

BREAK IT DOWN!: ANALYZING SELF-IDENTITY IN MAINSTREAM
HIP-HOP MUSIC AND FILM TO EMPOWER THE HIP-HOP GENERATION
FOR CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP¹

Brandon Winstead, Ph.D. student
Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary

What's da hook? An Introduction

On April 4th, 2007, Don Imus, on his radio show *Imus in the Morning*, referred to the Rutgers University women's basketball team, which is comprised of two white and eight African American players, as "nappy headed-hos" immediately after the show's executive producer, Bernard McGuiirk called the team "hard core hos."² After these comments became public, reactions came from all different directions. Black activists and community leaders such as the Rev. Al Sharpton and the Rev. Jesse Jackson called for Imus' firing and demanded that he be suspended from the radio waves. Representatives from other organizations, radio stations, television networks, and magazines also asked for Imus to apologize and called on executives at MSNBC® and CBS® to cancel his broadcasts. Within two weeks, both CBS® and NBC Universal® terminated his employment.

In the days between Imus' remarks and his firing, figures in the media began to raise questions about racism and sexism in American society in general and in hip-hop music in particular. Fox New®, CBS®, NBC®, CNN®, and C-SPAN® brought in record executives, Hip-Hop artists, and African American cultural critics to discuss the relationship between hip-hop music and its promotion of violence and the denigration of black women. The discussion became so popular that even the producers of *Oprah* couldn't pass up on the opportunity to debate about the relationship between hip-hop and misogyny.

Since I grew up on hip-hop and because I've spent years ministering alongside urban youth, I tuned in to see what would happen. The first thing I noticed was that Oprah had assembled a cadre of hip-hop moguls; Russell Simmons (President of Def-Jam records), Kevin Liles (Executive President of Time Warner Music Group), Common (a socially conscious rapper from Chicago), and Dr. Ben Chavis (President/CEO of Hip-Hop Summit Action Network). Aside from these figures, Oprah had also gathered a group of female students from Spellman College to be a part of the discussion.

At the start of the show, it seemed that a fruitful and honest dialogue was going to take place. Everyone present acknowledged that misogyny, violence, and the glorification of materialism pervaded mainstream hip-hop. Simmons, Chavis, Liles, and Common tried to convey that programs were underway to address these issues. Yet the ladies from Spellman and

¹ Editor's Note: The following article contains some language that might be construed as objectionable in certain church settings. However all objectionable material resides in the words and concepts of other writers and thinkers; not in the argument set forth by Reverend Winstead. Brandon's judicious use of said material reflects the necessity of identifying the common parlance of Hip-Hop and the author has demonstrated sound judgment in balancing representative concepts with sound academic critique. While potentially "jarring" in imagery the material captures the core issues Rev. Winstead lifts up for our consideration. (Dean G. Blevins, *Didache* Senior editor)

² Ryan Chiachiere, "Imus Called Women's Basketball Team "Nappy-Headed Hos," [article on-line] (Washington, DC: 2007, accessed Tuesday May 1, 2007); available from <http://mediamatters.org/items/200704040011>; Internet

others such as Diane Weathers (the former editor of *Essence* magazine) felt that the hip-hop community had not done enough to curb the problem.³

Nonetheless, as the show advanced, differences between the male panelists and the audience became more apparent. At one point, Stanley Crouch, an African American columnist from the *New York Daily News*, made a comment from the crowd calling hip-hop artists “clowns,” which then prompted Liles to give an angry response. Moreover, towards the end, the show was constantly disrupted by corporate commercials, making it difficult for the panelists to have an honest and open discussion with one another. Thus, when the session ended, I was left hanging in suspense, pondering whether I had been duped into “corporate representational politics”⁴ or wondering whether any authentic headway had been made to address the issues at hand.

Even so, there were other things that pricked my conscious as I turned off the tube. First, it struck me that no one questioned the root of the dilemma. Nobody, at any point, questioned the consumerist culture that drives people to buy records produced by multi-national corporations such as Universal® or Atlantic Records®. In short, none of the panelists or any one in the audience discussed whether mainstream hip-hop could be socially conscious in a capitalistic society.

Second, I noticed that there were no ministers or church representatives in the crowd that day and the only time that the words “church” or “religion” surfaced in the conversation was when Common critiqued various churches for not caring about the plight of black women.⁵ In other words, it seemed that the African American church was silently and politely ignored. Did this happen because the audience and the panel thought that African American churches could not effectively address the socio-cultural issues in hip-hop? Or, was their absence from the discussion due to some other circumstance?

Third, throughout the conversation, no one discussed how mainstream hip-hop music affects the psychological and social development of urban teenagers. There was no space provided for youth to give *their* perspective on hip-hop and misogyny affect their ideas about the self. Thus, black teenagers were once again excluded from participating in a public discussion about how hip-hop affects African American teenage identity.

³“Oprah’s Town Hall,” April 17th’s episode on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

⁴This is a term borrowed from the critical pedagogist Henry Giroux. Giroux defines “corporate representational politics” as a form of politics whereby corporations and media conglomerates act as a “mediator of a version of the social that abstracts ethics from a history informed by diverse forms of resistance and collective struggle.” Thus, public debate and social consciousness in this worldview is “about purchasing merchandise, not changing oppressive relations of power.” See Henry Giroux, “Consuming Social Change: The “United Colors of Benetton,”” in *The Giroux Reader*, ed. Christopher G. Robbins (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 71.

