

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Chasing Paper: The Effects of Commodification on the Arts and Artists of Hip-Hop Culture

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology

By

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In Memory of Dr. Mack Johnson

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ABSTRACT

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By

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Hip-hop culture is a young culture; however there is an abundance of literature on the culture. In particular, the commodification and commercialization of hip-hop culture is a widely studied topic; however many studies approach the effects of these processes on the culture as having a homogenous effect on all of its elements and artists. The purpose of this thesis is twofold: to examine the unique effects of commodification and commercialization on the individual elements and to study their effects on hip-hop rappers, graffiti writers and dancers vis-à-vis such factors as age, race and gender.

Chapter 1: Introduction

July 1, 2009, one week after the death of pop-star Michael Jackson, marks the date that I became interested in the anthropological study of graffiti culture and by extension hip-hop culture. On that date I was driving through the streets of South Los Angeles and I happened upon a *crew*¹ of graffiti artists who were in the midst of creating a mural to the late star. Like most of the general public I had been conditioned by the media to be cautious about approaching graffiti artists, especially if you “catch them in the act.” However fascination and curiosity got the better of me. I put my car in park, grabbed my camera phone, and politely asked if I could take a picture of them working. The answer came in the form of a question from a young man who appeared to be in charge, “You’re not a cop are you”? I laughed and replied no and he said “Then go ahead”. This was my first meeting with MOEZART², and his graffiti crew known as KWS. MOEZART is known as a graffiti *king*. He is also a high ranking member of KWS which today is one of the most prolific, recognized and respected graffiti crews in South Los Angeles. My chance meeting with MOEZART and KWS led to my discovery that graffiti is not the random scrawling of disenfranchised youth. Graffiti is a cultural art form unto itself as well as the visual component of the larger hip-hop subculture. The artists who create it are often part of a well-disciplined and organized crew that runs as smoothly as any corporation. Furthermore many artists, young and old, male and female make their living by providing graffiti-style art to business and private clients.

Although I began my anthropological study of hip-hop culture on July 1, 2009, I had my Geertzian moment on November 11 of that same year when my husband and I ignored a no

¹ Italicized words appear in the glossary in appendix A

² It is a common practice to use all capital letters when writing out the names of graffiti artists

trespassing sign and crawled through a hole in a fence--that was presumably cut by graffiti artists--so that I could take pictures of the graffiti along the walls of a forbidden area. The "Geertzian moment", named for Clifford Geertz, is that pivotal moment when an anthropologist goes from merely observing a culture to being part of it. In Geertz's case the moment occurred when he and his wife joined the natives who fled the site of the illegal Balinese cockfight as the authorities approached. Rather than stay and protest their innocence or try to explain that they were doing research, they fled along with everyone else and thus became participants in the culture as opposed to mere observers. When I crawled through that hole in order to photograph graffiti I committed an illegal act just as surely as the artists themselves had committed an illegal act when they cut the hole and spray painted the walls. At that point I not only felt like "one of the crew" but it is also the first time that I truly felt like an anthropologist; ready to take chances to get deeper inside the culture under my study. My feelings were validated when upon viewing the photos online MOEZART exclaimed "Damn CJ, I know that area. You get around don't you?"

The Research Question/Hypothesis:

In *The Forest of Symbols* Victor Turner states that symbols initiate social action and are "determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action" (Turner 1967:36). Clifford Geertz later wrote that the capacity to understand a cultural object is brought into existence by living in the midst of certain things (Geertz 1976:1497). So what happens when the symbols of a culture can be bought, repackaged and sold back to the society that produced them? Furthermore what happens when those symbols are sold to a larger, mainstream audience that consumes them without knowledge of or concern for their true meaning?

In this paper I will focus on effects of commodification on the music, dance and art of hip-hop culture and will support my position that the effects of commodification have impacted the diverse elements of hip-hop culture in varying ways. Hip-hop culture and its commodification are complex subjects therefore no one anthropological perspective can be used in their analysis. My approach to this research will intertwine political economy, black feminist and post-colonial perspectives. I will also employ Nelson Graburn's acculturation hypothesis; that producers of cultural artisans often alter their arts in an attempt to market them to a mainstream audience.

I will begin with a review of the post-colonial conditions of urban America in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There is no universal definition for post-colonial theory or culture; however Pramod Nayer (2008:21) writes that the terms have evolved beyond their connection to temporality. Since the 1990s post-colonial theory has been used to address issues concerning socially subordinated and marginalized citizens living within First World nations. According to Lipsitz (1994:30) post-colonial culture can be defined as a product of the absence of faith in yesterday's struggles for determination. By both descriptions, post-civil rights era urban America was a time of post-colonial turmoil. From these seeds of discontent the hip-hop movement and culture sprouted and grew as a means for young blacks to rage against what they saw as the failings of the civil rights machine, continued forms of social oppression and ingrained racism. Hip-hop music, along with jazz and other forms of black musical expression, is an exemplar of post-colonial culture which serves to carry images, ideas and icons of enormous political importance (Lipsitz 1994:27). Sherri Ortner defines political economy as the study of capitalist penetration into communities (2006:464). It is this definition that I will work with as I examine how the commodification of gangsta rap has affected African-American culture by conflating it

with hip-hop culture and perpetrating the image of the typical African-American male as oversexed, violent, lacking in formal education, misogynistic and homophobic. In a similar vein the typical black female has been cast as the gold digging whore, welfare queen with multiple baby daddies, gangsta bitch or hoochie mama. The role and image of the black woman will also be examined through the application of black feminist theory.

My assertion that commodification affects the different elements of hip-hop in different ways will be evidenced by the fact that while the commodification of gangsta rap has all but silenced the voice of female rappers or driven them to the environs of the hip-hop underground (hooks, 1992; Nichols, 2006; Rose, 2009) the commodification of graffiti has been a boon and a blessing to many female graffiti writers and dancers by allowing them to establish a presence in art forms that are traditionally dominated by male competition. According to DeFrantz (2004:16) and Hazzard-Donald (2004:510) the movies *Beat Street* (1984), *Breakin'* (1984) and *Flashdance* (1983) contributed to the transition of hip-hop dance from the masculinized realm of competitive, ritualized battle to an integrated social space that accommodated both men and women. Movement of the dance into the commercial regions marshaled its availability to women. These developments are the result of acculturation: defined by Nelson Graburn as the tendency of Fourth World cultures to adapt their art to the tastes of outside buyers in order to make a living from said art (1976:32). In the context of this study, the Hip-Hop nation fits Graburn's definition of a Fourth World Nation in that it is a nation without physical borders and its arts are chiefly produced for "foreign" consumption (Graburn 1976:1-2; Rose 2008:20, 88).

