sic] of optimism on the block, we hope to tap into it and build locally" (29 October 2008).

If I found any consensus regarding electoral politics among the participants in this project, it is that voting is not enough even if "your" candidate wins. "Voting is just one small thing I do for an hour (if that) every four years…. The day to day work that I do means much more to me" (Earth, 4 November 2008). One anonymous female interviewee explains that she votes "but politics is more than casting a ballot." From her perspective, politics "begins when you are meeting people where they are and fighting local battles to insure justice…. It is also…negotiations of issues before they reach the ballot box or mobilization of communities" who are affected by initiatives (Anonymous, 5 July 2007).

Earth's comment highlights the tension between electoral politics, what many think of as politics proper, and grassroots activism. Most of the people involved in this research, whether they participate in electoral politics or not, agree that the most important and "real" work is done on the grassroots level, within local communities.

According to Nkrumah, "All our major advancements have come from major grassroots movements including (civil rights, human rights, social justice, affirmative action) [sic] and had little to nothing to do with voting for candidates" (4 November 2008).

GRASSROOTS POLITICS

Despite disagreements about the value of electoral politics and the significance of Obama's election victory, NHHPC members agreed that national electoral politics are not going to solve most of the problems facing local hip-hop communities. Participants are aware that their priorities are not those of most officially designated leaders and that solutions to community problems would have to come from communities themselves. While distinctions between the role of electoral politics and that of grassroots organizing are important to political hip-hop communities, members seem to agree that grassroots approaches are necessary to the development, maintenance, and effectiveness of any movement for social change.

Even at the grassroots level, however, community members debate the viability of various strategies. Some call for a bridging of the divide between grassroots politics and electoral politics because the two are integrally linked and mutually necessary. Others argue that engagement with the official political system is a necessary aspect of grassroots political work but contend that the goal of this engagement must always be reform of the system. Finally, some NHHPC members argue that nothing short of

169

revolution will bring about the desired changes within the political system and within hip-hop communities.

In her book *Stand and Deliver,* Yvonne Bynoe explains that while national electoral politics is important, most individuals are likely to feel more connected and involved in politics when they are happening at a local level. This is not, however, the typical American concept of politics. As Bynoe points out, Americans "seem to be comfortable with the notion of the leader being a person disconnected from the masses, occupying a prominent position either above or in front of the general public" (10). Many Americans see voting for these leaders as the most important political act. We often see grassroots activism and organizing as the domain of the radical and overzealous. Bynoe argues that these notions are counterproductive if not outright destructive toward social change. "This leadership construct discourages average citizens from envisioning themselves as leaders and challenging the decisions made by established leaders. Perhaps most dangerously, this hierarchical model renders the public passive spectators, since the leader is solely responsible for resolving issues and then conveying solutions to the masses" (ibid). Grassroots politics rejects this model of leadership and aims to empower individuals and communities and to build power from the bottom up.

Some NHHPC members actually see politics and activism as separate and distinct practices. These practices involve different skill sets and very different spheres of influence. Individuals can participate in electoral politics through voting in addition to being actively involved in grassroots activism and community organizing. Few, however,

considered grassroots activists as serious contenders for political office. Within the NHHPC Austin LOC, members regularly called for other members to run for local office. No one, however, accepted this challenge; everyone believed, ultimately, that his or her talents were better put to use in the activist realm.

NHHPC list member Wayne Emilien explains that it is important to understand the difference between activism and politics. "Politicians have no choice but to sacrifice some things to push their agenda. Activists don't have to… That is not to say that activism does not have its place in politics, on a grassroots level. Activism is the vessel by which minds are changed" (3 January 2009). Community members like Emilien argue that activists, on the one hand, are able to remain steadfast in their commitments and values and do not have to compromise. Politicians, on the other hand, are required to compromise and to find a middle ground. While activists can influence politicians, the two areas of political influence remain distinct.

Some participants argue that real political change will only emerge when hip-hop community members cross the divide between activism and electoral politics. In a recent interview with Jeff Chang, Kevin Powell, who ran for the U.S. Congress in the 2008 election, summed up the situation like this:

> Young Berg, the new hip-hop artist, asked me recently when was this CHANGE Barack Obama is promising going to happen? My response was simple: When YOU become the change you want to see, when YOU make it happen, when YOU understand the leadership we are waiting for is US. That is the message we need to be putting out there very clearly to young America. (Chang, "Bigger")

On a panel at the NHHPC conference in Las Vegas in 2008 "The Electoral Reality: How Do We Vote for a Hip Hop Agenda or Can We?" Reverend Lennox

Yearwood, president and founder of the Hip Hop Caucus, argued, "there has to be a melding of two sides of this process," meaning that the grassroots and the "official" policy-making aspects of political communities must work together. The 2008 election season also saw hip-hop journalist and activist Rosa Clemente selected as the vice-presidential nominee for the Green Party. Clemente expressed disappointment and frustration that her candidacy and its platform received such limited support from hip-hop communities. Her experience suggests that hip-hop communities continue to struggle with bridging the gap between activism and policy-making.

Another important idea that repeatedly arose is the distinction between social reform and social revolution. Bynoe describes this distinction as one of the key tensions within Black political discourse.

> The political tension that continues to exist among Black Americans can be roughly defined by two competing ideologies: reform and revolution. The reformists basically accept the United States' political and capitalist-based economic systems and seek to effect change by working within the established social and legislative frameworks. In contrast, the revolutionaries (militants or radicals) oppose the United States' political and economic systems as inherently racist and oppressive. Revolutionaries therefore advocate wholesale changes to the current United States system or the development of sovereign entities solely for Black Americans. (39)

Del Llano describes a similar tension but puts it another way, arguing that people have three political options. First, she suggests, people can "Do nothing and sit home not participating at all, ever." Second, people could "Lead a revolution and overthrow the current political system." This is the revolutionary approach; del Llano says she is "not against this if someone could show me (1) a strategy to succeed with this plan, and (2) what they plan to replace our system with that will be better." The final option according

to del Llano is to "Work within our current political system to improve it." Del Llano sees this as the most viable option currently. "This would involve voting and also working in between the elections on things that we do like community organizing, activism advocacy, etc." (11 November 2008).

Again, Nkrumah represents the revolutionary approach to this argument. According to Nkrumah, "there has to be electoral overhaul (not reform) which clears out the archaic system we are stuck in right now…. [T]he problem is that there is no opportunity to restructure the electoral system because those involved in passing such bills are 99% demos/republicans. Why would they make changes to that which empower[s] them?" He goes on to argue that the existing political system is, in fact, "a barrier to democracy." From Nkrumah's revolutionary perspective, "If we build anything now it should be an institution that is the tool for destroying this money-based electoral-college-deciding undemocratic system" (4 November 2008).

This tension between reformist ideologies and revolutionary ideologies is not necessarily a deal breaker for hip-hop political work. As Austin participant Debbie Russell explains, political activists do have the option to work "within the system to a degree – to radically change it…while leading a revolution by example, modeling the better world [of] tomorrow" (11 November 2008). Debates such as these constitute the NHHPC community as a community of practice. The listserv can function as a space in which activists and organizers can discuss strategies, tactics, and best practices. It is a space where they can celebrate successes and ask advice when problems arise. In important ways, disagreement keeps the community vibrant and thriving.

Some NHHPC members tired of the continual disagreement and discussion, however. As Rafiki Cai explains, such political analysis does little to help the people who struggle daily with material issues. "The masses of people are inspired and uplifted by sincere action, rooted in today, however flawed or imperfect" (7 November 2008). Others complained that the NHHPC was all talk and no action. Regardless of ideological disagreements, the discourse of the members is that *action within local communities* is the basic building block for social change.

LEADERSHIP

As the comments on voting and activism suggest, NHHPC members often have limited, if any, faith in "the system" to represent their interests and to lead them. The issue of leadership – where it should come from, who should be included, and how it should work – is central to nearly all political communities. Nonetheless, some matters about leadership are particular to the hip-hop communities. The priorities of hip-hop communities are not those of national or even state and city leaders. To expect these public leaders to promote solutions to, or even publicly to comment on or address, the issues most salient to them seems futile. The comparison between the Civil Rights Movement and the Hip-Hop Political Movement begs the issue of contemporary leadership. Where the Civil Rights Movement had distinct if competing leaders, the Hip-Hop Political Movement includes few individuals who masses of people would agree to

174

call leaders. For this reason, the movement must negotiate new approaches to leadership and adopt new attitudes toward leading.

Bynoe points to the ways in which an electoral system that treats Black people as second-class citizens when it does not ignore them altogether "not only fostered a sense of political impotence among the mass of Black Americans, it also gave rise to the 'Black leader,' a species with no counterpart in white America. In this capacity the Black leader acted as an emissary, negotiating with White decision makers on behalf of Black America" (3). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the archetypal "Black leader," and the question of who will be the next MLK is often repeated. According to the discourse amongst NHHPC members, although the notion of a "black leader" is antiquated, active and effective black leadership is still necessary. The idea, however, that a single Black man might represent all Black people is dangerously essentialist. According to listserv members, Black communities do need Black leaders, and they need a variety of them from various positions of power and walks of life.

The Civil Rights struggle in the United States continues to stand as a dramatic and defining era in the history of Black American leadership. Revisionism and nostalgia for "simpler" times when Black people were united in solidarity and Black communities flourished in cohesion tend to dominate contemporary discourse regarding the civil rights era. It is constructed as a time when the issues and goals within the movement were specific and clear and when leadership was usually religious and national. Commentators lament that today's Black communities lack the apparent unity and cohesiveness of Civil Rights era communities.

175

Such discourse erases a long history of division and internal strife within Black communities. These struggles continue today and the issues and concerns of one Black community may differ quite dramatically from those of another. Communities tend to form around interests as often as they do around race or geographic proximity, and the use of technology to connect disparate people creates opportunities, but also difficulties. The question is what sorts of leadership might be effective within and among contemporary communities.

Bynoe argues that the notion of a Black leader is "an anachronism since one, two, or even three people cannot adequately represent the multiplicity of interests and political beliefs that compose Black America" (4). This is not, however, the only reason that the search for *the* next Black leader is a misuse of time and energy. According to Bynoe,

> the term has become irrelevant because few so-called Black leaders are actually articulating a vision for the economic or political progress of Black Americans, much less doing the staff development; constituency-building; organizing and mobilization; and lobbying necessary to move a political or social agenda forward. Instead of Black leaders, there are Black spokesmen. (4)

The Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton are among these Black spokespeople. So, too is Oprah Winfrey. A number of African American scholars such as Cornell West and Michael Eric Dyson can also count themselves amongst the current group of Black "spokespeople." These are people who are called upon to represent the views of Black people to the masses when issues arise that seem to call for a Black opinion. These representatives tend to enjoy national recognition and a certain amount of social influence, but few have the power to enact material, or even legal, change in the lives of the Black people whose interests and attitudes they are supposed to represent.

176

In an article published in September 2006 in *The USA Today*, political commentator Juan Williams agrees that the possibility that the "next Martin Luther King, Jr." will emerge to lead Black people in a heroic struggle against injustice is unlikely if not impossible. He writes: "The most frequently asked question about black leadership in America today is: Where is the next Martin Luther King, Jr.?" He argues, however, that the question is misguided for a number of reasons. Not the least of these is that many Black people are in leadership positions, but "Who is at the forefront of the ongoing fight for racial equality in the nation? Who is taking leadership on difficult questions, such as how to respond to the disproportionate poverty among black and Hispanic Americans?" (par. 3). Similarly to Bynoe, Williams makes the point that being Black and in a position of power does not guarantee that a person will be using that power to address issues of particular concern to Black communities.

When Williams's article was posted to the NHHPC listserv, one list member asked, "Are we still looking for the next Martin or should we seek to be the next Martin/Malcolm?" (Johnson, 20 September 2006). Rosa Clemente quickly answered that she is *not* looking for the next MLK. Instead, she observes, Civil Rights leaders "left us with vision, wisdom and solutions." The task for those who aspire to be current leaders is to "take that beautiful work and legacy and grow in the 21st century" (20 September 2006). Jeff Campbell argues that the "question is stupid" and backward looking. He sees national Black leadership as largely false and detrimental to the development of power within local communities. "Black people don't need false leadership, we need

177

responsibility, ownership of our communities and future. No figureheads" (21 September 2006).