⁵Common’s statement was addressed to the black church in general. Whether or not one agrees with Common’s assertions, it is important to note that mainline black denominations such as the National Baptist Convention, Inc. and the Church of God in Christ do not ordain women to the ministry. Instead, women in these traditions have to fulfill their calling through other teaching and evangelistic ministries. For further discussion see Anthony Pinn, *Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 116-132.

Nonetheless, the point of this paper is not to analyze the positive and negative aspects of Oprah's "Town Hall Meeting." Instead, I have highlighted these three issues because they form the basis of what I will address in this paper. In the first section of the essay, I will seek to analyze the ways in which the self-identities of black youth have been marketed in mainstream hip-hop, while at the same time detailing how commercial hip-hop has allowed the hip-hop generation⁶ to critique society and to develop self-agency.

Henry Giroux's and Todd Boyd's writings on hip-hop film and music will be used to address the positive and negative effects of mainstream hip-hop music on the psychological and social development of black teenagers.⁷ On the one hand, Giroux's critical analysis of the movie *Baby Boy* will be utilized to show how mainstream hip-hop film supports some of the conservative ideologies of corporate America, while Boyd's scholarship will be used to highlight how the hip-hop industry has created individual agency for young African Americans. Then, I will conclude this section by discussing whether or not black churches⁸ need to provide pedagogical space for youth to critically engage the positive and negative aspects of mainstream hip-hop music and film.

After this, I will briefly argue that the church needs to provide pedagogical space for youth to decisively analyze commercial hip-hop. By examining some of the current scholarship on the relationship between the hip-hop generation and the black church, I will show why it is imperative that congregations create on-going ministries that allow youth and adults to critically

⁶ Bakari Kitwana, in his monograph *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture*, states that the hip-hop generation is comprised of African Americans born between the years of 1965 and 1984. Yet, he also conveys that there are distinctive subgroups within this generation. First, there are older hip-hop generationers who may find a rapper like KRS-One, LL Cool J, or Public Enemy to be more representative of "true" hip-hop than someone like Young Jeezy, Jay-Z, Fabulous, or Ludacris. Second, there are those in the middle of the group who resonate more with the music and culture that emerged during the mid-1990's, while the last subgroup usually identifies with the language, images, goals, and desires that have been promoted by artists such as 50 Cent, Lil' Flip, Paul Wall, T.I., or Mims. In this paper, I will focus on the youngest population. For further detail concerning Kitwana's definition see Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Book, 2002), xiii-xiv.

⁷There are many levels of practices and actions that are a part of hip-hop culture. Besides music, videos, and movies, others factors such as clothing, language, food, beliefs, and value systems inform hip-hop culture. For other works that analyze the language, politics, and philosophy of hip-hop culture see Kermit E. Campbell, *"Getting our Groove On": Rhetoric, Language and Literacy for the Hip Hop Generation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005); Elaine Richardson, *Hip Hop Literacies* (London: Routledge, 2006); H. Samy Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006); Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You?: Popular Culture From the Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 13-59; S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 33-55; Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby, eds., *Hip Hop & Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason*, vol. 16, *Popular Culture and Philosophy*, by William Irwin (Chicago: LaSalle, 2005).

⁸I am quite aware of the theological, liturgical, and economic diversity that affects the makeup of African American churches. However, in this paper, the "black church" refers to African American congregations that are a part of historically black denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention, Inc., the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc., the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Church of God in Christ.

investigate some of the cultural, political, racial, social, and gender issues that pervade mainstream hip-hop music and film. I will also suggest the ways in which some pedagogical practices can help African American youth achieve *freedom* and *healing* within the domains of the church.⁹ Then, I will conclude the paper by summarizing my arguments and noting some of the future implications that this type of practice may have for African American pastors and congregations who are seeking to reach out to the hip-hop generation.

Drop da' Beat!
Henry Giroux, Tony Boyd and the Psycho-Social Dynamics
In Mainstream Hip-Hop Film and Music

Ever since the early 1990's, Henry Giroux, the renowned social critic and educational theorist, has written about the oppressive link that exists between multi-national corporations and youth culture. Underlining most of his work is the assumption that corporations have inaugurated a war on youth culture by marketing the bodies and desires of teenagers and selling them for profit.¹⁰

Although his writings have dealt with youth culture in general, recently Giroux has reflected on how corporations profit by depicting stereotypical depictions of black masculinity. For instance, in his work *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*, Giroux analyzes how recent films such as *New Jack City* (1991), *Boyz 'N the Hood* (1992), *New Jersey Drive* (1995), *Clockers* (1995), *Belly* (1999), and *Baby Boy* (2001) have promoted a "homogenous image of the inner-city as largely inhabited by illiterate, unmotivated, and violent urban youth who are economically and racially marginalized."¹¹

Giroux goes on to maintain that these films suggest a correlation between urban public space and rampant drug use, daily assaults, welfare fraud, unwed teenage mothers, and young African American males caught in the intricate web of thug life, prison, and moral irresponsibility. Thus, when these films attempt to critically engage the ethical, moral, and social development of young African Americans, it does so only at the individual level. In other words, by focusing on how youth in the films refuse to grow up and assume the responsibility of acquiring jobs, taking care of their families, and becoming productive members of society, it overlooks the broader systemic forces of poverty and racism that adversely affect those that suffer under its constant pressure.¹²

For example, Jody, the main character in the movie *Baby Boy*, is a young black male growing up in South Central Los Angeles who realizes that he will never make it out of the

⁹Henry Giroux, "Doing Cultural Studies: Youth and the Challenge of Pedagogy," in *The Giroux Reader*, ed. Christopher G. Robbins (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 92.