My research will contribute to the extant body of research on the effects of commodification of hip-hop culture by filling in the spaces left by the writers who have previously covered the topic. Like my predecessors I will examine the effects that the

commodification of rap music has had on the African-American community. However unlike others, who have made blanket statements about the effects wrought by this process, I will examine the variable effect that it has on individual elements of hip-hop culture (rap music, dance and art) while demonstrating that it has benefitted women and adults over the age of 30 who continue to be involved in the dance and graffiti aspects of the culture.

Research Methods:

My methods consisted of both fieldwork (primary research) and literary review (secondary research.) Literary research provided history on the evolution of the hip-hop cultural movement and also an explanation of how commodification took hip-hop out of the inner cities of American and turned it into a global phenomenon and a multi-billion dollar culture industry. This research availed me of the current literary themes and theories regarding the commodification of culture in general and hip-hop culture in particular.

My field research was conducted over a period of more than three years: from July 2009 through late 2012. During that time I interviewed and observed female graffiti writers and male graffiti writers who were (in most cases) over the age of thirty because I believe that these two groups are most affected by commodification. I also interviewed rap musicians, hip-hop insiders and oral historians. I communicated with female rappers to gauge their positions on the effects of commodification on their careers. I attended graffiti art shows and watched middle-aged, middle class consumers bid on graffiti canvases and I also attended graffiti events put on as community entertainment. Finally I interviewed consumers of paid graffiti-style art to determine their motivations for using this type of art as a business promotional tool. No standardized surveys were used. All interviews were unstructured and informal.

All participants were given a copy of the Research Consultants Bill of Rights and asked to sign a statement of the Statement of Informed Consent; see samples in the appendices. No participant received monetary compensation and no one performed at my request. After gaining rapport with many of Los Angeles based graffiti writers I was frequently invited to come out and watch them work and also alerted to other hip-hop related functions. In general we kept in touch via telephone, Facebook and MySpace.

Review of Existing Literature:

Despite the brief existence of hip-hop culture, there is an abundance of literature on the topic in general and on its commodification specifically. Literature exists in the form of books of both scholarly and popular nature and journal articles from a wide range of disciplines. There are also several documentaries and videos available for the researcher to make use of. Some of the books that I found helpful are by authors who are mainstays of the hip-hop researcher. These books provide a historical background of hip-hop culture and offer analysis of its role in current mainstream culture. Titles include: Nelson George's *Hip-Hop America* which chronicles the rise of hip-hop in the aftermath of the civil rights movement; Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* provides a historical context for hip-hop while *The Hip-Hop Wars* examines many of the most critical current arguments both for and against hip-hop; Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* presents a large amount of historical data relevant to the hip-hop movement and its development into a culture; David Toop's *Rap Attack #3* examines the state of hip-hop in the post-Tupac, post-Biggie years; and Alex Ogg's and David Upshal's *The Hip Hop Years* presents a hip-hop narrative from the past to the present. *Graffito* by Michael Walsh and *The Graffiti of Pharonic Egypt* by Alexander Peden help to provide a historical context for graffiti. *Wallbangin'* by Susan Phillips deals with the criminal element of graffiti while *Graffiti Tattoo* by Alain Maridueña

shows how older and former graffiti artists transition into lucrative, legal art careers. A complete list of reference texts is found in the bibliography.

I also made use of a number of Master's theses written from the viewpoint of diverse disciplines that include English, Sociology, Psychology and Business. Journal articles from peer-reviewed publications were used to gain perspectives on the commodification of hip-hop from diverse areas such as anthropology, business and marketing, communication studies, visual communication studies, travel and tourism studies, Pan-African studies and gender studies. Lastly, I employed several internet resources, such as the video *Can You Hear Me Now* by noted hip-hop scholar Michael Eric Dyson.

Chapter 2: How Hip-Hop Culture Became the Hip-Hop Industry

In this chapter I present a brief history of hip-hop cultural movement as well as provide a comparison to the civil rights and black power movements that preceded it. I also provide an explanation of the individual elements of hip-hop culture and end with examples of the first instances of the commodification of hip-hop culture: a process which led to the culture becoming an industry.

A history of hip-hop

The origin story of hip-hop culture will differ depending on which historian or griot you interview; however there are three individuals that are almost universally accepted as the founding fathers of hip-hop and it is their stories that are given the most credibility; they are DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash.

The locus for the origin of hip-hop culture is generally accepted as New York City's Bronx district although the origins of the separate elements remain the topic of many high-spirited debates. Alex Ogg and David Upshal (2001:13) claim that hip-hop culture began when Clive Campbell--later known as DJ Kool Herc-- first arrived in New York City from Jamaica in 1967, although Campbell was only 13 years old at the time. However Jeff Chang (2005:67) dates the origin of hip-hop culture six years later and credits Cindy Campbell, Clive's sister, with being the creatrix of hip-hop culture. In 1973, while she and Clive were both teenagers, she decided to throw a back-to-school party in the recreation room of their apartment building. She enlisted Clive to play the records and deejay the event. The parties thrown by the Campbell siblings soon became so popular that they had to be moved to a nearby park. Crowds of teenagers flocked to the parties that served as an outlet for pent-up energy and frustration and as an alternative to gang violence. According to Chang and Watson, "hip-hop saved a lot of lives in

its early days” (2007:62).

Though the Campbells may have laid the foundation for what later came to be known as hip-hop culture, the movement went untitled until 1974. Afrika Bambaataa, who founded the first hip-hop organization--The Universal Zulu Nation—states that hip-hop culture became “official” when he borrowed the phrase “hip-hop” from Lovebug Starsky and applied it to the movement on November 12, 1974. Therefore, according to Bambaataa, November is Hip-Hop History Month and November 12 is the birthday of hip-hop culture (Universal Zulu Nation N.D.).