In his essay "Black Leaders…You're Fired!" Minister Paul Scott pokes fun at the very idea of the search for America's next Black leader. He argues that there is no place for Black figureheads within Black leadership anymore, and he elucidates the ways in which these figureheads have made themselves obsolete. He asserts that the stories of going to jail and facing police dogs no longer impress young people. Young black people today face similar challenges on a daily basis. He writes, "My cousin Clyde, the Klepto can do a 10 year bid standing on one hand. As far as police dogs, Lil Tyrone has to deal with stray pit bulls everyday coming home from school. So tales from the past just don't move Black folks like they used to" (par. 2). Furthermore, "My peeps in the street are … tired of seeing you flossin' on C-Span more than they see you in the hood, homie" (par. 4). Scott makes the point that the next generation is ready for its turn. "The Boyz in the Hood want a chance to shine on the cover of *Ebony* and on the radio, too.… My boy Tre.… once dropped some serious science after the Hurricane Katrina disaster in the middle of Mr. Luther's Barber Shop and got a standing ovation and a free haircut! Brotha's got some real talk for people but NPR won't holla at him" (par. 5).

While making light of claims that Black communities lack leadership, Scott makes the point that many people within black communities are well equipped to lead but rarely receive mainstream attention because media outlets and institutions rely on the same few spokespeople. Scott believes that these spokespeople have lost touch with their communities and are now merely paying lip service to their concerns. Therefore, Black

178

communities should fire these "leaders." Scott suggests that "To find a suitable replacement we have decided to launch our own reality show 'America's Next Black Leader' and we will be going through hoods across America with a camcorder to see who is actually out there feeding the people, fighting the power and doing all of the other things that you preached to us that we should be doing for the last 40 years" (par. 8).

Although many argue that the very notion of a "Black leader" is outdated, Juan Williams and others do see a continuing need for Black leaders who "inspire people to get the highest level degree possible to keep pace in the rough-and-tumble global economy" and who "tell young people that even if they are in the worst school imaginable, they must not drop out; that they shouldn't have children unless they are married; that they should work to avoid drifting into crime and the living hell of the prison system" (par. 12). Ultimately, his argument is that Black leadership has done a fine job of altering the public face of Blackness while doing very little to change the private lives of individual Black people. He believes Black folks are still looking for a leader who will help them find ways to ease if not eliminate their daily struggles.

According to members of the NHHPC, leadership for Black communities and for hip-hop communities will need to be multiple and diverse. As Jay Woodson puts it, a "movement must have several leaders. For a movement to become effective, it must address issues concerning several communities to build the necessary critical mass" (27 September 2006). Clemente emphasizes the importance of female leaders, arguing that she "would like to see the other half acknowledged, respected and all this subtle sexism to stop.… [I]f women…hold up half the world, we [should be] half the acknowledged

179

and respected leadership, we would add a more humane dimension" (20 September 2006). Campbell agrees that "diversifying leadership will strengthen the fight" (21 September 2006).

Participants in this project called for diversity in terms of areas of expertise and influence as well as political reach. Local, grassroots community leaders who can organize and affect change amongst community members are at least as important as those with legal and political influence at the city, state, and national level. The hip-hop community and the local communities who constitute it must not expect a national leader, even a Black president, to address all their local problems, let alone to solve them. Instead, hip-hop communities must develop strategies and skills to develop leadership from within. As Bynoe argues, "[I]t is time for the Hip Hop generation, particularly young Black Americans, to construct a more sophisticated dialogue about what constitutes leadership, politics and political action" (vii). Hip-hop political communities question the value of national political leaders as well as rappers as leaders; they also argue, however, that constituents have a responsibility to demand accountability on the part of leaders. Finally, they emphasize the need for community leaders and make the point that "we are the ones we have been waiting for."[11]

---

[11] This is the title of a book by Alice Walker. She took the title from a poem by June Jordan and explains that Black female a cappella singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock turned the poem into a song as well.

POLITICIANS AS LEADERS

Despite general dissatisfaction with federal and state electoral politics, many folks both within and outside of hip-hop communities think first of politicians when they think of leaders. The American president is commonly referred to as "the leader of the free world." People think of the mayor as the leader of a city and the governor as the leader of a state. In school, elected officials are represented as the most effective and venerable leaders. When the state or federal economy is in trouble or programs are cut or expanded, people blame these leaders. People argue that elected leaders are supposed to "represent" their constituents though their constituents rarely believe that this truly occurs.

According to the discourse within the NHHPC, elected officials mostly cannot be trusted to "lead" on issues that are of the greatest concern to hip-hop communities. NHHPC list member Vision sums up this concept as follows: "We can't trust our leadership. They don't seem to speak our language. Our issues are never highlighted unless they are forced to the forefront of the news" (21 September 2006). Typically these issues are thrust to the forefront of the news when violence occurs. For example, when high profile police brutality cases become national news, leaders are more likely to address this issue.

One of the problems that hip-hop communities face is a lack of direct connection among community leaders, activists, and organizers and the elected officials who are supposed to represent their interests. This is often a matter of class as well as social networks. The problem, however, is also a lack of outreach on the part of elected officials and a seeming lack of interest in developing a genuine understanding of the lives and

181

concerns of constituents. As NHHPC list member Anthony Springer explains, "I've seen a lot of legislative struggle from the suit and tie leadership, very little outreach to grass roots organizations and very little progress made as a result. Legislation without action is useless…. [W]e have more then enough people willing to lead, but the fractured state of the Black community makes it difficult for us to build a following" (21 September 2006). According to Springer and others, one of the challenges facing hip-hop communities in terms of leadership is diversity and lack of communication across groups. The most commonly suggested solution to this dilemma is diverse leadership, but for such leadership to be effective diverse leaders must be in communication with each other and working together.

While many who participated in this project expressed disappointment or disgust at the ways in which the political system ignores and excludes hip-hop constituencies (Black, Brown, poor, etc.), others believed that the system only works as well as its constituents make it work. If the system is failing, it is not the fault of the elected leaders. It is, instead, the job of the people to demand more from the politicians, from "the system," and from themselves. In a lengthy submission to the NHHPC listserv, Jarvis Johnson acknowledges the frustration that individuals feel toward elected officials but explains that he sees fixing these problems as voters' responsibility. "If you want something positive to happen then you must at the same time project the positive," he writes. If community members are dealing with problems that they think must be addressed at a city, state, or federal level, then it is their responsibility to attract the appropriate attention. Politicians, he argues, react to the most pressing problems, and it is

182

the people's job to impress upon politicians how serious the problems are. "Sometimes," he writes,

> we have to create a movement or a situation in which politicians will react.… We have to remember that all electeds are competing for the same money. So in order for us to get some for our neighborhood we have to make some noise.… We have to make some noise, not because our electeds are not doing their job, but to help them have the ammunition so that they can do their jobs. (22 September 2006)

Constituents cannot, he contends, blame politicians for their own failure to have their voices heard.

Johnson also disagrees with the dismissal of all elected politicians as only concerned with their own well-being and success. He argues that it is important to look at the real work that politicians do, at their proposals and their voting records, and to distinguish between those who are doing their jobs well and those who are failing to address their community's concerns. He does not deny that many fail, but he argues that it is not fair to lump them all together. "Yes, we have some problem electeds, but when some of those whom we elected are doing it right, give them some props. Stop placing everyone in the same bag." Johnson argues that citizens and their communities need elected officials to do good work. They play an important role in social change.

Furthermore, communities need to include elected officials in their various activities if they are going to succeed with social change work on a large scale. Johnson argues that it is important to look for allies amongst the elected officials and to seek solidarity with them. He asserts some are truly willing to work toward the goals that communities hold dear, and community leaders would be wise to take advantage of these connections. "There are some politicians who support the hip hop culture and would be

willing to do more with us. Not seeking to just get our vote, but because they know that we are not just the future we are the now" (ibid).

Members of the NHHPC describe at least three ways in which hip-hop communities can and should participate in and influence elected leaders. The first and most commonly discussed is voting and then holding elected officials accountable for their actions and policies. Both elected officials and community leaders are "representative" leaders, or leaders whose power is derived from having earned the support of the public. "Since the power of representative leaders rests with the people, the people have to more aggressively exercise their right to terminate the services of lackluster leaders" (Bynoe 9). As NHHPC list member Vision explains:

> In order for [politicians] to respect us and the issues we face as legitimate, we have to, first, respect ourselves and become more proactive agents of our own survival. Once we are able to do this…Maybe some of our apathy will begin to diminish. If we can diminish some of the apathy…Maybe we can become more active participants in this 'glorious' system of ours. If we are able to become more active…Maybe we can get these politicians to come with real gifts of change during this season of theirs. (21 September 2006)

According to this line of thinking, participation in electoral politics is key to a sense of enfranchisement and empowerment.

Additionally, as the hip-hop generation matures, more and more members of the hip-hop community will be running for and elected to office. The 2008 national election alone saw the campaigns of Powell for U.S. Congress and Clemente for Vice President on the Green Party ticket. Although neither candidate won the race, such candidacies help to put hip-hop politics on national political agendas, provide leadership to hip-hop

184

communities, and allow the general public to witness the rise of the hip-hop generation as a serious political force.

Finally, hip-hop community members should "make some noise" to assure that the concerns of their communities are attended to by those they elect to office. This is especially true in areas where the represented constituency is largely young, lower income, or of color. That is to say, hip-hop communities should demand that community leaders truly represent the people who live in those communities.

Both hip-hop artists and hip-hop activists have roles to play when it comes to making noise. As Immortal Technique explains, "sometimes a Revolutionary has to do things that resemble gangsta behavior…. [W]e cannot ignore the fact that a closed mouth does not get fed" (26 December 2006). Artists can spread the word about community concerns through lyrics and information provided at live performances. One anonymous participant makes the point that "real hip hop must contain a purpose or motivation to do something more than entertain…. [Artists] should contribute to social change by putting racism, classism, poverty, and sexism into a context" (Anonymous, 5 July 2007). Gator agrees that artists should talk about what "what we need to do to make life better" in their music and should participate in activist actions because artists "have a responsibility" to their communities (17 July 2007). Activists can continue to strive to improve the connections and communications between communities and elected officials. This is precisely the sort of work the Reverend Yearwood's Hip Hop Caucus is striving to do in Washington.

COMMUNITY LEADERS

Although elected political leaders can play an important role in hip-hop politics, local community leaders are not only more important, but more effective with regard to instituting change. "So many of our people are looking to the outside for leadership, the true leadership begins at home.… I don't mind those who step out to the front in global news, but don't get so caught up on what they are doing that we forget how to discipline our own" (Johnson, 21 September 2006). The idea is that leadership starts at home, and local communities and their members are best equipped to identify and address that community's problems and concerns. The most valuable and effective changes come from within as do the best leaders.

One of the benefits of community leadership is the education and empowerment of community members. As Bynoe argues, the hip-hop community must develop leaders from within, citizen leaders who are truly "of the people." She points out that the "development of citizen leaders requires a paradigm shift that moves civic engagement and political participation from abstract concepts, reserved for the privileged, to routine activities for average Americans. This means that politics and civic engagement become everyone's business" (12). Blakes makes the point that "political" is "a code word for speaking about what goes on in society" (5 March 2008). He argues that if people think of politics in this way, then nearly everything has a political aspect. This shift in the ways in which community members think about politics and participation can lead to the development of educated, informed, and involved community members who share information and resources and see the care and development of their community as their

responsibility. These communities would resemble Robert Putnam's ideal communities and they would experience high levels of social capital.

One list member explains, "We have to move beyond needing our leaders to be holy and identify leaders that can assist in bringing about the desired result" (Allah, 12 September 2006). The point is that the community does not need perfect leaders; instead it needs effective leadership. The most effective leadership will come from the community so that the concerns that are addressed arise directly from community members and solutions meet immediate needs. Because communities are diverse, citizens must accept responsibility for identifying problems and creating solutions that address the needs within each community. They must also take responsibility for identifying individuals with the skills to organize people and to seek and utilize resources available to them.

Participants also argued that community members need to take the time to nurture and develop future leaders from amongst community youth. Gator, who sees himself as a leader within his community, states that he takes every opportunity to talk with young people in his neighborhood about who they are, what they are doing, and where they are heading. He points out that he has these conversations because "communication goes a long way" and young people need guidance. He argues that hip-hop is really for the youth and that hip-hop activism must "guide them in a direction to where they are conscious about what they are doing" (17 July 2007). Campbell agrees that "empowering our youth…should be our responsibility and focus." He sees "the grassroots movement of

Hip Hop activism targeted at the public education system [as] the greatest political move we are making" (21 September 2006).

Furthermore, Campbell argues that community activists need to "stand up and change this shit…. If we create unity among us within the Hip Hop community between grassroots community and the corporate Hip Hop, we could have the Wisdom, Wealth, and Workers to get the job done" (13 August 2008). Here Campbell makes the point that a politics of exclusion that works to divide the "masses" of hip-hop listeners from the political or from the "conscious" hip-hop constituents is counter-productive of social change. Campbell imagines a community with open boundaries, but also one in which communication is emphasized and resources are shared.