¹⁰Henry Giroux, *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture's War on Children* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 1-35; Henry Giroux, *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3-24; Henry Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 153-197.

¹¹Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, 129. Bakari Kitwana makes a similar argument when analyzing the nihilistic thread in recent hip hop films. In short, he argues that Hollywood films promote a mythology of a new Black youth culture as an "outgrowth of the street culture of our parents' generation—diminishing our parents' more praiseworthy achievements and our own. The message here is, they left nothing better and we aspire to nothing more meaningful." See Kitwana, 136;

¹²Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, 130.

'hood.' Thus, he begins stealing women's clothes and selling them in various beauty salons and parlors throughout his community. As the story progresses, Jody's continues this type of behavior as his sense of agency becomes increasingly entrepreneurial and privatized. Yet, none of his peers or family members analyze how racialized stratification of power and the lack of economic opportunity within their own community impacts Jody's sense of possibility and individual agency.

Nonetheless, towards the end of the film, Jody's masculinity is challenged when he is put out of his mother's house after demanding that his mother kick out her boyfriend Melvin.¹³ Meanwhile, Rodney (Jody's nemesis in the film) and his crew attempt to murder Jody, but their efforts fail. Facing a crisis in both his identity and manhood, Jody and his boy Sweetpea hunt down Rodney and kill him, despite their hesitations and reservations about committing murder. After the incident, Jody returns to his mother's house and is completely shaken up. Melvin finds him in the corner trembling while holding the gun that he used to shoot Rodney. Melvin takes the gun, wipes off the prints, and leaves the room without uttering a word. The film ends with Jody leaving his mother and moving in with Yvette, the mother of his baby.

As Giroux rightly asserts, the ending of the movie conveys the idea that Melvin and Jody bond through a ritual of masculine violence, "removed from either the sphere of moral responsibility or the necessity for argument." In the end, it is hyper-masculinity that substantiates black adult reality and Jody's self-identity.¹⁴ As a representative of masculinity within the hip-hop generation, Jody's sense of agency and self-identity is wrapped up in a conservative ideology that accentuates individual violence and misogyny. According to Giroux, this type of ideology refuses to acknowledge neither the state nor corporate America's implications in perpetuating racial violence and social disintegration.¹⁵

Not only does this serve the interest of the corporations who distribute the movie, but it also overlooks how the film perpetuates stereotypical understandings of young black personhood.¹⁶ On the one hand, black masculinity develops along the lines of anger, violent behavior, promiscuity, laziness, and irresponsibility,¹⁷ while the identities of African American

¹³Ibid., 134.

¹⁴Ibid., 134.

¹⁵Ibid., 140. In his book, *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, Michael Dyson levies a similar charge against corporate abuse of hip-hop culture. At the same time, Dyson also maintains that hip-hop artists have used hip-hop as a means to accumulate capital and as a tool to critique bourgeois black institutions, white racism, and systemic injustices. Thus, he asserts that hip-hopsters shape and respond to the values and visions of mainstream hip-hop music. For further detail see Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 176-186 or Michael Eric Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 308-309, 345-348.

¹⁶Princeton intellectual Cornel West states that similar themes run throughout commercial hip-hop. See Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 483.

¹⁷Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, 141. Numerous African American scholars have revealed the ways in which black men have been portrayed as lazy, lethargic, lustful, and violent throughout American history. For further discussion on this particular subject see Kevin Verney, *African Americans and US Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper

females remain passive, dependent, and nurturing, despite enduring the social ills of economic depravation, domestic abuse, and rape.¹⁸

Thus, in an effort to please the conservative ideology of corporate America, the film's producers have perpetuated an idea which states that inner-city black youth lack individual discipline and are unable to alter their situation because they lack the will and determination to change their destructive behaviors. In the end, *Baby Boy* supports the myth of individual motivation and pathology as the source of violence, substandard housing, inadequate schools, misogyny, and unemployment.

This type of dynamic can be seen among certain mainstream hip-hop artists such as Jay-Z and Young Buck. In a recent song entitled "Trouble," Jay-Z describes how he defends his manhood against young detractors who are attempting to "come up" by challenging his masculinity. He begins the song by detailing his inevitable self identity as one who maintains his reputation against "young niggaz": /I try to pretend that I'm different but in the end we're all the same/I pray to god, father forgive a nigga I'm never gonna change/.¹⁹

After this, Jay-Z articulates how "young niggaz" continue to "hate on him" because of his stature within the hip-hop industry. He says, "/I know, its just a matter of time before the steady hate/start to overflow/then the levy breaks and my conscience go/you escape the rico, why throw everything away over ego?/ you paper chasing, they paper hating/." Because of this threat, Jay-Z launches a verbal assault against those who think they have a right to disrespect the "lord" of hip-hop.