Since its inception in the urban areas of New York City, the hip-hop cultural movement was not only a means to mitigate gang violence. It was also a movement of resistance and protest rooted in the frustrations caused by the lack of power experienced by urban youths (Hoch 2006; Powell 1997:206; Rose 1994). Resistance and protest was achieved through the seizure and claiming of space, be it public or private; on the ground or through the airwaves. *Rap* lyrics, dance moves and illegal art became the weapons that armed the protestors to do symbolic battle with each other and with the oppressive dominant culture. Early rappers and deejays performed in public parks and abandoned warehouses, often illegally hijacking the electricity necessary to power their lighting and sound equipment (Ogg and Upshal 2001:32; Bambaataa 2008). The lyrics of pioneers such as DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash spoke out against poverty, joblessness, police brutality, black on black crime and other social problems faced by black youth in urban areas such as the Bronx and Harlem (Aldridge 2005:226).

Meanwhile, hip-hop graffiti writers were claiming space for their art in the New York City subways; moving to the walls of surface buildings when the anti-graffiti efforts of the New York Transit Authority made painting in the subways next to impossible (Silver 1983) and *b-boys*, *b-*

girls and other hip-hop dancers were claiming space in the streets: adapting the African aesthetic of the cool, impassive face balanced by the gyrations of hot, hard-driving bodies to express what DeFrantz (2004:3) calls an “amalgamation of pleasure and critique”.

In its earlier days, hip-hop culture had much in common with the civil rights and black power movements. All three movements advocated self-determination for blacks and sought to shed light on the political, economic and social injustices that many blacks faced as a regular part of life (Aldridge 2005:231, 234). However the hip-hop movement (which later developed into hip-hop culture) served as a postmodern critique on what young, urban blacks saw as the failings and unintended consequences of the civil rights movement; for example, deindustrialization of urban areas and black-flight. Chapter 2 will deal with the effects of post-civil-rights era disenchantment in more detail.

The Elements of Hip-Hop Culture

Historically, hip-hop culture is composed of four basic elements, each with its own unique history. These four elements are rapping (music) including *emceeing* and spoken word; deejaying or turntablism; b-boying and b-girling (dancing); and graffiti writing (art). However like any culture, hip-hop culture is organic and ever expanding beyond its original definition. Recently the fifth element of knowledge, first proposed by Bambaataa, has been gaining ground with hip-hop culture claiming space in the halls of academia as institutions from community colleges to private universities offer classes in hip-hop culture, history and politics and scholars take up the task of writing books and articles that are based on research and fact as opposed to belief and legend. Singing could be considered a sixth element hip-hop culture as evidenced by singers such as Mary J. Blige, Erykah Badu, Nikki Minaj, the late Nate Dogg and the 1990s group Jodeci who blur the lines between R & B, neo-soul and hip-hop music. Finally, we have

the emergence of hip-hop theater--a possible seventh element-- which includes stage plays and movies created along hip-hop themes and made specifically for the hip-hop audience (Davis 2006:71; Hoch 2006:356). As I mentioned before, each element of hip-hop culture has a unique history all its own. Here I will present each element separately and examine their history and development prior to and after their inclusion in what we now recognize has hip-hop culture.

Rap Music

Rap music is what many people think of when they hear the term hip-hop (Universal Zulu Nation N.D.). It has been crucial to the development of the social demographic known as the hip-hop generation; it has changed the English language--in recent years phrases and words such as bootylicious and bling-bling have been added to the Oxford English Dictionary-- and made multi-millionaires out of poor kids who have gone from rapping to become movie stars, clothing line creators and record company founders and executives. According to Dick Hebdige (2004:223) "...rap did for poor blacks in the 1980s what reggae did for struggling Jamaicans a decade earlier. It got them noticed and helped forge a sense of identity and pride within the local community."

The year 2009 marked thirty years since the 1979 single "Rapper's Delight" burst through the Billboard Top 40 glass ceiling and propelled rap to the musical foreground. It remains the first acknowledged rap record to enter into Billboard's Top 40 and a trailblazing song for rap music and hip-hop culture. It peaked at #36 on the pop charts and #4 on the R&B charts (Hip-Hop Database Wiki N.D.). Although Rappers Delight was the first rap record to receive widespread radio play it was not the first rap to be pressed onto vinyl. That honor goes to the Fatback Band who released "King Tim III (Personality Jock)" a few weeks before the release of "Rapper's Delight"; however that record failed to chart (Ogg & Upshal 2001:45; Chang

2005:130; Toop 2000:15).

Though it is impossible to give a date of origin to rap music, some authors claim that it originated in Bronx, New York in the 1960s (Ogg & Upshal 2001). However the literature shows that rap did not originate with hip-hop, not even in the musical sense. David Toop (2000:47), Michael Eric Dyson (2004) and David Hoch (2006:353) see it as a link in a continuous chain that began with the oratory traditions of African griots in Nigeria and Gambia. This oratory tradition manifested itself in many African diasporan based practices such as Jamaican toasts and the African-American verbal war games known as signifying and playing the dozens (Toop 2000:19; Hoch 2006:353) According to political activist H. Rap Brown, "Before you could signify you had to be able to rap" (Brown 1969:27).

Prior to the advent of hip-hop rap, musicians made use of what Toop calls soul rap, a musical style employed by blues and R & B legends such as John Lee Hooker, Pigmeat Markham, Johnny Taylor, Bo Diddley, Isaac Hayes, Millie Jackson, Denise Lasalle, Bobby Womack, James Brown and many others. Soul raps were effective and popular because they provided the illusion of direct and intimate communion between the performer and the listener (Toop 2000:47-55; Dyson 2004). Furthermore, the similarities between rap music and the musical genre known as "talking blues", which includes blues and country songs that are half sung, half spoken, has further complicated efforts to come up with a beginning date for rap.