RAPPERS AS LEADERS

Much has been made of the potential of hip-hop artists to become leaders and effective agents for social change. Hip-hop moguls such as Russell Simmons and artists such as Sean "Diddy" Combs and T.I. (working with the Hip Hop Caucus) have made big news via their political participation (Vargas; Lamar). Such celebrities are able to bring mainstream attention to the causes and issues with which they align themselves. They have, however, also drawn wide criticism of their alleged superficial political involvement and use of politics to increase their celebrity rather than vice versa.

Basically, three positions exist within this discussion. For one, some argue that rappers are artists and should not be expected to be role models, let alone leaders.

188

Second, some argue that rappers have a responsibility to address issues of social or political concern. At the very least, according to this line of reasoning, rappers ought not to promote destructive notions of materialism, violence, and sexism. Finally, some take a more moderate position arguing whether rappers can be effective in influencing listeners and promoting particular causes. Hip-hop communities, however, cannot depend upon artists to play these leadership roles and must develop their own leaders from activist and organizing communities.

Bynoe is among those who argue that rappers are ill-equipped to be political leaders. She contends that "The commercial success of 'conscious' rap artists along with the laziness of the mainstream media helped to spawn the *raptivist*." Bynoe defines the raptivist as "a rap artist who dabbles in activism on the side" (ix). Bynoe argues that these rappers have neither the skills nor the knowledge to provide effective leadership and, instead, represent a failure on the part of hip-hop communities to train and develop genuine political leadership. According to Bynoe's critique of the rapper as leader:

> The ascent of the raptivists in the media meant that the post civil rights generation had failed to recognize and put forth real political leaders, satisfying itself with the pseudo-political rhetoric of rap artists instead. The result is that the post-civil rights generation lacks gravitas and thus has failed to develop its own political agenda, much less a strategy to execute it. (x)

NHHPC list member I Majestic Allah largely agrees with Bynoe's assessment. "I think we take 'conscious' or 'progressive' hip hop artists way more seriously than we should, unless they have proven themselves to be able to expand beyond rhetoric and actually offer frameworks and solutions to our issues" (12 September 2006). His point is that, while it may be valuable and important for rappers to talk about the problems that

hip-hop communities face, few of them offer solutions. Ultimately, even socially conscious rappers describe problems ranging from structural racism to police brutality to the challenges and horrors of poverty but *do* very little to change any of these situations within their communities. In Bynoe's opinion "while rap artists certainly have a role in the movement for racial equality, the work of defining and implementing a political agenda should be left to post-civil rights generation activists, organizers, and politicians" (xii).

NHHPC list member Jeff Campbell sees rappers as having a responsibility to their communities and argues that their influence and resources will be key to effective social movements within hip-hop communities. He critiques artists who grew up in horrific conditions, who are "from the streets," and who go on to "escape the hood [and] never look back." Campbell believes that "it's going to take real leadership" to change the dire conditions from which many rappers emerged, "and like it or not, the only real leadership that can create such a movement is Hip Hop." He points out that hip-hop culture speaks to young people in a way that nothing else really does. Rappers are "who the young respect, and it is Hip Hop who is setting the example for those who are out there doing dirt to follow" (13 August 2008). Elected officials and the "suit and tie leadership" are unable to influence young people the way that hip-hop artists can, despite whatever good intentions they may have. Unlike parents, politicians, activists, teachers, and other potential community leaders, hip-hop artists enjoy a level of respect due to their coolness. Within youth communities, hip-hop artists often represent the epitome of cool and are

190

held in the highest regard. They are seen to have made it; they often set trends and have the potential to influence young people in important and significant ways.

Campbell argues that hip-hop communities need to mobilize the resources that hip-hop generates within communities in order to create change. No matter who is elected to office, change is going to come from within communities. As Campbell explains, "Barack Obama cannot do it, it's going to take exactly what these entertainers have. Street credibility, finances, and influence." Campbell calls for "a movement among corporate Hip Hop to go back to the communities where Hip Hop Culture finds its origin and develop a plan to redirect the anger and frustration of our people, open their eyes and give them hope" (13 August 2008).

While NHHPC list member Earth recognizes and appreciates the contributions that socially conscious rappers make to the hip-hop political movement, she argues that it is important to remember that "Hip Hop artists are primarily just that…artists. They don't make movements, they make music." She contends that many artists "make contributions and grind in the community along with their music" but others do not so "why depend on them when artists have been known throughout time to be inconsistent" (12 September 2006). Furthermore, Earth points out that many artists whose music might not be classified as "conscious" are doing real work within their communities to improve the lives of community members. David Banner, for example, created a foundation to assist Katrina survivors, and T.I. puts money toward building affordable housing. Earth asks, "Would you rather have the person with the 'right' message or someone who's doing the

191

'right' thing? Pick your poison cuz for Hip Hop in 2006, you ain't gonna always get both" (ibid).

Most importantly, Earth asserts that, besides hip-hop artists, there are "way more influential people to hold accountable who control the distribution of resources. We shouldn't hold [artists] to standards any higher than our local politicians and others in positions of power" (ibid). Finally, that hip-hop communities demand leadership from rappers is cause for concern. As Earth explains, "It is something to say for the lack of … recognized leadership if folks are looking to musicians to spark and maintain change. It is something to say when musicians and people in entertainment are many children's biggest role models…. [S]omething is wrong with that picture and we are in trouble" (ibid). Ultimately, Earth argues, socially conscious rappers can be effective and help to raise awareness and provide inspiration. Others might use their celebrity and wealth to make contributions to social change movements. Hip-hop activists, however, should neither rely upon nor expect these sorts of contributions from artists. Sparking and maintaining social change is simply not the job of the artist; it is job of the activist.

The hip-hop political movement offers a number of critiques of the existing political system. These hip-hop political community members generally agree that the political system itself is in need of reform if not a complete overhaul. Community members question the value of the vote in a system that is so consistently unreliable, and many argue that engagement with electoral politics is a waste of time. The 2008 presidential election offered a particularly compelling site for the debate of these issues. Whatever the perceived importance of voting and electoral politics, grassroots politics

and organizing are considered much more central to the hip-hop political movement. Community members agree that problems will be identified and solutions sought and implemented at the grassroots level. For this reason community leadership is essential to the success of hip-hop politics. Although they may not entirely agree on the relative importance of each, hip-hop political community members also generally agree that communities need a variety of leaders from elected officials to community activists. Leaders may emerge from the ranks of politicians, activists, educators or artists, but effective leaders will undoubtedly maintain connections with the communities they claim to serve. The NHHPC listserv served as a forum for discussion and debate regarding all of these issues. The NHHPC itself functions as a community of practice within which members learn and grow from one another. Such a community does not demand shared values and beliefs, which are clearly diverse amongst this group. Instead, a community of practice requires a shared commitment to a project or an occupation. The NHHPC was able to maintain such a commitment for some time.

Chapter 6: Breaking It Down

This project aimed to address three interconnected sets of questions: the first set asks what binds hip-hop communities together and whether simply listening to hip-hop constitutes membership; the second set asks what types of communities form around hip-hop and what purposes these communities serve for members; the final set asks about the relationship between hip-hop culture and politics. Throughout this dissertation, I have relied upon the members of the National Hip Hop Political Convention as a case study of a political hip-hop community. In this concluding chapter, I will review this project's findings with regard to these questions. In doing so, I will also describe the processes by which the National Hip Hop Political Convention broke down and eventually unofficially dissolved.

In chapter two, I discussed a variety of ways in which communities have been conceptualized and theorized. Pierre Bourdieu describes how tastes contribute to individual and social identity and the ways in which these identities function to shape social connections and an individual sense of belonging to a community. According to Herbert Gans, "taste publics" constitute "communities" at least in the sense that people who share cultural tastes are likely to think of themselves as similar and in some ways connected to each other. Today's taste publics are largely masses since media and art are transmitted mostly through mass media outlets. A mass consists of individuals from all walks of life who become interested in the same object but who have little interaction

with each other. The generic "hip-hop community," including everyone who listens to and enjoys hip-hop music is, certainly, a mass.

Other types of communities that have formed around hip-hop, however, involve more direct interaction amongst members. Hip-hop communities associated with the National Hip Hop Political Convention (NHHPC) include the local communities to which individual members belong. These are sometimes also organized into Local Organizing Committees (LOCs) where local members meet and participate in projects and actions in real, physical space and time. They also include the community of practice created online through the NHHPC listserv. This listserv also occasionally serves as a support group. Additionally, individual members who identify with hip-hop culture and consider themselves members of a "hip-hop community" create "imagined communities." The parameters and traits of these imagined communities vary significantly amongst individuals. I argue that these differences contribute to the lack of solidarity and cohesion that eventually lead to the NHHPC's demise.

In the second portion of the chapter, I will discuss the role that hip-hop music plays within these communities, focusing on the relationships among listeners, artists, music, and politics. Although participants agree that hip-hop community is a useful concept, most express concerns about the effectiveness of this community in creating social change. Nonetheless participants continue to describe hip-hop music as politically potent, arguing that it functions in dialogue with communities and their members, providing both a forum and a catalyst for the discussion of important issues. Additionally, hip-hop continues to offer the possibility of connection between artists and listeners and

195

the potential to mobilize resources through these connections. Some respondents are less optimistic and argue that hip-hop music and the hip-hop communities are failing to have the political impact and to create the social change that once seemed possible. I explain both the reasoning and the proposed solutions offered by these participants. The chapter closes with suggestions for further research.

WHO IS HIP-HOP?

Most respondents agree that at least one hip-hop community does exist, but disagree about what type of community it is. Bavu Blakes points out the time, energy, emotion, and other resources that listeners, artists, and their families devote to hip-hop and argues that these people constitute a community. Another respondent defines the "hip-hop community" quite simply as "the people involved or fans of the hip-hop culture" (Anonymous1, 19 April 2009).

Most definitions of "hip-hop community" involve a greater degree of commitment than mere listening. At the very least, one ought to listen to the music, identify with it in some way, and experience a sense of belonging to a community of people who share one's interest and sense of belonging. Some participants require a demonstrated commitment to hip-hop values such as antiracism and class struggle. One interviewee explains that members of the hip-hop community "can relate to the same issues and share concerns" (Anonymous2, 19 April 2009). Another describes hip-hop as a "communal effort" and defines community members as those who "believe that the music and issues

196

(both positive and negative) that arise from the music impact the people listening and living it" (Anonymous, 5 July 2007). Others base inclusion on listeners' contributions to hip-hop culture, but these might be made in a number of ways. For example, one respondent contends, "There are people that like hip-hop that I don't think are part of the community, they view it from the outside looking in…. If you are not actively participating in one of the 4 elements then you are somewhat of an outsider" (Anonymous1, 19 April 2009). Cherryl Aldave describes a similar "outsider" status for some but employs somewhat different criteria and terminology. According to her, "people who just listen to Hip Hop, but do not participate in anything 'positive' are still part of the community, but I would consider them more 'inactive members'" (Aldave, 2 December 2006).

Some definitions involve issues of "authenticity," including blackness and street credibility. For some respondents, race plays a role in defining the hip-hop community. Aldave, for example, explains that the "Blackness" of hip-hop is the thing that she likes most about it. She argues that "The community part [of hip-hop] seems to make less sense the more non-Black Hip Hop gets" (ibid). Although Aldave does not exclude White people from the community, she is "not convinced that the majority of White people who listen to Hip Hop would really be willing to give up their race privilege if given the opportunity, and this…separates them from the sense of struggle inherent to hip-hop" (ibid).

Blackness as a key requirement for membership in the hip-hop community is generally critiqued rather than supported amongst the interviewees in this project.

Nonetheless a genuine interest in and understanding of black musical traditions and culture are described as important aspects of inclusion for non-Black members. NHHPC member Troy Nkrumah expresses the importance of cultural sensitivity, writing,

> one of the modern additions is the diversity of the movement… but never ever ever forget who your parents are!! Cuz it lets you know who you are… and white folks should feel honored to be allowed to now be a part of a movement that for generations excluded them because they (the whites) had no personal or historical relationship to the movements, outside of being on the wrong side of it. The hip-hop political movement is your chance to be on the right side of history for once… Understand that… respect that please. (14 September 2006)

Ultimately, Aldave herself defines membership in the community as open to "anyone who is down for erasing racial barriers and leveling the playing field, or otherwise working towards something positive" (2 December 2006).