Unlike you little nigga, I'm a grown ass man/big shoes to fill nigga, grown ass pants/
prolly hustled with your pops, go ask your parents/its apparent you're staring at a
legend/who, put a few little niggaz in the they place before/trying to eat without saying
they grace before/blasphemous bastard get your faith restored/you're viewing your
version of the lord god/ mc little nigga, applaud, or forever burn in the fire that I spit at
y'all/I rebuke you little nigga the meek shall parish/ill roof you little nigga, Im a project
terrorist/cute you little niggaz think you in my class/substitute little niggaz soon feel my
wrath/I mute you little niggaz you a little nigga/I shall abuse you little nigga, I'm a ill
nigga/now shoot you little niggaz go somewhere and play/cuz the day I loose to you little
niggaz, no day.²⁰

Based upon his self-identity as a ghetto hustler who has taken his game to the hip-hop industry,²¹ Jay-Z feels that he has to maintain his reputation by verbally assaulting all the "little niggaz" who want to try and discredit his status as a hip-hop legend. In the aforementioned verse, he even equates himself as a "project terrorist" that will soon unleash his wrath upon his enemies. In a sense, this portrays a similar picture of black masculinity that was described by Giroux. Jay-Z represents the young black male that will unleash his anger against those who try to take what he has earned. He has to "keep it real" against other young black males who are struggling to

Torchbooks, 1972); Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

¹⁸Giroux, 145; bell Hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁹Jay-Z, "Trouble," *Kingdom Come* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2006).

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Campbell, 59.

make a name for themselves in the hip-hop industry. Despite his wealth, fame, and notoriety, Jay-Z articulates his sense of identity and self-agency vis-à-vis the inner-city black male. Thus, in an effort to heighten his status, Jay-Z does not question the very forces that may cause “little niggaz” to feel as if they have to attack his character in order to make it into commercial hip-hop.

In other words, his lyrical assault does not address the social, racial, economic, political, and corporate forces that often leave urban youth with little sense of possibility and self-agency. It is a battle that takes place within a social vacuum. There is no mention of how familial, institutional, economic, religious, political, or educational relationships affect the warring parties. The audience is presented with a David and Goliath type scenario, yet neither the Philistines nor the Israelites are said to exist.

Moreover, Jay-Z does not address how the “little niggaz” are struggling to survive in a nation where young African American males represent 50 percent of the prison population.²² It fails to analyze how corporations and municipal, state, and federal governments help to facilitate an environment where in 2002, young black and Hispanic girls accounted for 84 percent of the heterosexually acquired HIV infections.²³ In short, by privatizing the battle between himself and his detractors, Jay-Z overlooks the societal forces that damage the self-identities of the hip-hop generation and he also helps to protect companies like Universal Records from being held accountable for marketing stereotypical depictions of inner-city black masculinity.²⁴

Like Jay-Z, other mainline artists and magazines such as Young Buck, *XXL*, and the *Source* contribute to the popular ideas about self-identity in the hip-hop generation. On the cover of *XXL*'s May 2007 issue, Young Buck, a rapper from the southern city of Nashville, TN is adorned with a gold necklace, while he holds a grenade pin in his mouth. The article about him details his recent activities, including his “beef” with a former G-unit member and his thoughts about his new album *Buck the World*. However, in the interview, he is also asked to reflect upon his involvement in a stabbing incident at the Vibe Awards in 2004.

At the awards ceremony, Dr. Dre, a noted hip-hop producer from Los Angeles, was attacked and punched by Jimmy James Johnson while Buck was backstage. After noticing the commotion through a monitor, Buck ran to the front and stabbed Johnson in the chest. Cameras got the whole incident on tape, yet when his case went to trial, Buck got three years probation and no jail time. When asked if he would do it again, Buck says that, “I’d do it again. If I had to repeat it twice, I would do it over and *over* again, bruh. But what I would do different is get a sharper knife.”²⁵

²²Kitwana, 76. David Hilfiker asserts that in the year 2000, roughly one out of every three black males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four were under the active supervision of the criminal justice system. Thus, they were either under arrest, awaiting trial, awaiting sentencing, on probation, in jail, on parole, in mandated programs, or in half-way houses. See David Hilfiker, *Urban Injustice: How Ghettoes Happen*, with a foreword by Marian Wright Edelman (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 36.

²³Watkins, 223.

²⁴Although Jay-Z’s album was produced by his own label, Roc-a-Fella Records, it was Universal Records, a predominantly white owned corporation that was in charge of national and global distribution of his record.

²⁵Sean A. Malcolm, “Look at Me,” *The Source*, May 2007, 92.

Although this response may shock some readers, according to Buck, nobody had the right to disrespect the manhood of someone like Dr. Dre. So, when somebody like Johnson attempted to discredit Dre's masculinity, it was imperative for Buck and other "soldiers" to protect him. Buck expresses this sentiment in the interview when he states,²⁶ "How dare you niggas?! How dare you niggas, ever in your life, try to disrespect my nigga? Not only him, but the man's wife is in the building. I will f*%! one of you niggas up for that!"

For Buck, irregardless of his status and popularity as a mainstream hip-hop artist, it is imperative that he maintain his street credibility. Thus, like Jody and Jay-Z, Buck's masculinity is actualized through a public act of aggression against another black male.²⁷ For the reading public, violence is repeated as the only terrain through which young African American men are able to work out their problems and disagreements.²⁸ The audience is given the impression that if Buck is going to be perceived as *authentic* in the hip-hop world, then he has to "keep it real" by protecting the manhood of his crew.

In all three examples, black manhood becomes synonymous with violence, hyper-masculinity, and criminality. Such stereotypes disseminated through mainstream music and movies provide justification for social policy and legislation that criminalizes black youth. As Kitwana concludes, "The extent to which the worldwide distribution and consumption of these images in a global economy have contributed to the national and international backlash against Black youth is impossible to measure."²⁹

Not only does it affect the self-identity and popular perception about young African American males, but it adversely impacts the psycho-social development of black females as well. In many sectors of mainstream hip-hop, women are often objectified as sex objects who bolster the ego and individual agency of male hip-hop artists. For instance, in songs such as Ludacris's "Money Maker," 50 Cent's "Candy Shop," and Jay-Z's "99 Problems," women are placed into a small box which defines the parameters of their femininity. On the one hand, their worth is determined by the beauty of their physical features or how well they can please a man in bed. At the same time, African American women are often portrayed as "gold-diggas" or "bitches" that stand in the way of black male success.