Today rap and hip-hop have become nearly synonymous terms and that is a thorn in the side of some like Bambaataa, who feel that the music industry has promoted rap music to the exclusion of the other elements of hip-hop culture, thus creating an unbalanced perspective of the culture (Universal Zulu Nation N.D.). This happened partly because white, corporate America owns the record companies and rap music in the process. When blacks lost ownership of rap

music they also lost part of the entrepreneurial spirit that was originally inherent in hip-hop. According to Bambaataa (George 2004:55), many of today's young rappers are only interested in Benz's, big houses and fly girls. They don't realize the full potential of hip-hop. Bambaataa believes that the full potential hip-hop culture lies in its ability to be a vehicle capable of delivering valuable lessons. His life mission is to promote and prove the idea that hip-hop can be used as a method for teaching awareness, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, freedom, justice, equality, peace, unity, love, respect, responsibility and recreation, how to overcome challenges, economics, mathematics, science, life, truth, facts and faith (Universal Zulu Nation N.D.).

Perhaps Bambaataa and others who view rap music and hip-hop as a possible teaching tool should not be so quick to condemn gangsta rap (the most commercial form of rap). Maybe the inner city youth to whom it is targeted feel that the rappers are actually speaking directly to them, in the manner that soul rap spoke to previous generations, about what is perceived as a shared experience of ghetto life. According to Sauer (2003) most hip-hop musicians provide the illusion that they are speaking to their audiences as opposed to speaking of them. This perceived intimacy makes hip-hop music the ideal musical format for the endorsement of ideas as well as products.

Graffiti

Graffiti is one of the world's oldest, extant forms of visual communication and social commentary. Excavations of the city of Pompeii have uncovered over 1500 pieces of graffiti that carry messages of political discontent, love, and other sentiments similar to the messages created by today's graffiti writers (Walsh 1996:10). Alexander Peden reports findings of hieroglyphic graffiti at the Temple of Isis, the Great Pyramids at Giza and many other ancient sites throughout Egypt. In fact hieroglyphic graffiti is so widespread at ancient Egyptian sites that the country is

known as “the classic land of graffiti” (Peden 2001: xix, 278); not surprisingly then hip-hop graffiti writers like OZ feel justified in using the term “urban hieroglyphics” when referring to graffiti; they feel that the term adds legitimacy to their art whereas the term graffiti has become a negatively charged word in modern society (personal communication, October 16, 2009).

Graffiti is the adopted written language of hip-hop culture; what rappers cannot express in words, graffiti writers can express with the stroke of a pen or a few strokes from a spray can (Newkirk 2007:8-9). However other cultures have used and continue to use graffiti; some long before the birth of hip-hop. For example hobo culture has used graffiti since it began using the U.S. Railroads as a means of free transportation in the 19th century. Hobo graffiti is either carved into or written on the sides of freight train cars to pass along vital information concerning where to find food and shelter (Gastman 2006:13). Street gang culture has used graffiti, possibly since the 1930s, to communicate messages of control over certain streets and territories. A major difference between gang graffiti and hip-hop graffiti is that gang graffiti is more likely to promote the gang rather than the individual (Docuayan 2000:103) whereas Susan Phillips (1999:312-314) has characterized hip-hop graffiti as more concerned with self-promotion and the garnering of personal fame than with actual communication; however during my research I found many examples that refute Phillips’ assertion. What I found was many instances of art that promoted the crew as well as the individual writers; furthermore many major pieces carry a roll call or list of writers who worked on the project. I also found many instances of graffiti designed to communicate messages of political, environmental and social importance. I found graffiti art that promoted an end to war, cessation of gang violence and environmental stewardship. Although many such as Phillips only see the self-serving element inherent in most I have observed that the more eloquent message of hip-hop graffiti and graffiti writers can often be read

as “We speak up for our culture, our community and our people” or “We will not condemn, abandon nor forget those who the dominant culture view as unredeemable or unremarkable”. Indeed, the impression given by many pieces of graffiti and aerosol art, from the simple raised fist surmounted by the single word RISE to the myriad murals depicting cultural icons as diverse as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Tupac Armon Shakur, is that graffiti is the writing on the wall that relates the story of a culture as told by that culture.

Unlike gang graffiti which is written in plain letters, hip-hop graffiti typically employs a script known as wild style which is undecipherable to most people other than graffiti writers and those who have taken the time to learn to read it. In the documentary *Style Wars* (1983), writer SKEME states that writers write for other writers; they don’t care if the public understands it. Some writers, such as Los Angeles based OZ who worked on the landmark Great Wall of Crenshaw Mural, feel that it is the undecipherable nature of wild style that frightens people away from graffiti. He therefore uses very little lettering, preferring instead to let the pictures tell the story (personal communication, October 16, 2009). Despite the self-promoting and cryptic characterization of hip-hop graffiti, it does seem to be very concerned with expressing resistance and raising public consciousness.

Los Angeles based hip-hop griot Snake Doctor says that the origin of hip-hop graffiti can be traced to the 1950s with Mexican gang graffiti writers in Los Angeles who would use Old English script and Roman numerals in either solid black or outline form, to identify the streets that they claimed as territory (personal communication, October 4, 2009). They wrote on the sides of freight train cars that eventually wound up on the East Coast. It was the East Coast writers who added color and other stylized elements to these numbers and moved the writing from the freight trains to the subway trains where they could work with less chance of detection;

thus hip-hop graffiti was born. When anti-graffiti efforts made the subways a less desirable target, graffiti writers in New York City began meeting in and near abandoned buildings to have painting parties. Soon the Jamaican immigrants began providing their own style of music as entertainment at these parties. The music consisted of off the cuff and spontaneous rapping and rhyming over dub-sides of records: meaning a b-side that had only the music without the lyrics. Dancing was an obvious accompaniment to the already party like atmosphere. Therefore in Snake Doctor's hypothesis, not only is hip-hop graffiti rooted in the West Coast but it is the root and first element of hip-hop culture (personal communication, October 4, 2009).

Graffiti can be considered more than just the visual element of hip-hop culture; it can be said to be a culture in its own right. Culture has been defined in many ways. Talcott Parsons defined it as a shared body of knowledge and patterns of interaction that are passed from generation to generation independently of biological genes (Parsons 1949:8). Graffiti training and culture is passed on from generation to generation through a mentor-apprentice structure: thus meeting Parson's definition of culture. Sometimes it is passed parent to child; for example MARK 7 is training his pre-teen son who has already put his name up on a wall. However age and biological relationship are not determining factors in the mentor-apprentice relationship. Sometimes the mentor is only a couple of years older than the apprentice; however mentors can also be younger than their apprentices.