Undoubtedly, a large and diverse set of people forms what might be considered a hip-hop "taste public." These are listeners who understand hip-hop's lyrical phrasings, its rhythms, and its language. If an individual identifies with this taste culture, he or she may be more likely to participate in hip-hop culture in ways other than simply listening. As Austin respondent Trevor Goodchild explains, people who "wouldn't otherwise consider pressing social/political issues will be more inclined to think about it if it is in a catchy chorus in their boomboxes" (18 April 2009). He or she may be more open to lyrics that describe problems and push for social change, but identification with the taste culture is by no means a guarantee of such a commitment. Many listeners remain unaware of the history of social struggle out of which early hip-hop grew or of the ongoing social and political projects to which some members of hip-hop communities are connected. Tricia Rose explains that in her experience "hip hop, and only hip hop, is the way that most

[white hip hop fans] come to black culture – and to black people for that matter." She

finds that White hip-hop fans "know virtually nothing about black people or the cultural

traditions out of which much of hip hop comes" (*Hip Hop Wars*, 231).

Census data and sociological research bear out Rose's observations. American

communities, schools, and many work places remain largely racially segregated areas.

According to one study conducted in the racially diverse cities of Chicago and Detroit,

people of different racial backgrounds have "blind spots" about the communities in which

people of other ethnicities live. The researchers report:

> For the most part, we found that whites, blacks and Latinos all tend to know more
> about communities their co-ethnics live in. But it is also the case that African
> Americans and Latinos, relative to whites, know about a broader range of
> different kinds of communities—racially mixed and racially segregated alike.
>
> For their part, whites are far less likely than Latinos or African Americans to
> know about heavily African-American communities; perhaps not surprisingly.
> But what is troubling, from the standpoint of encouraging integration, is that
> whites' blind spots also include communities that are racially mixed (either with
> Latinos or African Americans)—even those where whites are in the majority.
> (Krysan, par. 6 & 7)

Census data for the Austin/San Marcos metropolitan area show that White people

typically live in neighborhoods that are over seventy percent White and less than five

percent Black (CensusScope). (According to the same census data, the population of

Austin/San Marcos is 60.68% White, 26.23% Hispanic, and 7.74% Black.) One

interviewee describes his community as "predominantly white and fairly middle/upper

class" and explains that there are not many problems in his community "except the

disparity between [his] in Austin and other communities" (Anonymous3, 19 April 2009).

Like the White hip-hop fans that Rose describes, this young person has come to his understanding of racism and Black culture through hip-hop music.

Nonetheless, hip-hop fandom has grown to the extent that numerous subcultures exist within hip-hop culture. In a media environment that is saturated with hip-hop and its cultural artifacts, demonstrating one's familiarity with contemporary mainstream hip-hop is not typically an impressive expression of cultural capital. Amongst hardcore "headz," for example, emphasis is placed on knowing hip-hop's history, having a grasp of the music of the pioneers, and being able to quote "old school" lyrical content. For fans of underground hip-hop, familiarity with one's local scene as well as the current heavy hitters on the national underground scene are most important. In large urban areas with thriving local hip-hop music scenes, listeners and artists alike may embrace regional sounds and styles while paying only minimal attention to goings on and releases in national mainstream hip-hop. Each of these factions may legitimately constitute a hip-hop community, but members of each are unlikely to have a connection to or any interaction with members of other similar hip-hop communities with somewhat different tastes or in different physical locations.

Hip-hop subcultures may be based on musical taste, but they may also have a great deal to do with race and class. "Backpackers," for example, tend to listen exclusively to "conscious" underground music and to scoff at the authenticity of the much-maligned "commercial" music; they also tend toward the white, middle-class demographic that makes up a huge proportion of the "conscious rap" audience. The same interviewee who describes his neighborhood as "white and fairly middle/upper class," for

200

example, emphasizes that he does not listen to hip-hop "music on the radio" but instead to "'underground' artists" (Anonymous3, 19 April 2009). Subcultures may also be based upon aspects of cultural capital in which economic class may play a significant role. Bourdieu argues that strategies for demonstrating one's superiority and status must vary depending upon one's financial capital. On the one hand, if I can go out and purchase every hip-hop record ever made, I can demonstrate my fandom and my social status through material possessions. But if, on the other hand, I have access to very limited means to record ownership, I might demonstrate my status by writing rhymes that reference classics or choose a hip-hop subgenre about which most fans know very little and learn about it in great detail. The boundaries of these subcultures are often carefully guarded in a process of inclusion and exclusion that assure insiders of their superior status within the overall hip-hop audience.

PROBLEMS IN THE CREATION AND MAINTENANCE OF HIP-HOP COMMUNITIES

As Gans points out, taste publics are not organized communities and do not necessarily share values. While some of the respondents' definitions of "hip-hop community" require a commitment to shared values, the values required are broadly defined and the minimal commitment to these values does little or nothing to bind community members to one another. A taste public, therefore, is extremely unlikely to unite people to work toward any single goal, especially one that requires commitment to moral ideals and hard work both in terms of time and emotion.

201

One of the major criticisms of hip-hop as a force for social change is not a critique of the music or the culture but an observation that the current generation is not connected, as the Civil Rights generation was, by any single pressing social issue. According to this line of discourse the current generation has no "single great issue around which the hip-hop movement can rally" (Watkins 151). Additionally, disorganization plagues current efforts to develop programs for social change around hip-hop. As NHHPC list member Kali Williams explains, "We are living in the shadow of the contradictions of the hard fought partial victories we gained and the crushing defeats we have sustained thereafter in the BLM [Black Liberation Movement] that have lead to our current disorganized state. We should take a sober assessment of this fact and use it to guide us forward" (Williams, 6 June 2008). Williams encourages anyone interested in contributing to a hip-hop social change movement to focus on organization and clearly defined purpose. These are precisely the sorts of principles that would create communities in which individual members put their own needs and concerns aside to address those of the whole group.

If neither the music nor a single pressing social issue bind hip-hop communities, then what *does* bind communities? More significantly, on what basis might a hip-hop community effectively assert itself to create social change? Within local communities, individual issues often arise that enable hip-hop communities to work in a concerted and effective manner. In Austin and Central Texas, Kenavon Carter spearheaded a "Know Your Rights" campaign that brought people together to fight police brutality and abuse of power. In Flint, Michigan, the local chapter of the NHHPC led a campaign against the "anti-sagging" laws that criminalized low slung, baggy pants. Several communities

formed to help Katrina survivors in New Orleans, including Williams's People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition.

While local communities can rally around issues like these, they often have difficulty maintaining momentum and purpose when the immediate situation is addressed or its urgency subsides. For communities to remain politically effective, members must be connected beyond a shared taste in music or a single issue around which they are working. According to one respondent, to maintain a community members "need to maintain a close sense of unity and collective responsibility with each other…. Unity and collective responsibility are the life giving nectar from which many great things come…" (Aldave, 6 June 2008). Unity and responsibility may be "life giving nectar," but they also may be in short supply within many hip-hop communities. As Williams observes, "[P]rogressive forces are not only disorganized, but seriously disunited ideologically and politically…. We got some work to do" (6 June 2008). An Austin respondent argues that unity and mutual moral support are of paramount importance if "we are indeed building a community of people that encourage the rest to be the change they wish to see" (Goodchild, 18 April 2009). The lack of ideological unity and moral support most likely contributes to the difficulty that hip-hop communities encounter when they attempt to organize and maintain effective groups.

Davey D also argues that a lack of real organization plagues hip-hop communities. "We have a problem. It's called disorganization coupled with apathy…. Politics of every level – from electoral to grassroots movement building has not been exciting or relevant to many" (6 June 2008). According to this line of thinking, in order to

become truly organized the individuals who make up a group must have a sense of their own effectiveness, empowerment, and relevance to the struggle. Without a sense that each can offer a significant contribution to a group or movement, individuals are unlikely to devote the considerable time and energy required to participate. The challenge, then, is not only to find ways to unite the various individuals that might form a hip-hop group or constituency but also to inspire individuals to recognize and exercise their power as political citizens. D argues that the disorganization may not be due to a lack of a single unifying issue but rather to a long history of political disenfranchisement, which has led to a sense of both hopelessness and apathy.

THE FAILURE OF THE NATIONAL HIP HOP POLITICAL CONVENTION

As I wrap up three years of research with the NHHPC, the community appears to have disintegrated. The listserv has been nearly silent for several months and the website is inaccessible due to "malicious software." The email that I sent to the listserv to inquire about the problem with the website generated a number of responses offering explanations for the group's failure. Troy Nkrumah believes "things fell apart because people were not doing their part to forward the organization. Everyone was fine while a few were doing all the work, but then when those few were not doing the work anymore, no one was willing to pick it up" (10 November 2009). In response to the technical issue he explains that there is "no point" in fixing it "unless people wanna step up" (10 November 2009).

Another NHHPC member argues that the problems that led to the failure of the NHHPC were institutional and were passed down from previous Black activist organizations. According to Lester Spence:

> The NHHPC borrowed heavily from two organizations – the 1972 National Black Political Convention, and from the 1998 Black Radical Congress –without sufficiently analyzing their difficulties. The NBPC fell because they did not have the resources to develop independently (nor scale up), they couldn't reconcile the difference between political representatives with voting constituencies and activists without them. The BRC still exists but has the same challenges. As a result neither organizations were able to sustain themselves. What problems individuals had with one another in the NHHPC were only exacerbated by the institutional flaws. (10 November 2009)

Spence argues that the community was built upon a failed model and it neglected to address these problems before they led to the break up of the community.

Another factor that contributed to the community's dissolution may be the use of technologically-based communication as the major form of interaction. For many NHHPC members spread across the nation in various communities, the listserv is their main and sometimes only connection to the organization. Regular calls for less talk and more action are often met with the response that actions were happening in local communities, but the listserv is a *discussion* listserv. Participants who are not associated with an active local group often find this response unsatisfying. For example, Aldave writes, "[I]f the majority of the interactions in this group in the future continue to be discussions, [I] see myself failing to achieve a measurable sense of satisfaction from this group. [C]onversation is not enough…. [W]hat we need is action, what our children need is action" (7 June 2008).

A lack of unity and a focus on discussion are acceptable and workable within a community of practice. If members simply hope to learn from others and to share information, unity is not especially important. When, however, community members seek moral support and group solidarity, when members want the community to function thusly, the bickering and debate of the community of practice become a divisive and destructive force.

Additionally, the NHHPC consistently had difficulty mobilizing resources. As Bob Edwards and John D. McCarthy explain, access to and the mobilization of a variety of resource types are keys to the implementation and maintenance of any successful collective action. Undoubtedly, resources are unequally distributed, and hip-hop communities are historically amongst those with limited access to material resources. Edwards and McCarthy also describe a variety of types of resources, however, some of which may be plentiful within hip-hop communities. These include 1) moral resources such as legitimacy and celebrity, 2) cultural resources such as conceptual tools and specialized knowledge, 3) social-organizational resources such as access to social networks and established organizations, and 4) human resources such as labor, experience, skills, and leadership. If hip-hop communities could more successfully mobilize available resources they would almost undoubtedly become much more effective in their efforts to form politically effective communities and to create social change.

Many NHHPC list members emphasize the necessity of resource mobilization to building social movements and working for social change. Zenzele Isoke sums up the

situation succinctly when she writes, "Organizing is always done collectively and at the grassroots level. Organizing involves building relationships, pulling together resources and mobilizing bodies" (3 October 2006). Isoke argues for the necessity of a variety of resources from the material, to the social organizational, to the human. List member Jay Woodson agrees, pointing out the "need to network, build and develop with individuals, organizations and forces that can build campaigns together" (6 June 2008). Woodson argues that the first step is "developing our material resources," but he also recognizes the importance of other types of resources including "political education, skills, structure, vision and material resources" (ibid). These comments suggest that many list members are aware that, although communities might lack some material resources, utilizing hip-hop music and the resources that amass around it provides a base of non-material resources that communities must tap effectively to develop social change programs.

Finally, I would argue that the NHHPC suffered because too many members found that the community was not consistent with the communities they had imagined. For some the group was not progressive enough. For others, it was too inclusive and unwilling to exclude what they saw as destructive forces. Some members experienced the community as sexist. In each of these cases, individuals imagined a community to which they wished to belong. When the community failed to live up to the imagined standard, that sense of belonging faltered and commitment waned.

HIP-HOP MUSIC AND ITS POLITICAL POTENTIAL

If hip-hop is not effectively organizing listeners into communities whose members experience ideological unity and shared responsibility, if it is not connecting people across racial and social divides, is it living up to its political potential in other ways? Is it serving other political purposes? What might the purposes be? And is this enough without the development of communities who can create social change? Is there any agreement amongst participants in hip-hop culture about the roles that hip-hop music can and should play?