Moreover, as S. Craig Watkins maintains, the messages in commercial hip-hop that women are cheap, consumable, and disposable have become all too familiar.³⁰ He claims that misogynistic portrayals are partly due to the industry's claim that they are marketing to an older audience. On the other hand, Watkins also asserts that the move toward the sexually explicit is a way to heighten and bolster hip-hop artists' claims of racial authenticity and fidelity to the ghetto. For example, when Snoop Dogg and Lil' Jon got involved in the porn industry to keep their images from becoming too "commercial" or "pop," it bolstered their credibility as "real

²⁶Ibid., 92.

²⁷Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, 143.

²⁸In mainstream hip-hop music, violence often becomes the way that young black males attempt to solve their problems. For several examples see Ja Rule, "Worldwide Gangsta" *Pain Is Love* (Island/Def Jam Records, 2001); Tha Dogg Pound, "Anybody Killa," *Dogg Chit* (Gangsta Advisory/Kock Production, 2007); Rich Boy, "Ghetto Rich," *Rich Boy* (Zone 4/Interscope Production, 2006).

²⁹Kitwana, 140.

³⁰Watkins, 211.

pimps” and enhanced their attractiveness to advertisers, executives at MTV, and the younger population within the hip-hop generation.³¹

Their rise in popularity revealed how hustlers, pimps, and “playas” are perceived to be representative of authentic African American street culture. If anything, this portrayal perpetuates some of the most enduring and pernicious themes in America’s cultural and racial history. In other words, when commercial hip-hop promotes this stereotype, it is agreeing with the age old racial myth that black sexuality is deviant, dangerous, and taboo. Moreover, it also amplifies and perpetuates the assumption that arose during slavery, namely that the black woman is a “work ox” and a hyper sexual being that needs to be tamed and managed by a man.³²

The wound that this creates within young black females is deep and excruciating. Self-identities become susceptible to feelings of self-doubt, low self-esteem, and the anxiety over whether or not their bodies can live up to the images portrayed in the lyrics and on the television screen. This internal struggle, coupled with the dominant culture’s view that whiteness is beautiful, makes it difficult for many young black women to construct a healthy self-identity and to talk honestly about issues related to self-esteem, individual agency, and individual possibility.³³

Nonetheless, one could continue to describe how commercial hip-hop has adversely affected the psycho-social development of the hip-hop generation. One could persistently bemoan (as Yvonne Bynoe has) the fact that five large corporations control the distribution of most mainstream hip-hop music. They could lament how those conglomerates often turn commercial hip-hop into a modern day minstrel show, where white and black youth are given a singular black experience that is often consumeristic, misogynistic, and hedonistic.³⁴

Yet, despite these facts, there are positive ways in which commercial hip-hop has created *agency* for young African Americans. In his provocative work entitled, *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop*, Todd Boyd, a University of Southern California film professor and producer, argues that the hip-hop generation has eclipsed the civil rights generation as the new bearers of African American culture. Thus, they will no longer acquiesce to the demands of white society and the older black population because hip-hopsters now operate from a position of cultural, economic, and social power within the African American community. Regarding this situation, it is worth quoting Boyd at length.

³¹Ibid., 208-210. According to Watkins, some of America’s largest corporations have contributed to the proliferation of sexually explicit entertainment. He asserts that Americans now spend as much as eight to ten billion dollars on adult entertainment and reputable companies such as AT&T®, AOL Time Warner®, and Hilton Enterprises® are just some of the companies that have benefited from this industry.

³²Katie G. Cannon, “Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, eds., Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 17-21; See also, Queen Bees and Big Pimps: Sex and Sexuality in Hip Hop,” in *Hip Hop & Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason*, eds., Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby (Chicago: Open Book, 2005), 93-94; bell Hooks, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* (New York: Atria Books, 2003), 35-37.

³³Hooks, 170-171.

³⁴Yvonne Bynoe, *Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2004), 167-171.

...we have a generation of Black people, now defined by the many strands that emerge most visibly through hip hop culture, who have decided to take what they want from the mainstream, while leaving behind what they do not care to embrace. Civil rights often imposed a certain unspoken code of moral behavior, which suggested that one should “act right” so as not to offend the tastes of dominant White society and so as to speed up one’s entrance into the mainstream, while recognizing that only certain Blacks and a certain Black style would be accepted into the corridors of Whiteness. This having been the case, hip hop can now step in and further the pursuit of time, fortune, and wealth, without giving up the phat farm, as it were. Hip hop could care less what White people have to say. As a matter of fact, hip hop, more accurately wants to provoke White people and “bourgie ass niggas” to say something, while laughing all the way to the bank. This ultimate disregard for the approval of the mainstream is quite liberating, indeed.³⁵

For Boyd, the issue is clear. Hip-hop has given young blacks more control over their lives and it has created enough political, social, and economic capital for them to reject mainstream society’s values and beliefs. Unlike other scholars that have been mentioned throughout this paper, Boyd asserts that instead of being manipulated, black artists and producers have actually exploited hip-hop’s popularity among white youth.