According to MOEZART 1 (personal communication, September 13, 2009), the mentor-apprentice structure is the only way to gain street credibility among other graffiti writers. Street credibility comes from being able to say that one trained with a certain teacher: especially a teacher like himself who is known for keeping it hardcore. Few real artists respect the work of artists who haven't put gone through the mentor-apprentice process: for example, those who

learn the art in a purely classroom setting.

The graffiti mentor-apprentice structure has many positive aspects. Several graffiti artists to whom I've spoken state that joining a graffiti crew is the only thing that kept them from joining the gangs. Graffiti learning also teaches skills that help one to succeed later in life. Like any team endeavor, it teaches valuable lessons in both cooperation and competition; graffiti is a highly competitive arena and no crew can effectively compete with its rivals unless its members cooperate with each other and are willing to accept the authority of the kings and legends who control productions. It also teaches discipline, hand-eye coordination and artistic techniques that can be parlayed into lucrative careers. Indeed, many graffiti artists go on to become graphic designers, art teachers, tattoo artists and advertising executives. Some make a career out of designing graffiti inspired clothing and accessories, painting commissioned murals and designing art for video game and CD covers (Maridueña and Karl 2012:5). For example graffiti writer MAN 1 built his love of graffiti into Crewest Gallery; an art gallery that showcases graffiti art. Chapter five of this paper includes several additional examples of graffiti writers who have turned their artistic talents into legal careers.

Graffiti learning can also help build skills in other areas related to the communication arts. For example, MARK 7's nine-year-old is not only learning to paint. He is also learning to use a video camcorder to document the work of his father and other writers and how to interview people. At an October 4, 2009 graffiti event, he approached me with his camera rolling and, in a very professional and confident manner, asked me what I hoped to learn by watching his dad and others writing.

The highly organized nature of graffiti training illustrates that graffiti is not just the haphazard and wanton destruction of property that some would imagine it to be. Nor are graffiti

writers simply disorganized, anti-social misfits with authority issues; in fact the opposite is more likely true. In many cases, graffiti writers have families, steady jobs and college degrees in artistic disciplines. Graffiti culture operates within a highly structured environment composed of crews that operate like well-run corporations. Each crew has designated personnel that perform various tasks such as scouting out locations, outlining artwork, coloring in the outlines and security. In order to succeed in a crew one must be willing and able to take direction, criticism and a certain amount of hazing (CRE8, personal communication, September 25, 2009).

As the preceding information shows, the mentor-apprentice structure within graffiti culture is a tradition that teaches business and social skills at a level comparable to courses taught in a classroom setting and that can benefit the apprentice for a lifetime. Richard Lachman, in *Graffiti as Career and Ideology*, quotes high school counselors who believe that youth who have participated in a graffiti mentor--apprentice relationship are more likely to stay in school: “The sort of kid who can be motivated to work for hours each day tagging to become famous can also accept the grind of school in order to get a degree (1988:239).”

The apprentice training mentioned above is the customary path that a graffiti writer takes but, due to commodification, this path is not always followed. A common concern among graffiti writers like CRE8 is that many artists are gaining corporate assignments to do graffiti type art without having put in any street time (personal communication, September 25, 2009). Instead of gaining their skills in the traditional manner, they learn to do “graffiti” in a classroom setting. As early as 1983, graffiti legend IZ THE WIZ prophesized that the art form was getting too much publicity too fast and the result, that kids want to learn the art without paying any dues, was a formula for disaster (Style Wars 1983).

Hip-Hop Dance

The original hip-hop dance forms developed in New York were known as top-rocking, up-rocking and floor-rocking (Pabon 2006:22). Meanwhile Los Angeles and other West Coast dancers were developing their own style of dance--known as locking or pop-locking--as part of the emerging funk culture. Due to ignorance on the part of the media, all of these dance forms were lumped together under the umbrella term of breakdancing and assigned the label of hip-hop dance. In the process the contributions of West Coast funk culture was eclipsed (Pabon 2006:22-25).

All of the original four elements of hip-hop present components of ritualized battle: graffiti writers battle for space in which to paint and cross out or go over the works of rival writers as a sign of disrespect and a signal to bring it on (POET, personal communication, October 4, 2009); rappers engage in history making battles such as the legendary 1982 dual in which rapper Kool Moe Dee humiliated fellow rapper Busy Bee. This competition is historically hailed as the first rap battle and began the tradition of battling and beefing among rappers (Spirer 2003). Early DJs such as Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash and Grandmaster Caz held competitions in parks and community centers and let the crowds decide who had the best equipment and style (Ogg and Upshal 2001:31-34; Universal Zulu Nation 2004;). Today's deejays compete in contests such as the DMC World DJ Championship: a contest that has been held annually for the last 22 years. However no element of hip-hop embodies the spirit of ritualized battle more so than dance. Jorge Pabon presents the hypothesis that African slaves in Brazil were forbidden to practice capoeira, their native form of martial arts; consequently they disguised it as dance. Much hip-hop dance is inspired by these Afro-Brazilian dances, which accounts for its competitive nature (Pabon 2006:20). According to anthropologist Zora Neal

Hurston, black dancers are naturally competitive. In *Characteristic of Negro Expression* (1970:24-26) she wrote “Negro dance is a dynamic suggestion born of the ‘will to adorn’. No matter how violent the dance may seem the impression is always that he will do more.” The impression that more is to come seems to be the driving force behind much of competitive hip-hop dance. The highly aggressive and competitive nature of hip-hop dance means that each dancer has to try to not only out dance his opponent but to also out think him in terms of what he might do next or what his next move might be. In this respect hip-hop dance is very much like a game of physical chess. The goal is to score a checkmate where your opponent will finally realize that he has nowhere else to go.

Deejaying or Turntablism

Of course the arts of graffiti, dance and rap (in all of its proto-rap, embryonic incarnations) are all older than the art of deejaying, alternatively known as turntablism; however without the deejay there would probably be no hip-hop movement, generation or culture. As I mentioned previously the individuals hailed as the fathers of hip-hop are DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash: all of whom were deejays who reportedly started the hip-hop movement by hosting parties and deejay battles as an alternative to gang violence (Bennett 1999:78; Toop 2000:15; Ogg and Upshal 2001:14, 31-34; Universal Zulu Nation N.D.).