Some commentators on hip-hop culture contend that hip-hop is political by its very existence. When poor disenfranchised young people of color made a multi-billion dollar business out of two turntables and a microphone, this was, they argue, a political act. As one NHHPC list member explains, "Hip hop's original intention was to give voice to those who were marginalized or voiceless" (jwharton, 28 December 2006). People who have consistently been ignored, who have been the last in line for everything, have brought their voices to the forefront of popular culture and are now being heard around the world. They are telling their stories and speaking truth to power in new and creative ways. Immortal Technique argues that gangsta rap, for example, "was another form of Revolutionary music, it reached the unreachable, it taught the unteachable" (28 December 2006).

For some, this claim of inherent political potency pushes the definition of politics. Blakes points out that, although he does not consider himself particularly political, he has been called a political rapper simply because he speaks about issues that matter to people

and tries to describe real life as he sees it. As he puts it, "[A] lot of times political is like a code word for speaking about what goes on in society" (5 March 2008). Blakes is not opposed to being called political but contends that if any comment on what is going on in society is "political," then nearly all lyrical content is political. As he points out, it is very difficult not to talk about society at all.

Furthermore, hip-hop music has brought issues and ideas to the forefront of public discourse that were formerly taboo, especially in mixed race and mixed class gatherings. In *Hip Hop Wars*, Rose points out that hip-hop politics has become synonymous with the politics of the inner city and with Black communities themselves. She argues that when we are talking about hip-hop, we are, in fact, talking about much more. Public discourse about hip-hop "has become a powerful vehicle for the channeling of broader public discussion about race, class, and the value of black culture's role in society. Debates about hip hop have become a means for defining poor, young black people and thus for interpreting the context and reasons for their clearly disadvantaged lives" (*Hip Hop Wars* 5). According to Rose, because hip-hop music has emerged from the underground and has been a major force in popular culture for at least two decades, it is, regardless of its content, political no matter what the artists' intentions.

Participants describe hip-hop music as a forum in which artists, listeners, and other community members can discuss and develop dialogue around otherwise undiscussed topics. One Austin respondent contends that hip-hop can be used to "express political viewpoints" and to "serve political ends by educating members of our society" (Anonymous3, 19 April 2009). NHHPC list member Woodson explains, "Conscious hip

hop reinforces conscious headz and makes ideas of alternatives and resistance …

accessible to many young folk" (15 September 2006).

Additionally, participants in hip-hop culture argue that hip-hop can be a catalyst

for social change, raising consciousness and motivating listeners to act. Hip-hop music

does, according to one Austin respondent, "have the ability to move people deeply and

spark a change within them, sometimes leading to an urge to change the fabric of our

society" (Anonymous3, 19 April 2009). Goodchild agrees, making the point that hip-hop

"can be a vessel to motivate young people and others into being thoughtful active

participants of the local and national politics" (April 2009).

These comments suggest that hip-hop music is providing a sort of public sphere

for participants in hip-hop culture. Through hip-hop music, listeners connect with one

another and interact, discussing issues raised within the music itself. Rapper and NHHPC

member Paradise Gray argues that this is precisely what hip-hop music was intended to

do. "Good music serves the people," he explains (2 November 2006).

The most optimistic participants in this research and the most positive hip-hop

cultural commentators argue that hip-hop has already changed society and will continue

to do so globally. These folks argue that hip-hop breaks down false barriers that have

kept people divided, such as race and class. The music bridges these gaps and brings

people together. According to this perspective, exposure to and admiration for rappers

like Jay-Z allowed young people to rally behind a Black man for U.S. president and

ultimately help him win that election. Hip-hop has changed the world by connecting

people through love for the music, which leads to love and understanding for each other.

For these respondents the hip-hop community is an inclusive public sphere where all who want to be a part of it are welcome. One respondent defines the hip-hop community as "a whole culture of people that can relate to the same issues and concerns and need each other's support" (Anonymous2, 19 April 2009). Another explains that the hip-hop community "must be fluid so as to be as inclusive as possible" (Anonymous3, 19 April 2009).

Others are not quite as optimistic, acknowledging that many of the reported positive effects of hip-hop culture are more appearance than reality. Neighborhoods, schools, and social groups remain highly racially segregated, even among the supposedly enlightened youth. Although many White people are avid consumers of hip-hop music and culture, evidence suggests that the change in their patterns of consumption has not led to much if any change in their attitudes and behaviors. Blakes, however, argues that we should not discount the appearance of change. He contends that if hip-hop is given enough time, "it will do a lot. If you can see change on the surface of it you know there's change below" (5 March 2008). His argument is that change is systemic and trickles up. "By the time you have a zit, you have put a lot of chocolate in your system" (ibid). Although it may appear that changes are only surface changes, the differences we see on the surface are only symptoms of deeper alterations.

While Rose decries the cultural tourism and "slumming" that passes for genuine engagement with another culture in regard to hip-hop consumption, she continues to recognize the positive impact that hip-hop can have in the lives of those who create it.

Furthermore, she advises that, for those who choose to listen, it continues to function as a place where social ills can be described, critiqued, and begin to be addressed.

> Hip hop remains one of the most accessible creative forms for those who feel that most if not all other avenues for telling their own life stories have been cut off by limits in other genres…. Despite its disturbing turn in the commercial realm, hip-hop truly is one of the few creative and visible places where in-depth criticisms of society's failures (e.g., social injustice, corporate control of culture and media consolidation, racial inequality, class oppression, normalized sexism, and homophobia) can be expressed. (*Hip Hop Wars* 135-136).

She suggests that many might continue to maintain an optimistic attitude toward hip-hop and its political potential because they believe that optimism will promote the very change they wish to see. "Perhaps," she argues, "many hold onto this role for hip hop because they believe that if hip hop continues to be identified as a place where one can 'keep it real,' it might encourage more visible social commentary" (*Hip Hop Wars* 136).

TELLING STORIES IS NOT ENOUGH

Other commentators contend that, while some political hip-hop may raise consciousness, it is no substitute for active organizing, agitation, and political participation. In short, if all hip-hop is doing is telling stories, putting issues into public discourse, and making some listeners think, it is simply not enough. As John McWhorter puts it, "There is not a thing wrong with 'conscious rap' fans enjoying the beats and rhymes and even valuing the sprinkles of an awareness of something beyond guns, Hennessey and women's behinds. But if we have gotten to the point that we are treating even this 'conscious' work as civil rights activism, then black America is in even worse

trouble than we thought" (par. 16). In other words, hip-hop is not doing and cannot do the ground-level work that activists do. While he suggests that there is "nothing wrong" with enjoying conscious hip-hop, neither does he suggest that anything is inherently politically useful or valuable in listening to it.

McWhorter argues that description of problems without some suggested solutions is unproductive. Furthermore, although lyrics may avoid some of the more vacuous topics that make up the bulk of mainstream commercial hip-hop (parties, sex, and money, for example), they do not necessarily have a valuable political message. He claims, "One can take a good dose of Talib Kweli, Common, Mos Def and Kanye 'Bush doesn't care about black people' West and still see nothing that resembles any kind of 'message' that people truly committed to forging change would recognize. Hip Hop, 'conscious' or not, is music, and that's it" (par. 2). In McWhorter's opinion, a "message" will not only describe what is wrong but also suggest what might be done about the problem.

Carter agrees that hip-hop music alone cannot create real change, but it can be a catalyst and an inspiration. He calls hip-hop music "the soundtrack to the struggle" ("Gospel to Hip Hop") and argues that hip-hop music is "what keeps [activists] moving, keeps us going." According to Carter's explanation hip-hop music is not necessarily the source of the change, not the originator of solutions. Instead, the role of the music in the social movement, like gospel and soul music before it, is to nourish spiritually and emotionally its listeners who turn to it when they are weary so they can come away refreshed, rejuvenated, reconnected, and reinspired, ready to continue to fight the good fight in their lives and those of others everyday. NHHPC list member I Medina Peaceful

Earth asserts that this is the most the listeners can ask from the music, writing, "Music at best provides powerful inspiration for folks to continue to work for change and may provide a certain level of public affirmation for those who think similarly, and may assist some people in changing their minds and their reality" (12 September 2006).

Perhaps somewhat less optimistically, Chris Harris makes the point that he loves hip-hop and sees it as an excellent starting point for political interest and participation. Nonetheless, he remains concerned that it is "not enough" and that those working toward social change "can't depend upon it" (1 August 2008). Harris argues that if listeners do not push themselves beyond the comfort zone in which they listen to conscious rap and raise their fists in solidarity at performances, there will be no change because no one will be genuinely working toward change. Hip-hop music can offer political inspiration, but listeners must step up to its challenges. As commentator Paul Scott puts it, "In order for conscious Hip Hop to survive, it must become what the system never really allowed it to be; a way to educate, inform and inspire Afrikan people to become involved in the betterment of their global communities" ("Crisis" par. 20). It is the people's job, however, to become involved.

Rapper Immortal Technique agrees that conscious rap is ineffective as a tool for social change unless its listeners also take action. He points out that "conscious" merely indicates awareness. It does not demand that one stand up for change or do things differently. He argues,

> I think conscious is being aware and knowing, I know mad brothers in the street living wrong who know better. They got knowledge, lots of knowledge, they speak truth to power even. They know about government corruption, they know

they do business with the CIA. They know Coke, Meth, and shit like crack is killing their people, they know that selling drugs is going to take them to prison, they know gangs are wrong, they understand that stealing is a stain on the character and that shooting muthafuckaz is going to see them in prison for 25 to life if not the chamber. They don't care. So conscious is not enough for me, that just means you're awake and it doesn't mean you're gonna do shit about the problems or even really speak about the core of them. (28 December 2006)

According to these participants in and commentators on hip-hop music and culture, hip-hop has political elements and political purposes, but it is not enough to create social change or even to forge the alliances that will form the groups who will create social change. These things are the responsibility of those individuals who are inspired by hip-hop. As Earth puts it, "Music compliments and may be the heartbeat of a movement, but it is not the movement itself" (12 September 2006).

HIP HOP IS FAILING TO MAKE GOOD ON ITS PROMISE

Hip-hop cannot solve social problems in and of itself. Because it functions only on a single front, hip-hop, even at its best, can really only inspire individuals to become involved and to work for the changes they would like to see. It can disseminate information about problems; it can offer some possible solutions; it can bring people together; it can even provide role models. Hip-hop music can play a significant role in forming and maintaining a social change movement even if it cannot constitute a movement in and of itself.

Some participants in this research, however, express substantial disappointment with hip-hop and its political accomplishments and serious doubts that it can be saved to

215

do the work they once believed it was primed to do. Nkrumah, for example, notes, "It was once thought that hip hop had such potential as a force." However, "That might be questionable by some now… Some of us in hip hop are gonna have a hard time amongst radicals defending our relevance as a cultural weapon" (4 November 2008). Nkrumah believes that hip-hop is not living up to the potential it once seemed to have as a political force. Furthermore, much of the music with which a general audience is familiar provides evidence that hip-hop is no longer "relevant as a cultural weapon." Nkrumah also seems to see the content of contemporary hip-hop as a limitation to its legitimacy as a political force.

Similarly NHHPC list member Wayne Emilien argues that, despite all the hype and all the optimism, hip-hop has failed to create any visible or significant change in the lives of hip-hop community members. Hip-hop, he says, "has made very little tangible change in the lives of the majority of people. Show me the healing that's being made in the world." While he accepts that hip-hop may have had some impact on race relations, it has done little else. "I don't see hip hop crossing any class barriers. It may have closed some racial barriers, but the problem of classism still exists and that's why the idea of 'get yours' is so prevalent in so much of hip hop music today" (3 January 2009).

Participants offered a variety of explanations for this failure, from early hip-hop's turn away from Black Nationalism, to its over-commercialization, to the failure of hip-hop fans to establish effective and productive communities. Again, no one is willing to make the argument that the struggle to mobilize an effective hip-hop political

constituency is hopeless, but several have grave concerns about the health and vitality of this movement.

Scott argues that political hip-hop went wrong early in its history. Musical groups like the Jungle Brothers and a Tribe Called Quest, who are considered early examples of conscious rap talked, for example, about Black pride through natural hair, positivity, knowledge of self, and the importance of Black traditions and Black community, especially with regard to Black music. Scott claims, however, that early political hip-hop failed partly because it did not encourage the "community to stick with the political black nationalist principles on which it was founded" ("Crisis" par. 8). Instead, political hip-hop became conscious hip-hop and created "a movement of hippies rather than freedom fighters … conscious hip hop became more Hip Hop-centric than Afrocentric" ("Crisis" par. 8).