For example, when Eminem, a white rapper from Detroit, arrived on the hip-hop scene in 1998 via Dr. Dre, he became an overnight sensation. His sales skyrocketed and his popularity among white youth soared.³⁶ Music critics nationwide celebrated and critiqued his work as if he was a giant in the hip-hop industry. Writers went about engaging not only his lyrics and music, but his personal and social life as well. Even when critics blasted Eminem’s overt nihilistic, sexist, and homophobic remarks, many in the media still lifted up Em’s right to free speech and individual expression.³⁷ In short, Boyd maintains that Eminem had become the new “white negro” and the 21st century’s version of Elvis Presley.

Yet, despite the presence of Eminem’s whiteness and his borrowing of blackness to critique the hegemonic culture, Boyd asserts that Eminem needed the pass of a black man to enter into the world of hip-hop. Unlike Elvis Presley, Eminem could not appropriate black music without permission from the black community. Therefore, when Eminem received the endorsement of Dr. Dre, he was able to enter mainstream hip-hop with a certain amount of cultural credibility, while Dr. Dre was able to gain an enormous amount of wealth by promoting a white rapper.³⁸

At the very least, Eminem and Dr. Dre’s example reveal how commercial hip-hop music is more than an art form that is being appropriated by white America and its corporative representatives. Instead, it is also an avenue that hip-hop artists and producers have used to “flip the script” on historical racial dynamics in order to achieve economic and social capital. With this in mind, Boyd asks, “Can we conceive of a landscape where Blackness can exploit and

³⁵Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 18.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 129.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 129.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 136.

appropriate, and be seen as something other than reaffirming a stereotype and instead seen as empowerment?”³⁹

Whatever value judgment one places on Boyd’s assertions, his example does reveal how hip-hop *has* helped some within the hip-hop generation to achieve cultural, financial, and political status. Although one could critique Boyd for not discussing the preponderance of sexism and consumerism within commercial hip-hop, he does uplift the image of the young black male taking matters into his own hands and creatively engaging the socio-historical context that he inhabits.

Aside from Boyd’s work, other cultural critics such as Michael Eric Dyson have detailed some of the positive aspects of commercial hip-hop. For instance, in Dyson’s estimation, figures like Tupac disclose both the spiritual and cultural depths of young African American males. As a hip-hop icon, Tupac was highly commercial, yet overwhelmingly brilliant in the way he was able to depict the brutal realities of black youth existence. In other words, even though Tupac was subjugated to the demands of white corporate elites, he was not limited by their conservative social and political ideologies. Even though Tupac promoted violence, the objectification of women, and hyper-individualism, he was also able to offer powerful and poetic views of the young black experience. He discussed issues such as racism, poverty, sexism, self-destruction, low self-esteem, war, drugs, religion, and theodicy. Thus, according to Dyson, Tupac’s music and life shatters the either/or interpretation of hip-hop as either commercial or political. By dancing in both realms, Tupac embodied a self-identity that “was as truthful as we can expect any human being to be about his evolving identity and his expanding artistic vision.”⁴⁰

Apart from Tupac, there are numerous contemporary rappers who are politically and socially conscious. Those such as Common, Talib Kweli, and Mos Def are just some of the artists who rhyme about contemporary social ills that affect the hip-hop generation. Even Lupe Fiasco, a native Chicago rapper who released his latest LP with Atlantic Records, has written songs such as “American Terrorist” and “Daydreamin,” which critique America’s international politics and the commercialism of mainstream hip-hop.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the fact remains that hip-hop represents a diversity of perspectives that can have a positive and negative impact on how black youth construct their self-identity.

In light of this fact and in light of the evidence presented so far, the question remains to be asked, “What role, if any, does the African American church play in helping youth navigate the proverbial waters of commercial hip-hop music? Since most hip-hop critics have overlooked the relationship between hip-hop, religion/spirituality, and self-identity and have often condemned the church for ignoring the needs and concerns of the hip-hop generation, does this mean that African American churches should remain on the sidelines? If the answer is no, then

³⁹Ibid., 137

⁴⁰Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader*, 316-323.

⁴¹Lupe Fiasco, *Food and Liquor* (Atlantic Records: 2006). On the political side, Russell Simmon’s Hip-Hop Summit Action Network is a group that seeks to address political and social issues that impact the hip-hop generation. Its mission statement reads that it 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 war on poverty and injustice.” See Watkins, 152.

in what ways can they become more involved with the lives of young African Americans? In the proceeding section, I will attempt to answer this question.

This is our Block? Creating Pedagogical Space for Youth to Critically Analyze Mainstream Hip-Hop Music

Unlike cultural and hip-hop critics such as Henry Giroux, Tony Boyd, Bakari Kitwana, Murray Forman, or Yvonne Bynoe, hip-hop pastors and black Christian scholars have interpreted the intricacies of hip-hop music and culture through the lens of the African American religious tradition. For instance, in an article entitled “Real Big: The Hip Hop Pastor as Postmodern Prophet,” Moss III argues that hip-hop culture was developed outside the African American church and without the assistance of “soul sensibilities.” As a result, he contends that hip-hop culture as an art form has and continues to develop outside the faith-based ethics of the black church.⁴² Due to this development and because hip-hop has been nursed by the hands of a global capitalist market and by morally ambiguous political and religious ideologies, Moss III believes that black churches and pastors need to reassess their theologies of worship so that congregations can celebrate Christ in a way that engages the hip-hop generation.⁴³

Furthermore, Ralph C. Watkins, associate professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, maintains that the church *must* be willing to reach out to the hip-hop generation. He asserts that congregations and pastors must be willing to change and embrace God’s vision for African American youth. He bases his ecclesiastical and theological reform on two biblical passages. The first text is Matthew 28:19-20, which reads, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.” (NKJV). The second is Luke 4:18, where Christ proclaims in the synagogue that, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” (NKJV).⁴⁴

According to Watkins, these texts have long held a prominent place within many segments of the African American church. Based upon these passages, black churches have tried to evangelize and disciple black souls by liberating them from sin and from the physical, political, and social forces that have impeded their ability to achieve full humanity.