A significant marker of the start of the hip-hop movement was when deejays like former breakdancer Kool Herc who, in the early 1970s, broke with tradition and used their own desires and those of fellow dancers to start playing records from a dance floor perspective and emphasizing the *break* part of the record which was what was most important to Bronx breakdancers (Ogg and Upshal 200:14; Toop 2000:60). The break is the part of the tune where the drums takeover or there is a long musical interval. Deejays like Kool Herc began using two

turntables and two copies of the same record to cut and loop between the same few bars of a record, extending the break into a full blown instrumental (Bennett 1999:78-79; Toop 2000:60). Eventually the deejays joined forces with the MCs, or rappers, whose job it was to provide spoken rhymes, catch phrases and commentary about themselves and the deejay. It was the MCs task to excite the crowd with such phrases as the often heard “throw your hands in the air, and wave ‘em like you just don’t care”. In the early, grassroots days of hip-hop the deejay was the star. It was the deejay who was the show producer and promoter and the one who provided the soundtrack for the breakdancers (Ogden & Upshal 2001; Universal Zulu Nation N.D.). It was also the deejays, like Bambaataa and Kool Herc, who managed to get opposing gangs to channel their rivalries into dance and MC battles rather than armed conflicts. As hip-hop became more mainstream many rap acts still featured a prominent deejay: Run-DMC had Jam Master Jay, Salt-n-Pepa had Spinderella and The Fresh Prince had DJ Jazzy Jeff. Even though The Sugarhill Gang--the artists who took hip-hop mainstream--did not feature a prominent deejay, I believe it is safe to disagree with Snake Doctor’s hypothesis that graffiti is the root element of hip-hop culture. As the literature suggests, graffiti may be far older than turntablism but if it weren’t for the deejay there might be no hip-hop culture.

Hip-Hop Becomes Profitable

The hip-hop movement was originally considered by the mainstream to be a “black thing” or a passing fad (Keyes 2004:2, 157; Price 2006:101). However it gained currency in Hollywood in the 1980s with the release of the movies *Beat Street* and *Breakin’* in 1984. These movies were both summer blockbusters; however their success was in large part due to the “dumbing down” of the true message of hip-hop to make it kid-friendly and palatable to a larger audience (Newkirk 2007:18). This watering down of hip-hop was one of the first effects of the

commodification of hip-hop culture.

Deborah Root defines commodification as part of the process of appropriation whereby elements of a sub-culture are incorporated into the dominant culture where they are then domesticated or their origins are erased (Root 1996:70, 78). Travis Newkirk defines it as an expression of culture for exchange (2007:iii). The commodification of hip-hop culture in general may have begun in the mid-1980s with the release of hip-hop themed movies designed to appeal to a mass audience; however community activist and author Solomon Comissiong (2009) argues that the commodification of rap music became more prevalent during the genre's Golden Era of the mid-1990s as a result of the white establishment being more comfortable with the image of the black thug than that of an intelligent black man or woman who used their lyrics to motivate, educate and galvanize black and Latino youth to resist, what he calls, the white supremacist messages that were being taught in the classroom. During this time major, white-owned record labels began buying out independent rap record labels and urban radio stations and thus took control of the music and the message; promoting images of violence over more positive images. Rappers who were willing to promote the corporate approved stereotype of the gun-toting, pant-sagging thug were rewarded with record contracts. Those who resisted were "white-listed," labeled as controversial and prevented from being promoted through mainstream channels.

According to Comissiong:

Huge media corporations literally bought up Hip-Hop in the early to mid-1990s, imposing cookie cutter themes of senseless violence, excessive materialism and misogyny. Progressive voices in rap were silenced. The clear message was "the minute you try to step outside of the 'box' and attack their power structure you will be omitted (Comissiong 2009).

Perhaps one of the most prevalent and lucrative forms of hip-hop commodification has been the use of product placement in rap-music. By the mid-1980s brand mentions had long been a part of rap music; at least as far back as 1979 when the Sugar Hill Gang mentioned Cadillac[®], Lincoln Continental[®], Holiday Inn[®] and Kaopectate[®] in the lyrics to “Rapper’s Delight”. However there was no money exchanged for the use of these brand names in the first rap record to reach the Billboard Top 40. The first true instance of product placement in hip-hop was engineered by Russell Simmons: co-founder of Def Jam records who capitalized on the success of the iconic rap anthem “My Adidas” by Run-DMC. According to Adam Sauer (2003) and Erik Parker (2002), as the band performed the song during a sold-out concert at Madison Square Garden in 1986, thousands of screaming fans responded by waving their Adidas sneakers in the air. Simmons had invited Adidas executives to sit in the audience so they could see the potential impact of rap music as a sales tool. After witnessing the reaction of the fans, the Adidas executives signed Run-DMC to a 1.5 million dollar sponsorship contract and gave them their own shoe line (Parker 2002; Sauer 2003).

Since that time, rap music and hip-hop in general have been used to successfully promote a wide range of products. In her book *Hip-Hop Dance: Meanings and Messages* (2007) Carla Stalling Huntington describes how the fascination with African-American dance forms, specifically hip-hop dance forms, has facilitated the transformation of blackness into a commodity by linking hip-hop dance to everything from low end purchases such as Pepto-Bismol[®] to higher end purchases such as cars and household appliances. Huntington proposes that when a consumer makes a purchase based on a hip-hop dance inspired advertisement, that he or she gains a feeling of being symbolically part of the struggle against the man. They join an “imagined nation” where blackness becomes an identity that can be bought, sold and worn with

“pride” until it becomes inconvenient or uncomfortable, at which time the identity can be discarded or stored away for later use (Huntington 2007).

Marc Spiegler (1996:31) makes similar observations when he reports that the marketing of hip-hop culture, via items such as fashion, music and jewelry, makes white teens feel privy to a world that would be otherwise closed to them. Through the marketing of hip-hop culture, white teens can travel to “da hood” via what Xie, et al (2007:453-454) calls virtual or imaginative tourism versus the more traditional form of corporeal tourism which many of them would be afraid to use.