In some ways, this hip-hop-centricity may have as much to do with hip-hop's commercial success as the nearly simultaneous turn to gangsta rap did. Hip-hop-centricity assures a broad audience and refuses to alienate White consumers who might be uncomfortable with more Afrocentric messages. The angry, violent, inner city gangsta stereotype appealed to White suburban youth and sold them a sense of cultural connection that felt dangerous and rebellious but was utterly safe. Gangsta rap became wildly popular and propelled hip-hop music to the top of sales charts and to the forefront of popular culture. Similarly, conscious rap sold a cultural connection to a group of white consumers who were able to feel more responsible, more authentically connected, and ultimately superior to white consumers of gangsta rap. In most cases, however, the

connection was no less superficial and consumption based. The attempt to appeal to a

racially broad audience is both understandable and admirable. It is, in fact, one of the

characteristics of hip-hop that has been extolled as contributing to its ability to create

social change. Scott's claim, however, is that when the attempt to appeal to a wide

audience leads to diminished political potency in an attempt to avoid offending anyone,

the music, its message, and its political potency suffer.

Austin respondent Goodchild argues that if talking about social change "becomes

just another way to sell albums, while not sincerely adhering to the tenets of your own

philosophy, then it becomes a cheap phrase rappers simply name drop into a song" (18

April 2009). Gator agreed that many artists fail to consider the impact that they have on

young people and the responsibility that they have to "serve the people" with their music.

As Gator explained, artists must ask themselves "Am I in it for the game? Or am I in it

for the people?" He argues that "a lot of these artists don't even ask themselves. They

already know. It's either the fame or it's the game. The women, the sex, and the drugs"

(17 July 2007). One NHHPC list member sees hip-hop music's failure to remain

culturally relevant as a betrayal of Black culture, lamenting, "[W]e are not only

leaderless, clueless and shiftless, we are culture-less!" (jwharton, 28 December 2006).

La'Keisha Gray agrees that hip-hop music is no longer viable as a tool for social change.

According to Gray, "[W]e have failed to pass along a sustainable culture" (28 December

2006).

So, do hip-hop artists have a responsibility to create music that nourishes and

uplifts the community? Although Blakes does not believe that rappers have a

responsibility to promote any particular political values or issues, he does argue that they have a responsibility to be honest and to express themselves genuinely. He also recognizes that a rapper with an audience of any size has some influence. As he puts it, "If you've got listeners and you decide to talk about it, then they're listening" (5 March 2008). This approach to hip-hop's influence puts all rappers in a position to impact their communities in ways both positive and negative. It does not lay blame or responsibility on rappers alone, but it does recognize that the music and lyrics that rappers and producers create do not exist in a vacuum. Like any artistic expression it has the potential to sway thinking and to influence behavior.

Some argue that the real problem with hip-hop music is the industry and its promotion of music that works against progressive change. The argument is that, while much "underground" hip-hop music does promote and could foster movement toward positive social change, major radio stations and record companies simply do not purchase, promote, or play such music so it remains underground. The music that does receive support from mainstream outlets is, most agree, anything but progressive. Instead, it promotes blatant materialism, violence, and misogyny. As Rose puts it, "The power and influence of mainstream commercial hip hop undermines the formation of a progressive, racially informed hip hop community" (*Hip Hop Wars* 234). One common response to this situation is to focus on conscious and more marginal music that promotes values and addresses issues that are important to politically minded listeners. This response allows individual listeners to enjoy music that meets their own needs and often to establish cultural capital that advances their social statuses within their own social

groups. It does nothing, however, to address the vast majority of young hip-hop listeners who are not listening to the progressive, marginal, underground music that some listeners favor but are, instead, deeply immersed in the images and messages that make up mainstream hip-hop. Politically minded hip-hop fans would be wise, then, to devote significant energy and resources toward influencing mainstream hip-hop and educating listeners about the significance of its messages.

Although many argue that rappers are not and should not have to be role models, most participants in this research as well as most commentators agree that young people do look up to and emulate rappers. Rappers can contribute to a movement for social change by setting a positive example for young people to follow. Rose notes that many reject the "role model" label because they find it limiting and argue that "being a role model" necessarily involves following the rules and enforcing the status quo. According to Rose, this is simply not the case: "Role models can be powerful agents for change, not just models for the status quo" (Rose, *Hip Hop Wars* 199). Rappers can have a positive impact by expressing their concern for and their commitment to their communities and to social change causes. As Rose argues,

> If we are going to create a just, community-nurturing society where we constantly strive for respectful inclusion for all, where genuine concern and equal opportunity are serious commitments, then what we project and what we emulate must match these values. There is extensive room for being wildly creative and honest while at the same time exhibiting affirmative goodwill for our community. (Rose, *Hip Hop Wars* 200)

When hip-hop music promotes the well-being of the community, it can have a tremendous impact on the people who consume it and participate in the culture. Recently

220

rappers who enjoy major commercial success such as David Banner and T.I. have devoted a great deal of their time and their creative expression to just such purposes. Their work has shown that hip-hop can succeed commercially even when it devotes itself to positivity and the health of the community.

NHHPC list member Jeff Campbell suggests that rather than maligning and disparaging mainstream artists, the political hip-hop movement needs to mobilize this resource for its own purposes. Projects like Respect My Vote, which relied heavily on rapper T.I.'s celebrity, demonstrate that some mainstream artists are amenable to such alliances and that such alliances can produce significant results. Campbell argues that activists and underground hip-hop cannot solve the problems in hip-hop communities without the help of artists who have mainstream influence. "It's going to take real leadership" he argues, "and like it or not, the only real leadership that can create such a movement is Hip Hop. This is who the young respect, and it is Hip Hop who is setting the example for those who are out there doing dirt to follow." According to Campbell, what political hip-hop communities need is "a movement among corporate Hip Hop to go back to the communities where Hip Hop Culture finds its origin and develop a plan to redirect the anger and frustration of our people, open their eyes and give them hope" (13 August 2008). Campbell's point is that community members who identify themselves as members of progressive communities should be careful to keep community boundaries open instead of excluding potential allies based upon their participation in mainstream hip-hop music culture. While commitment to underground music might increase a

221

community member's social status, it can also serve to alienate and individual from his or her local community.

Many participants still believe that hip-hop activism, organizing, and community building can effect social change and that members of the political hip-hop community must keep working and striving to improve conditions within their neighborhoods. Davey D, for example, writes, "I refuse to say its [sic] hopeless, its [sic] gonna take 200 years and there's no way for change to come" (5 June 2008). Campbell sees the most effective work being done with youth through education. He argues that hip-hop music remains the most effective strategy for reaching the young people on the streets, "the people we have to reach. The ones shooting, selling drugs and themselves" (21 September 2006). He contends, "Hip Hop is art, technology, literacy and business. Empowering our youth through these mediums gives youth a sense of value through a culturally competent context" (ibid). Again, Campbell urges politically minded community members to set aside exclusionary attitudes that divide hip-hop communities and to search for the common interests and values that can connect individuals within communities. According to Campbell, the current and future well-being of young people within local communities should be at the heart of the values that form the basis for hip-hop community building.

Others argue that the political arena is the site where the greatest impact can be made and that community building efforts ought to be focused on building voting blocs and communities that share political views and commitments. D contends, "many of our solutions will come about in the political arena. [S]o we should start being smarter. It might be voting for people who are unwavering on their position and making sure they

get into office" (5 June 2008). NHHPC list member Rafiki Cai concurs. He urges

political hip-hop community members to "Construct progressive parties and offer

forward compelling candidates. Engage voter education and help deepen the electorate's

appreciation for what their interests are, and what the possibilities are" (4 November

2008). These respondents speak to the importance of building communities of practice

that will continue to organize local communities to affect political change.

Each of these respondents argues that hip-hop activists, organizers, and concerned

community members must mobilize the resources available. Whether building coalitions

with hip-hop's celebrity artists, making use of educational, technological, or artistic skills

to develop relationships with young people, implementing political knowledge, or

making use of social networks, these participants argue that hip-hop can better serve the

people if the people put it to its best uses. If existing hip-hop communities are ever to

coalesce into a social movement, local communities will have to work together to

identify, share, and mobilize all available uses. Perhaps the NHHPC failed in part

because of its diffuse communities and scattered resources.

HIP-HOP IS A TOOL

Like other important musical genres that have been connected with social

movements, hip-hop has limited reach, limited impact, and limited uses. Hip-hop music

and its practitioners need allies from across an array of taste cultures, professions, walks

of life, and organizations, and those allies must accept some of the responsibilities that

some might like to place on hip-hop's shoulders. As Immortal Technique argues, "There are questions to be answered that cannot be answered by Hip Hop artists. They must be answered by Revolutionaries so do not cement all the pressure on the youth of the artistic cadre of our people. It is a heavy burden to bear. Trust that" (28 December 2006).

Hip-hop music can effectively spread information and ideas. When Chuck D called rap the "Black CNN," he clearly identified one of the music's most dramatic social impacts. Hip-hop music can and has made issues of concern to people of color, to poor people, to formerly unheard people a part of cultural discourse. It can raise awareness about racism and police brutality, poverty, and violence. "At best music should be used as a tool to expose people to ideas in a digestible fashion" (Allah, 12 September 2006). Hip-hop has successfully raised these issues because it does talk about them in ways in which people are willing to listen, to hear, and, perhaps, to care.

Hip-hop politics like the music and the culture before it will have to emerge from the streets, to bubble up from communities all over the world. Hip-hop music can be a powerful tool that allows individuals to self-identify as members of a community, but these individuals must take responsibility for connecting with one another on a deeper, more personal level if these communities are to create any lasting social changes. Hip-hop music can rejuvenate and inspire the members of these groups, but it cannot solely do the work.

FUTURE RESEARCH

I see this project as interdisciplinary and contributing to sociology, cultural studies, and popular music studies. Still, in many ways it will open as many questions as it answers. My work on this project involves an (perhaps naïve) assumption that hip-hop can be best understood as a product of African-American popular culture. This is certainly open to debate and future research should address hip-hop production in other ethnic communities and its reception amongst various audiences.

Furthermore, this project is only a very tiny step towards a full understanding of music audiences and their interaction with music. My sample is by no means representative of the various and diverse hip-hop audiences that exist around the globe, let alone music audiences more generally. The audience members who participated in this study all had a strong commitment to hip-hop in one way or another. None of them was simply a casual hip-hop listener. While it is extremely difficult to sample casual listening audiences, this sort of research would go a long way toward developing understanding of the interaction between listeners and music.

My use of hip-hop as a genre category may overly simplify the audience. While proponents of hip-hop activism often speak uncritically of "hip-hop culture," the notion of a culture built around a music genre still deserves critical attention that I am only able to hint at in this project. Most music fans are fans of music from a variety of genres, and musical interests are always shifting. Researching "hip-hop fans" might work to erase the complicated nature of music listening and genre affiliations. If music contributes to

225

identity via cultural capital and community affiliation, what roles might diverse or eclectic musical taste play for listeners?

Finally, this project considered the ways in which music might be put to use to create progressive social change. If one argues that music can be pressed into such service, those interested in music's social impacts would be well advised to consider music's dark side. How might music be used to exert control over populations for example? How effective might it be at disseminating racist, sexist, and culturally destructive concepts and values? How subtle might these intentions and effects be? Would the impact of such messages be automatic, as is often assumed in discussion about materialism, violence, and misogyny in hip-hop music and its images? Or would these negative effects also require the labor of a movement and its hard-working members to impact the beliefs and attitudes of listeners?

While the results and findings of this project are necessarily limited, I do hope that they are useful and beneficial academically and practically. I believe that this research has produced a richer and deeper understanding of political hip-hop communities than has previously been available. Furthermore, I would like for the interdisciplinary approach and the combination of ethnographic methods used in this project to function as an example of the sort of academic work that can reach across artificial boundaries to produce knowledge that is rigorously researched, socially relevant, and intellectually stimulating.

I feel confident that the account of the National Hip Hop Political Convention and the distillation of the ideas that they share and promote that I present here can benefit hip-

hop communities by contributing to a public understanding of the hip-hop generation as a motivated, passionate, committed, and hard-working community whose members do have a vision for a better world and who find their inspiration for creating that world within hip-hop music and hip-hop culture. I hope that documenting a portion of the long, hard grind that members of the community have contributed to the movement for social justice will contribute to the community members' belief in the value of the work that they do.

Bibliography

"About Hip Hop Congress." *Hip Hop Congress Website*. 4 April 2009.
  http://www.hiphopcongress.com/national-organization/

Adams, Terri M. and Douglas B. Fuller. "The Words Have Changed But the Ideology
  Remains the Same: Misogynist Lyrics in Rap Music." *Journal of Black Studies*
  36.6 (2006) : 938-957.

Adorno, Theodor. "On Popular Music." 1941. *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written
  Word*. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds. London: Routledge, 1990. 301-
  314.

Aldave, Cherryl. Email Interview. 2 December 2006.