In other words, unlike most white Protestant churches of the past, salvation has meant more than deliverance from individual sin. For those who were enslaved or for those who suffered under the weight of Jim Crowism, it was also necessary to engage in social and political activism. In essence, one’s ability to help change oppressive social and political systems was equally a part of what it meant to achieve salvation and to grow as a Christian disciple. Thus, if African American churches are going to reach the hip-hop generation with this message, then Watkins believes that transformation needs to take place in many black congregations. At the very least, changes in worship, in pastoral models, in cultural competency, in biblical exegesis,

⁴²Otis Moss III, “Real Big: The Hip Hop Pastor as Postmodern Prophet,” in *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation*, ed., Ralph C. Watkins (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007), 111.

⁴³Ibid., 112-118, 126-138.

⁴⁴Ralph C. Watkins, “A Charge to Keep I Have: Institutional Barriers to Reaching the Hip Hop Generation,” in *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation*, ed., Ralph C. Watkins (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007), 44-45.

and in Christian education are needed if churches are going to reach out to the hip-hop generation.⁴⁵

Although recent books such as *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture*, *Keep It Real: Working with Today's Black Youth*, and *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* have provided excellent ways to bring about *change* and have offered practical suggestions on how to reach out to hip-hopsters, the authors offer little advice on how youth and adults in the church should address the self-identities portrayed in commercial hip-hop music and film.

As it was shown in the first section, mainstream hip-hop music and film serve as legitimate objects of social and cultural knowledge. These pop cultural texts offer portrayals of inner-city life, which, in turn, help to shape the social identities of those in the hip-hop generation in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, self-identities and ideals about self-agency have been manipulated by corporate conglomerates. At the same time, however, individual artists have used commercial hip-hop to construct a more authentic identity. Simultaneously, there are acts of self-determination taking place during moments of economic, cultural, psychological, and social exploitation.

Despite this paradox, one may ask how the church can help youth navigate the varieties of images and lyrics portrayed in commercial hip-hop. Like other critical pedagogists, I believe that the goal of education in general and Christian education in particular, is to raise critical consciousness about the issues that impact people's lives⁴⁶ in a way that helps to further and deepen their Christian faith. This, of course, may mean that individuals have to deconstruct conservative ideologies that often oppress and marginalize them (like those that often support the relationship between large corporations and commercial hip-hop).⁴⁷ At other times, it may mean helping to create awareness about what has damaged their self-esteem or self-identity. In other words, Christian emancipatory pedagogies should help bring about *freedom* and *healing* in learning communities and in individual lives so that they can have hope for a better tomorrow.⁴⁸

Based upon this pedagogical assumption, I believe that if churches and congregations are going to analyze self-representations in commercial hip-hop to help bring about freedom and

⁴⁵See Ibid., 70-78; Efreem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping our Culture* (Downers Grove: IL, 2005), 131-216; Anne Streat Wimberly, "The Challenge and Promise of Real Ministry with Black Youth," in *Keep it Real: Working with Today's Black Youth*, ed., Anne Streat Wimberly (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), xi-xxiii.

⁴⁶In his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Friere defined *conscientização* as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality." See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, with an introduction by Donald Macedo (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 35

⁴⁷This also means that white educators like me have to express and address how our socio-cultural location and privileges allow us to work in African American communities. If we are going to take serious our role in working to create awareness and agency in oppressed communities, then we need to realize how our own presence may impede establishing a more just and equitable society. For further reference on the relationship between white liberals, oppression, and emancipatory pedagogy, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, with a foreword by Donald Macedo and an introduction by Stanley Aronowitz (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), xxvii-xxxii.

⁴⁸Ibid., 69-72.

healing, then there are several steps that should be followed. First, the discussions should be guided by an *historical* analysis of how hip-hop emerged out of the black musical tradition. Discussing the historical link between genres such as jazz, the blues, and hip-hop could allow young blacks to see how previous generations used music to reflect on social and personal conditions and how they utilized music to transform hurt and pain into art and self-agency. Helping youth and adults to see how hip-hop is similar to the blues in that both express the pains, disappointments, struggles, and joys of life, could enable both parties to see why African American youth define their self-identity in both negative and positive terms.⁴⁹

Moreover, when it comes to history, pastors, Christian educators, and church leaders should communicate to youth and adults the ways in which historical racial stereotypes have affected the psyche of African Americans. Aside from preaching about this issue from the pulpit, pastors and Christian educators could offer on-going classes that deal with how hip-hop compares and contrasts with historical racial stereotypes. For instance, the class could engage a film like *Menace II Society* or songs in a popular hip-hop album and compare how those match up with a historical document that discussed the physical, mental, and spiritual characters of African Americans. Particular attention could be paid to how the culture, language, music, mental capacities, and beauty of the characters are portrayed.⁵⁰ Then, after an analysis has been rendered, the class could compare these findings with passages such as Genesis 1 or scriptures dealing with Jesus' teachings about the goodness of all humanity. Thus, by relying on an Afro-centric approach to American history and a black hermeneutic that seeks to both illuminate historical stereotypes and highlight the beauty of African American humanity, churches could give youth and adults a foundation on which to critically engage the positive and negative self-identities portrayed in commercial hip-hop.