The purpose of this chapter has been threefold: to provide a brief history of hip-hop and to examine its relationship to other social movements within black and urban America; to present the traditional and emerging elements of hip-hop culture as individual elements and as they exist within hip-hop culture; and to discuss how the process of commodification has transformed hip-hop culture into the hip-hop industry. The following chapters will examine the effects of commodification on the individual elements as well as its effect on the artists that produce them.

Chapter 3: Gangsta is the New Black: The Commodification of Hip-Hop and Black Identity

Hip-hop music often gets a bad rap (pun intended). More specifically scholars, social critics and everyday folks blame the sub-genre known as *gangsta rap* for the glorification of violence and crime and the contempt for education expressed by many black and minority youths particularly the male members of these groups. Many blame the gangsta rapper persona, which is largely a creation of the music industry, for misleading young black men with the idea that the violent and criminally minded gangsta rapper is a real person to be emulated rather than the offspring that results when creative marketing breeds with negative and popular stereotypes.

In the social critics' point of view, this misguidance furthers the socioeconomic plight of young blacks when they model their own lives after the media portrayal of the gangsta rapper. This point of view poses two questions: 1) is gangsta rap the cause or effect of the problems faced by urban black youth and 2). Does gangsta rap define what it means to be black, especially a black male?

Some see the creation of the gangsta rapper as a relatively new marketing phenomenon that is unique to rap music but history tells us that the marketing of cultural authenticity by the music industry has been going on since the dawn of the previous century. In the music world commercialism and commodification often become the progenitors of what I view as "created authenticity" when the dominant culture seeks to profit from the music of an oppressed or sub-culture. As far back as the 1920s music moguls have sought to create cultural music personae that effectively repackage the performance of a culture's music and then sell it back to that culture via performers and performances that play to a target audience whose perceived taste is often the misguided creation of the racist and classist imaginations of the moguls. For example, during the early years of the 20th century, when country and blues music were newly emerging

cultural art forms, the rain makers of the music industry believed that the most economically viable country music performers were those who were perceived by their audiences to be Southern, white, working-class, rural and unschooled. Likewise it was felt that blues performers who were rural, illiterate, black and preferably blind offered a level of authenticity---and sales potential--- that no white blues performer could ever hope to offer (Lindholm 2008:35). This led to the creation of fictional musical personae such as the singing cowboy Hank Williams, Sr. who never worked as a cowboy (Lindholm 2008:31) and Blind Joe Taggart who was not really blind (Wald 2000:22).

That mode of music marketing did not change much as we exited the 20th century and entered the 21st century. Hip-hop music –gangsta rap in particular-- became the dominant culturally based music form and the latest to be commodified by the commercial music machine. The practice actually began with what Norman Kelley refers to as the “colonization of black music” that resulted from CBS Record’s desire to analyze the profitability of soul music (Kelly 2002:9). In the 1970s CBS commissioned the Harvard Business School to research this question. The answer was:

Soul music is one of the very few basic art forms which is indigenous to America, although its roots may be traced back to Africa. It has been and probably will continue to be a vital and influential force on contemporary music. And Soul is by no means a static music form. It too will change.

Rap music represents an example of a “change” to soul music and has thus become a recent site of cultural colonization while the idea of what constitutes a “real” and “authentic” rap artist became conflated with black males who actively and openly promoted gang violence, criminal activity, drugs, bravado, machismo, misogyny, aggression and sexism. In keeping with the practice of creating fictional musical personae, two of the most iconic gangsta rappers, Andre “Dr. Dre” Young and O’Shay “Ice Cube” Jackson were promoted as gangsta rappers even

though neither was ever a gang banger. In fact Dr. Dre transferred from Vanguard Junior High School in the inner city to suburban Roosevelt Junior High School in order to get away from the gang violence of the inner city (Alonzo Williams, personal communication, May 24, 2011).

West Coast rap pioneer Alonzo Williams--owner of the famed hip-hop nightclub Eve After Dark and founding member of the legendary 1980s rap ensemble the World Class Wreckin' Crew to which Dr. Dre once belonged--remembers Dr. Dre and Ice Cube as anything but a gangsters. According to Williams, Dre was a master *mixologist* on the turntables and a joker but never a fighter. In a May 24, 2011 interview he tells the following story:

I don't really consider myself a gangster but I opened this club when I was 22 and a lot of cats in the area thought that they could punk me or become my "silent partners". Me and my security team had a lot of fights right there in that alley and here in this club but neither Dre nor Yella (referring to DJ Yella) ever came to our aid. One night we had a 40 nigga fight right here. Somebody hit me so hard I thought I was going to pass out. Dre was on stage spinnin' records and he never came off the stage. Later I asked him why he didn't help me when he saw I was hurt and he said somebody had to keep the music goin'.

He goes on to say that when he first saw Dr. Dre and Ice Cube on an awards show "actin' all gangsta" it was like watching the caricatures in the movie *CB4*. Dr. Dre and Ice Cube had mastered the art of *mean mugging* and *swagger* and were putting on a minstrel show that was totally at odds with who they really were. Williams says that he met Ice Cube when Cube was 15 and he was always a nice kid and very family oriented. The Ice Cube that you see in movies such as 2002's *Barbershop* and 2005's *Are We There Yet* is the real Ice Cube. Not the "nigga" scowling on the front of his early album covers.

Ironically hip-hop music began as a grassroots movement rooted in resistance to what young black people of the post-civil rights era saw as the mass commodification and commercialization of soul music which in early 1970s began to reflect the tastes and sensibilities of the newly emerging black middle-class instead of the underclass created in the wake of post

civil rights era economic collapse of the black urban centers (Neal 2004:383). The soul music of this period took on The Quiet Storm format and provided the black middle class with a musical subculture that distanced them from the rumblings of the black underclass (Neal 2004:363, 370).

By the mid-1970s hip-hop music was being used by young urban blacks as a means of giving voice to the issues that were important to them. The rappers emphasis on *hoods* brought the ghetto to the forefront of public consciousness and highlighted socioeconomic issues such as crime and poverty (Neal 2004:371).