---. "Re: Gangsta Rap is Hip Hop" Listserv. 28 December 2006. 2:45 pm. NHHPC-
  Discuss. 4 July 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Gangsta Rap is Hip Hop" Listserv. 28 December 2006. 4:29 pm. NHHPC-
  Discuss. 4 July 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Bob Johnson Lobbies For Clinto VP S…" Listserv. 6 June 2008. NHHPC-
  Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Bob Johnson Lobbies For Clinto VP S…" Listserv. 7 June 2008. NHHPC-
  Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Congratulation Barack Obama – He's Going To Win, and Win Big." Listserv. 4
  November 2008. NHHPC-Discuss. 18 April 2009.
  <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Allah, I Majestic. "Re: mos def's arrest." Listserv. 12 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss.
  29 February 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

---. "Re: Womens right in NHHPC agenda." Listserv. 3 October 2006. NHHPC-Discuss.
  21 June 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

---. "Re: Womens right in NHHPC agenda." Listserv. 4 October 2006. NHHPC-Discuss.
  13 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

---. "A Pot to Piss In, A Window to Throw It Out Of"
www.authorofchange.blogspot.com. 25 October 2006. 15 August 2008.
http://authorofchange.blogspot.com/search?q=A+pot+to+piss+in

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses." 1970. *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. London: New Left Books. 1989.170-186.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

Anonymous. Online Interview. 5 July 2007.

Anonymous. Personal Interview. 25 July 2008.

Anonymous1. Online interview. 19 April 2009.

Anonymous2. Online interview. 19 April 2009.

Anonymous3. Online interview. 19 April 2009.

Ards, Angela. "Organizing the Hip-Hop Generation." *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York: Routledge, 2004. 311-323.

Bartlett, Andrew. "Airshafts, Loudspeakers, and the Hip Hop Sample: Contexts and African American Musical Aesthetics" *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York: Routledge, 2004. 393-406.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 1935. *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968. 217-252.

Blakes, Bavu. Personal interview. 5 March 2008.

Blumer, Herbert. "Collective Behavior." *New Outline of the Principles of Sociology*. Ed. A. M. Lee, 1951.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984. Trans. of *La Distinction: Critique Sociale du Jugement*, 1979.

Boyd, Todd. "Check Yo Self Before You Wreck Yo Self: The Death of Politics in Rap Music and Popular Culture." *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York: Routledge, 2004. 325-340.

Brown, Courtney. *Politics in Music: Music and Political Transformation From Beethoven to Hip-Hop*. Atlanta, GA: Farsight Press, 2008.

Brother J of X-Clan. Interview. *ThaFormula.com*. 4 April 2009. http://www.thaformula.com/x-clan-heed_the_word_of_the_brother.htm

Bynoe, Yvonne. *Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture*. New York: Soft Skull Press, 2004.

Cai, Rafiki. "Re: Gangsta Rap is Hip Hop." Listserv. 26 Dec. 2006. NHHPC_Discuss. 4 July 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Mater P. Launches Profanity Free Label." Listserv. 11 May 2007. NHHPC_Discuss. 18 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Boycott the Elections!" Listserv. 4 November 2008. NHHPC_Discuss. 18 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: NHHPC or Criticize Everything Barack Obama Does Listserv?" 7 November 2008. NHHPC_Discuss. 18 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Campbell, Jeff. "Re: Are we still looking for the next Martin or should we seek to be the next Martin/Malcolm." Listserv. 21 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 18 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: What do you do when cats are killing eachother and onnocent bystanders?" Listserv. 13 August 2008. NHHPC-Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Carr, J. Michael Jr. "Our Chickens." Listserv. 29 Nov. 2006. NHHPC_Discuss. 4 July 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Carter, Kenavon. Personal conversation. 12 March 2008.

---. "Re: Is McCain's racially charged campaign leading…" Listserv. 29 October 2008. NHHPC_Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Boycott the Elections!" Listserv. 4 November 2008. NHHPC_Discuss. 18 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "RE: Obama." Listserv. 5 November 2008. NHHPC_ATX_LOC. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NHHPC_ATX_LOC/>

Cashmore, Ellis. *The Black Culture Industry*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Castro, Eva. "Re: Boycott the elections!" Listserv. 5 November 2008. NHHPC_ATX_LOC. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NHHPC_ATX_LOC/>

Cavicchi, Daniel. *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Chambers, Iain. *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985.

Chang, Jeff. "Bigger Than Hip-Hop: A Q&A with Kevin Powell." Weblog post. *Zentronix D+H*. 7 September 2008. 17 April 2009. <http://blogs.vibe.com/jeffchang/2008/09/bigger-than-hiphop-a-q-a-with-kevin-powell/>.

---. "The Impact of the Hip-Hop Vote." Weblog post. *Zentronix D+H*. 24 November 2008. 17 April 2009. < http://blogs.vibe.com/jeffchang/2008/11/the-impact-of-the-hiphop-vote/>.

---. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.

---. *Constant Elevation: The Rise of Bay Area Hip-Hop Activism*. 12 Jan. 2006. www.cantstopwontstop.com/pdfs/monographfinal.pdf

CensusScope. "Segregation: Neighborhood Exposure by Race, Austin-San Marcos, TX." 20 April 2009. <http://www.censusscope.org/us/m640/print_chart_exposure.html>.

Circle: The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. "Young Voters in the 2008 Presidential Election." Fact Sheet. www.civicyouth.org. Nov. 2008. 18 Apr. 2009 <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=324>.

Clarke, Gary. "Defending Ski-Jumpers: A Critique of Theories of Youth Subcultures."
1981. *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*. Simon Frith and Andrew
Goodwin, eds. London: Routledge, 1990. 81-96.

Clemente, Rosa. "Are we still looking for the next Martin or should we seek to be the
next Martin/Malcolm?" Listserv. 20 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 3 March
2008 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: SHOULD GENDER ISSUES BE ON THE HIP HOP POLITUCAL
AGENDA?" Listserv. 28 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 3 March 2008
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

---. "Re: Womens right in NHHPC agenda." Listserv. 3 October 2006. NHHPC-Discuss.
3 March 2008 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

Clingman, James Jr. "An Open Letter to Black America: It's Time to Bring Back Black"
www.izania.com Nov. 16, 2006. Accessed Aug. 15, 2008.
http://www.izania.com/articles/political/an-open-letter-to-black-america:-it-is-
time-to-bring-back-black/

Cohen, Anthony. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. New York: Routledge, 1985.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the
Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge, 2000.

"Community - a review of the theory." *Contents @ the informal education homepage*.
Web. 17 Nov. 2009. <http://www.infed.org/community/community.htm>.

Concert for Hurricane Relief. NBC. KXAN, Austin, Texas. 2 September 2005.

D, Davey. "This Gangsta Stuff & Russell's Call For Change." *ColorLines*. May/June
2007. 19 April 2009. < http://www.colorlines.com/article.php?ID=212>.

---. "Re: Bob Johnson Lobbies for Clinton VP S…" Listserv. 5 June 2008. NHHPC-
Discuss. 20 April 2009 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Bob Johnson Lobbies for Clinton VP S…" Listserv. 6 June 2008. NHHPC-
Discuss. 20 April 2009 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Davey D's Hip Hop Corner. 4 April 2009. http://daveyd.com/

Davies, James Chowning. *When Men Revolt and Why: A Reader in Political Violence
and Revolution*. New York: Free Press, 1971.

Dawson, Imani. "Good Rap, Bad Rap." *Ms*. Summer 2005: 18.

DeCurtis, Anthony. "Review: Boogie Down Productions: *By All Means Necessary*"
    Rolling Stone Online. 1988. 4 June 2008.
    http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/boogiedownproductions/albums/album/20529
    3/Review/5945594/by_all_means_necessary

Del Llano, Ann. "Re: Boycott the Elections." Listserv. 4 November 2008. 2:30 pm.
    NHHPC_ATX_LOC. 28 January 2009.
    http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NHHPC_ATX_LOC/

---. "Re: Boycott the Elections." Listserv. 4 November 2008. 3:59 pm.
    NHHPC_ATX_LOC. 28 January 2009.
    <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NHHPC_ATX_LOC/>

---. "Boycott the elections!?" Listserv. 11 November 2008. NHHPC_ATX_LOC. 28
    January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NHHPC_ATX_LOC/>

DeNora, Tia. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Dyson, Michael Eric. *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*.
    New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

---. "The Culture of Hip-Hop." *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Ed.
    Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York: Routledge, 2004. 61-68.

Earth, I Medina Peaceful. "Re: mos def's arrest." Listserv. 12 September 2006.
    NHHPC_Discuss. 19 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-
    discuss/>.

---. "Re: Spearhead, Hip Hop Activism, and NHHPC." Listserv. 14 September 2006.
    NHHPC_Discuss. 13 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-
    discuss/>.

---. "Re: backwards/forward." Listserv. 5 October 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 13 April 2009.
    <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Boycott the elections! – a personal reflection on the meaning of my vote." 4
    November 2008. NHHPC-Discuss. 28 January 2009.
    <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Edwards, Bob and John D. McCarthy. "Resources and Social Movement Mobilization." *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. Ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2004. 116-52.

"Electoral Reality: How Do We Vote for a Hip Hop Agenda or Can We?" Panel Discussion. National Hip Hop Political Convention. University of Nevada, Las Vegas. 2 August 2008.

Emilien, Wayne. "Re: Why Obama is not the first Hip Hop President." Listserv. 3 January 2009. NHHPC-Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Enoch, Brother. "Re: Backwards/Forward." Listserv. 4 October 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 13 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

Esterberg, Kristin G. "Action Research" *Qualitative Methods in Social Research*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002. 135-150.

Everingham, Christine. *Social Justice and the Politics of Community*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Compnay, 2003.

Eyerman, Ron and Andrew Jamison. *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Fischer, Dawn-Elissa. "Re: sexism, nastiness coming from the leadership of the NHHPC." Listserv. 13 November 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 13 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

Fiyouzat, Reza. "Don't Let the Bastards Have Your Vote: Boycott the Elections." *CounterPunch*. 30 October 2008. 17 April 2009. <http://www.counterpunch.org/fiyouzat10302008.html>

Forman, Murray. *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.

Fricke, Jim and Charlie Ahearn. *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-hop's First Decade*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002.

Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

---. "Music and Everyday Life" *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*. Ed Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton. New York: Routledge, 2003. 92-101.

Gabriel C. "Re: Gangsta Rap is Hip Hop." Listserv. 26 December 2006. NHHPC_Discuss. 4 July 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Correction for Brotha Jitu." Listserv. 15 September 2006. NHHPC_Discuss. 13 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

"Gallup Daily: Election 2008" *www.gallup.com* 1 November 2008. 18 April 2009. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/107674/Gallup-Daily-Election-2008.aspx>.

"Gallup Daily: Race Still Close with Obama 47%, Clinton 46%." *www.gallup.com* 28 April 2008. 18 April 2009 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/106855/Gallup-Daily-Race-Still-Close-Obama-47-Clinton-46.aspx>.

Gans, Herbert. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*. New York: Basic Books, 1974.

Garcia, Angela Cora, et al. "Ethnographic Approaches to the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. 38.1 (February 2009), 52-84.

Gator. Personal Interview. 17 July 2007.

George, Nelson. *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

---. *Hip Hop America*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Goodchild, Trevor. Online Interview. 18 April 2009.

"Gospel 2 Hip-Hop." Panel Discussion. Another Option Productions. Victory Grill, Austin. 27 Feb. 2009.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks*. 1929-1935. Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

"Grand Master Flash's Definition of Hip Hop." *Davey D's Hip-Hop Corner*. 27 Mar 2009 http://www.daveyd.com/whatisflash.html.

Gray, La'Keisha. "We still talking bout 'Conscious Vs Gangsta Rap'?" Listserv. 28
    December 2006. NHHPC_Discuss. 18 April 2009.
    <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Master P. Launches Profanity Free Label." Listserv. 11 May 2007.
    NHHPC_Discuss. 18 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-
    discuss/>.

Gray, Paradise. "Officer draws weapon on 7 year old girl!" Listserv. 17 Sept. 2006.
    NHHPC-Discuss. 21 June 2008 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Message from the X-Clan's Grand Verbalizer 'Brother J'." Listserv. 2 November
    2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 20 April 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-
    discuss/>.

---. "Re: Gangsta Rap is Hip Hop." Listserv. 26 Dec. 2006. NHHPC_Discuss. 4 July
    2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Grime. "Re: Boycott the elections!" Listserv. 4 November 2008. NHHPC_Discuss. 17
    April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Grossberg, Lawrence. "Rock Cultures and Rock Formations." *We Gotta Get Out of This
    Place: Popular Conservatism and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992,
    131-135.

Hager, Steve. *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and
    Graffiti*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.

Harris, Chris. Personal Interview. 20 February 2008.