Second, classes that foster *intergenerational dialogue* should be offered on a continual basis. Like any other communicative approach, hip-hop literacy in the church must foster honest dialogue between youth, adults, and the pastoral team. As youth struggle with identity formation and lack of spaces to construct healthy self-agency,⁵¹ it is crucial that churches provide pedagogical room for them to discuss how they struggle to construct an authentic Christian identity in light of commercial hip-hop and in light of an American consumerist society that accentuates instant gratification.⁵²

⁴⁹Smith and Jackson, 97-100.

⁵⁰Marsha I. Handy and Daniel O. Black, "Getting Real," in *Keep it Real: Working with Today's Black Youth*, ed., Anne Streat Wimberly (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 60.

⁵¹This is especially true in urban areas. According to Stephen Nathan Haymes, white supremacist society equates "urban" with "blackness," "crime," and "slum." As a result, white municipal governments have often justified the destruction of black public spaces as efforts to clear out "slum districts" that blotch the aesthetics of the city. For further detail see, Stephan Haymes, "Toward a Pedagogy of Place for Black Urban Struggle," in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, eds., Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo Torres (New York: Routledge, 2003) 211-223.

⁵²In their study on psycho-social development among urban African-American teens, Linda M. Burton, Kevin M. Allsion, and Dawn Obeidallah found that one of the major factors that affected African American self-identity was the adolescents' focus on immediate and readily apparent symbols of success. Even though many of the respondents failed to finish high school and continued to live in poverty, they still measured success in terms of survival and one's ability to accumulate clothing, jewelry, and money. However, many in the study stated that when they participated in religious activities, they felt the need to

Establishing these safe pedagogical spaces where youth and adults can come together to have honest dialogues about hip-hop and about what it means to serve one another could allow youth to contribute to the conversation surrounding commercial hip-hop and it could also help them to critically engage the issues that affect their lives. Of course, youth will need the guidance and affirmation of adults, but when there is honest and concrete dialogue about commercial hip-hop and self-identity; youth will be able to experience freedom and healing. By participating on an equal level, black youth will be able to freely express their appreciation of how the black self is represented in commercial hip-hop, while also exploring the ways it has caused damage to their psycho-social development.

Moreover, freedom and healing could come through certain cooperative acts where small groups of adults and youth investigate corporate abuses of mainstream hip-hop. Healing and affirmation could arise by writing letters to artists and corporate executives describing how their lyrics and videos have impacted or damaged their self-identities as young black Americans. They could also compose letters describing their appreciation for a song that lifted up models of self-agency, black social critique, or gender equality.

Third and last, analyzing black personhood in mainstream hip-hop should always be *transformational*. The goal of Jesus' ministry and one of the historic visions of the black church has been to recognize the quest of all human beings for liberation from what is life-negating to what is life affirming. In pedagogical terms, this means that the goal of developing hip-hop literacy with and among black youth is to make Christian disciples who are able to see themselves as created in the image of God and as social agents who are able to consciously name where the Spirit of God is moving in commercial hip-hop. The goal of analyzing personhood in hip-hop music and film is to empower young people to claim their own talents, abilities, and gifts as children of God. When this goal is reached, then they will begin to see the touch and imprint of God's hand on their lives.

Conclusion

In summation, it is important to remember that this paper is not to be interpreted as a panacea for how the black church should address self-representations in commercial hip-hop. Instead, I have analyzed some of the psycho-social dynamics within mainstream hip-hop music and film in an attempt to reveal the need to begin examining these representations on a consistent basis within the domains of the African American church. By using the works of scholars like Henry Giroux, Todd Boyd, Yvonne Bynoe, Bakari Kitwana, S. Craig Watkins, and Michael Eric Dyson, I revealed the complexity of forces that impact commercial hip-hop's representation of the young black self and have argued that the church needs to provide pedagogical space to engage this cultural dynamic if it is going to meet the needs and concerns of the hip-hop generation and if it is going to help bring about freedom and healing within individual lives.

serve others instead of focusing on their own immediate desires. See Linda M. Burton, Kevin W. Allison, and Dawn Obeidallah, "Social Context and Adolescence: Perspectives on Development Among Inner-City African-American Teens," in *Pathways Through Adolescence: Individual Development in Relation to Social Contexts*, eds., Lisa J. Crockett and Ann C. Crouter (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 131. Findings like this suggest that despite the effects on poverty, racism, poor education, and self-doubt, hip-hopsters are looking for a safe place where they can develop and contribute to those in their community

Thus, it is my simple hope that this paper will further the discussion around the black church, media literacy, commercial hip-hop, and self-identity. By furthering the discussion, hopefully others will see the need to establish hip-hop literacy classes within their own local congregations. Establishing curriculum and awareness will not look the same in every context. Instead, congregations will have to be imaginative and creative. Churches may have to produce programs or hire trained workers that create hip-hop literacy classes. Whatever it may look like, it is my prayer that others will see the positive ways that media literacy can help the hip-hop generation see themselves as agents of change and as living examples of how God can nurture, heal, and empower their lives.

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