---. Personal conversation. 1 August 2008.

Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Routledge, 1979.

"Hip-Hop." *Urban Dictionary*. 4 April 2009.
    http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hip-hop

"Hip Hop Caucus Mission Statement." 12 Jan. 2006. http://www.hiphopcaucus.org/

"Hip Hop, Politics, and the Ever Changing Music Business." Panel Discussion. South By
    Southwest Music Festival. George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural
    Center, Austin, TX. 15 March 2008.

Hoggett, Paul. *Contested Communities: Experiences, Struggles, Policies*. Bristol: The Policy Press, 1997.

hooks, bell. "Eating the Other" *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992. 21-39.

"HSAN Mission Statement." 12 Jan. 2006. <http://www.hsan.org/content/main.aspx?pageid=7>

Isoke, Zenzele. "Re: Re: Help Mate: Womens right in NHHPC agenda." Listserv. 3 October 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 3 March 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

---. "Re: Master P. Launches Profanity Free Label." Listserv. 11 May 2007. NHHPC-Discuss. 18 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Johnson, Jarvis. "Re: Citizens Police Review Board Hears about aggressive Cops." Listserv. 20 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

---. "Re: Are we still looking for the next Martin or should we seek to be the next Martin/Malcolm?" Listserv. 21 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

---. "Re: Itz That Season Again, Y'all!!!" Listserv. 22 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

---. "Re: Backwards/forward." Listserv. 5 October 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 13 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

Jones, Charles. "Grabbing Hip-hop's Power: The Undefineability of Hip-hop's Political Identity" *YO! Youth Outlook*. Sept. 10, 2004 Accessed 3/3/08. http://www.youthoutlook.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=365810d1ec087f780ce08c7b0ccfc9e9

Jones, LeRoi. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963.

jwharton. "Re: Gangsta Rap is Hip Hop." Listserv. 28 December 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 4 July 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

Keyes, Cheryl L. *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois
Press, 2002.

Kitwana, Bakari. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African
American Culture*. New York: Basic*Civitas* Books, 2002.

---. *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality
of Race in America*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005.

---. "The Challenge of Rap Music from Cultural Movement to Political Power." *That's
the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony
Neal. New York: Routledge, 2004. 341-350.

Krysan, Maria. "Confronting Racial 'Blind Spots'." *Poverty and Race*.
September/October 2008. 20 April 2009.
<http://www.prrac.org/full_text.php?text_id=1193&item_id=11275&newsletter_i
d=101&header=Housing>.

Lamar, Erica. "T.I. to the People: 'Respect My Vote'." *Vibe*. 30 July 2008. 19 April
2009.
<http://www.vibe.com/news/news_headlines/2008/07/ti_respect_my_vote/>.

LeBlanc, Lauraine. *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in Boys' Subculture*. New
Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

Lewkowicz, Daniel. "Re: People Fear What They Don't Understand." Listserv. 4 October
2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 13 April 2009 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-
discuss/>

Light, Alan. "About a Salary or Reality?: Rap's Recurrent Conflict." *That's the Joint:
The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New
York: Routledge, 2004.137-145.

Lipsitz, George. *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Lusane, Clarence. "Rap, Race, and Politics." *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies
Reader*. Ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York: Routledge,
2004. 351-362.

Marshall, Terry. "Blacks and Gays #3057." Listserv. 18 February 2007. NHHPC-
Discuss. 13 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

Mattern, Mark. *Acting in Concert: Music, Community, and Political Action*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

McAdam, Doug. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

McClary, Susan and Robert Walser. "Start Making Sense!: Musicology Wrestles with Rock." 1988. *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds. London: Routledge, 1990. 277-292.

McClary, Susan. "Introduction: A Material Girl in Bluebeard's Castle." *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. 3-34.

McRobbie, Angela. "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique." 1980. *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds. London: Routledge, 1990. 66-80.

McWhorter, John H. "Don't Believe the Hype – Rap Anger Isn't a Meaningful Message." *Los Angeles Times*. 27 November 2005. 15 May 2008. <http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/miarticle.htm?id=2907>.

Morgan, Joan. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*. New York: Touchstone, 1999.

Morgenstern, Claire. "Election 2008: Second-largest Youth Voter Turnout in American History." *The Tartan*, 10 Nov. 2008. Carnegie Mellon University. 4 April 2009. http://www.thetartan.org/2008/11/10/news/elections

National Hip Hop Political Convention Austin LOC Issues Survey. Raw data. Sweeney Circle, Austin, Texas. 25 October 2008.

Neal, Mark Anthony. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

---. "Postindustrial Soul: Black Popular Music at the Crossroads." *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York: Routledge, 2004. 363-387.

Negus, Keith. *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Nkrumah, Troy. "Re: Spearhead, Hip Hop Activism, and NHHPC." Listserv. 14 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 13 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "THIS EMAIL: I Medina and Jays convo (NHHPC)…and then the Close of this ISSUE." Listserv. 9 October 2006. NHHPC_Discuss. 13 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Boycott the elections!" Listserv. 4 November 2008. NHHPC_Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Perry, Imani. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

Peterson, Richard. *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Porter, Nicole. Telephone Interview. 13 February 2008.

Potter, Russell A. "Roots-N-Rap #2: The Last Poets." *Roots 'n' Rap*. 20 April 2009. <http://www.ric.edu/faculty/rpotter/lpoets.html>

Powell, Kevin. *Who's Gonna Take the Weight?: Manhood, Race, and Power in America*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003.

Price, James. Personal Interview. 18 October 2008.

Putnam, Robert. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6.1 (1995): 65-78.

---. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Rabinow, Paul, ed. "Truth and Power." *Foucault Reader*. New York: Random House, 1984. 51-75.

Radano, Ronald. *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. "Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five." http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/grandmaster-flash-and-the-furious-five Accessed 6/4/2008.

Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

---. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop – and Why It Matters*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.

Russell, Debbie. "Re: Boycott the elections!?" Listserv. 11 November 2008. NHHPC_ATX_LOC. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NHHPC_ATX_LOC/>

Samuels, David. "The Rap on Rap: The 'Black Music' that Isn't Either. " *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York: Routledge, 2004. 147-153.

Scott, Paul. "Black Leaders…You're Fired!" *No Warning Shots Fired*. 16 January 2008. 18 April 2009. < http://nowarningshotsfired.blogspot.com/2008/01/black-leadersyoure-fired.html>.

---. "Crisis of the Nigga Intellectual: How Conscious Hip Hop Failed Us." *No Warning Shots Fired*. 20 April 2008. 19 April 2009. <http://nowarningshotsfired.blogspot.com/2008/04/crisis-of-nigga-intellectual-how.html>.

Shuker, Roy. *Understanding Popular Music*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Shumway, David. "Rock & Roll as a Cultural Practice." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 90.4 (Fall 1991) 753-69.

Springer, AJ. "Re: Are we still looking for the next Martin or should we seek to be the next Martin." Listserv. 21 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Staples, Brent. "How Hip-Hop Music Lost Its Way and Betrayed Its Fans." Editorial. *New York Times*. 12 May 2005: 26.

Swiderski, Adam, Sam Brand and William Bookman. "The Top 11 Conscious Rappers." *UGO.com*. 20 April 2009. <http://www.ugo.com/music/top-11-conscious-rappers/?cur=jeangrae>.

Tavares, David "Minister Server". Personal conversation. 2 August 2008.

Technique, Immortal. "Gangsta Rap is Hip Hop." Listserv. 26 December 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 4 July 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Gangsta Rap is Hip Hop" Listserv. 28 December 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 4 July 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

"That Huge Voter Turnout? Didn't Happen." *Mlive.com* 8 Nov. 2008. 18 April 2009. <http://www.mlive.com/us-politics/index.ssf/2008/11/that_huge_voter_turnout_didnt.html>.

Thornton, Sarah. "The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital." *The Subcultures Reader*. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, eds. London: Routledge, 1997. 200-209.

Toop, David. *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.

"Turnout in Presidential Elections Hit 40-Year High." *Politico.com*. 15 Dec. 2008. 18 Apr. 2009 <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1208/16576.html>.

Universal Zulu Nation. "The Beliefs of the Universal Zulu Nation." *Universal Zulu Nation Website*. 4 April 2009. http://universalzulunation.com/

Vargas, Jose Antonio. "Vote or Die? Well, They Did Vote" *Washington Post*. 9 November 2004. 19 April 2009. < http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35290-2004Nov8.html>.

Vibe History of Hip Hop. Ed. Alan Light. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999.

Vision. "Itz That Season Again, Y'all!!!" Listserv. 21 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 3 March 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>

Walser, Robert. "Beyond the Vocals: Toward the Analysis of Popular Musical Discourses." *Running With the Devil*. Hanover, CT: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1993. 26-56.

Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Watkins, S. Craig. *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005.

Weinstein, Deena. *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology*. New York: Lexington Books, 1991.

Wenger, Etienne. Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Wester, Stephen, et al. "The Influence of Sexually Violent Rap Music on Attitudes of Men with Little Prior Exposure." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21.4 (1997): 497-508.

Wise, Tim. "Good, and Now Back to Work: Avoiding Both Cynicism and Overconfidence in the Age of Obama." *Racialicious*. 5 Nov. 2008. 18 Apr. 2009 <http://www.racialicious.com/2008/11/05/good-and-now-back-to-work-avoiding-both-cynicism-and-overconfidence-in-the-age-of-obama/>.

Williams, Christina. "Does It Really Matter?: Young People and Popular Music." *Popular Music* 20 (2001): 223-242.

Williams, Kali. Bob Johnson Lobbies for Clinton VP S…" Listserv. 5 June 2008. NHHPC-Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Bob Johnson Lobbies for Clinton VP S…" Listserv. 6 June 2008. NHHPC-Discuss. 28 January 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Williams, Juan. "Missing: A Black Voice for Economic Equality." *USATODAY.com*. 20 September 2006. 17 April 2009. <http://blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2006/09/post_19.html>

Woodson, Jay. "Spearhead, Hip Hop Activism, and NHHPC." Listserv. 15 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 29 February 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Womens right in NHHPC agenda." Listserv. 4 October 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 13 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

---. "Re: Bob Johnson Lobbies for Clinton VP S…" Listserv. 6 June 2008. NHHPC-Discuss. 20 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Yearwood, Reverend Lennox, Jr. Listserv. 19 September 2006. NHHPC-Discuss. 3 March 2008. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Zald, Mayer N. "Looking Backward to Forward: Reflections on the Past and Future of the Resource Mobilization Program." *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. Ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992. 326-48.

Zidonia. "Re: Boycott the Elections!" listserv. 4 November 2008. NHHPC-Discuss. 17 April 2009. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nhhpc-discuss/>.

Discography

Blackalicious. *Blazing Arrow*. MCA, 2002.

Black Star. *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star*. Rawkus. 1998.

Boogie Down Productions. *By All Means Necessary*. Jive, 1988.

---. *Criminal Minded*. B-Boy, 1987.

The Coup. *Party Music*. 75 Ark, 2001.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Truth Is On its Way*. Right On, 1971

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. *The Message*. Sugar Hill, 1982.

Ice Cube. *Death Certificate*. Priority, 1991.

Macklemore. "White Privilege." *The Language of My World*. Integral Music Group, 2005.

Mystic. *Cuts for Luck and Scars for Freedom*. Good Vibe, 2001.

Nas. *Illmatic*. Columbia, 1994.

N.W.A. *Straight Outta Compton*. Ruthless, 1988.

Public Enemy. *Apocalypse 91…The Enemy Strikes Black*. Def Jam, 1991.

---. *Fear of a Black Planet*. Def Jam, 1990.

---. *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Def Jam, 1988.

---. *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*. Def Jam, 1987.

Scott-Heron, Gil. *Pieces of a Man*. Flying Dutchman, 1971.

---. *Small Talk at 125th & Lenox Ave*. Flying Dutchman, 1970.

---. *Winter in America*. Strata-East, 1974.

Shakur, Tupac. *2pacalypse Now*. Interscope, 1991.

---. *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* Interscope, 1993.

X-Clan. *To the East, Blackwards*. 4th & B'way, 1990.

Young Jeezy. "My President is Black" *The Recession*. Def Jam, 2008.

Vita

Marnie Ruth Binfield attended Richardson High School in Richardson, Texas. In 1992 she entered the University of Texas at Austin where she participated in the Plan II Honors Program. She received the Bachelor of Arts degree in May of 1997. In 2000 she began graduate school at San Diego State University in San Diego, California. She was awarded the degree of Master of Arts in Women's Studies in August, 2002. In September, 2002 she began her doctoral program in Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin.

Email: marnie_binfield@yahoo.com

This dissertation was typed by the author.