According to Lord Yoda X of The Universal Federation for the Preservation of Hip-Hop Culture, "...hip-hop culture was created as a means to uplift our people from a life of crime, violence and poverty but the music industry is using gangsta rap to drag us right back in. Hip-hop is not on the radio, the music industry is on the radio " (personal communication, June 28, 2009). Despite early hip-hop music's emphasis on social issues, early commercial hip-hop successes were generally about partying and having a good time. For example artist such as the Sugarhill Gang and Run-DMC were fun to dance to but offered little in the way of bringing important urban issues to light, which is what hip-hop was originally designed to do. However in the 1980s message rap began to crossover into the mainstream. The first commercially successful message rap record was the aptly titled "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five. It was released in 1982 and is regarded as the first significant political recording of the post-soul era for its critique of the impact of Reaganomics on members of the urban working-class (Neal 2004:372). Probably the next most commercially successful rap record of this genre was 1988s "Children's Story" by Slick Rick. This was a tragic tale of a young man who decides that he can strike it rich by robbing old folks. Rappers of the message rap genre used the medium of hip-hop music to bring the problems of the ghetto to the attention of the mainstream; however

their lyrics generally seemed designed to dissuade young people from deviating from “the right way” and to warn them about the perils of breaking the laws of the land, for example the subject in “The Message” paid the consequences for his criminal choices by being sent to prison where he was the victim of homosexual rape and ended up committing suicide. Just as tragically, the subject of “Children’s Story” dies in a hail of police gunfire. It is ironic then that these very rappers may have been the forerunners of what later became known as gangsta rap. Both message rap and gangsta rap share a common perspective on black oppression and systematic injustice; however while message rap seems to promote trying to change the system by means such as political activism and racial unity, gangsta rap often promotes criminal behavior as a means to deal with the realities of urban life. Message rap looks towards an idealized “someday” while gangsta rap deals with the clear and present dangers, such as crooked cops, that plague the inner cities. Another distinction is that message rap seeks to employ a global discourse to speak to and connect black people in the diaspora while gangsta rap tends to be more local in perspective, instead emphasizing the ghettos and the ‘hoods (Foreman 2004:211). Perhaps these distinctions partially explain why, to some, gangsta rappers have become synonymous with what it means to be authentically urban or a real nigga.

Robin Kelley (Baldwin 2004:166) argues that gangsta rap provided “the nigga” with a locational and economic specificity. In gangsta rap the word nigga defines a person who is a product of the post-industrial ghetto. The nigga of gangsta rap fame is the embodiment of black defiance and highly masculinist imagery. Through gangsta rap the nigga becomes the only “real” black identity and all of the tropes of masculinity, promiscuity and violence become naturalized as inherently black. The gangsta rapper views the female as a constant threat to his success or

hustle and black women in particular are used as scapegoats for all of the problems within the nation aka hood.

As an example of the aforementioned tropes becoming naturalized, consider 1994's "In Da Club" during which rapper 50 cents brags about walking with a limp as a result of being shot several times. Even somewhat positive and conscious rap songs contain violent and sexist imagery. For example 2009's "Dead and Gone" by T.I. contains lyrics that lament the loss of a friend due to testosterone fueled violence and 1994's "I Used To Love H.E.R" by Common, considered by many to be the very definition of a conscious rapper, uses the metaphor of a black woman who prostitutes herself to the highest bidding white man to relay his disappointment with the commercialism of hip-hop music. Ironically this song has become one of the "fight songs" for hip-hop consumers who want to see the music returned to its original, less commercial roots when violent and sexist lyrics were not the defining element of rap music.

Los Angeles based rapper and graffiti artist INK REZN, or simply REZN, takes issue with the terms gangsta rap and gangsta rapper and believes that they need to be deleted from the hip-hop lexicon. According to REZN (personal communication, November 15, 2010) prior to the 1990s there were no "conscious rappers" or "gangsta rappers"; an MC was an MC and that was that. The term gangsta rap was first developed to put a negative spin on reality rap music, especially music by those MCs whose lyrics were too controversial, too political and too reality based, in order to discredit the lyrics and the rappers. When that ploy backfired and gangsta rap became profitable---for example 1988's "Straight Out of Compton" by Niggas With Attitude (NWA) went double platinum with virtually no airplay, touring or promotion by a major record label (REZN personal communication, November 15, 2010) --- the term became a marketing tool that has been used as a way to both make money for the music companies on and as a

weapon to divide and conquer among hip-hop fans who want to create a distinction between rappers and what they view as “real hip-hop artists” (personal communication, November 2010). It is my personal opinion that the current hip-hop vs. rap war is the new East Coast/West Coast war which ended tragically with the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. When one witnesses the heated online debates about whether or not gangsta rap is hip-hop music and whether or not an artist is a rapper or an MC, it becomes quite easy to agree with REZN’s assessment that the term “gangsta rap” is currently being used as a tool to create division and controversy among the ranks of rappers and among hip-hop fans; and in hip-hop music controversy usually equals sales.

Per Tricia Rose (2008:2-9), the popularity of gangsta rap and the gangsta rapper is fueled by the particularly negative portrayal of blacks; a portrayal she describes as part of the gangsta-pimp-hoe trinity. This trinity may not have been created by the music industry but is heavily promoted by it -- similar to the ways that negative stereotypes of country and blues fans were promoted in the 1920s-- and resonates with the widely held stereotypical views of black people held by mainstream, white America which incidentally makes up the largest consumer group for gangsta rap music. These images not only entertain white audiences but also confirm their already low opinions of black people and ease white guilt by making it seem that poor blacks are responsible for their own socioeconomic status.

Although Rose places the blame for the popularity of the gangsta-pimp-hoe trinity on white audiences, I think this is not an overly fair or accurate assessment. Black communities have long held a romantic, sometimes heroic fascination for certain types of outlaws and anti-heroes, possibly based on the love-hate relationship with law enforcement and possibly based on

governmentally sanctioned socioeconomic practices and policies that made the opportunity for lawful employment a rarity in some inner city black neighborhoods (George 1998; Rose 2008).

Ironically the post-civil rights era in the United States of America was a time marked by rapid decline of predominately black urban centers (George 1998; Rose 2008). In anthropological parlance, black America was left in a state of post-colonial decline as its inhabitants sought to cope with the aftermath of the civil rights movement. Several factors had key roles in this decline: One factor was black flight; during this period many middle-class and upwardly mobile African-Americans used their new found equality to leave the inner-cities for the suburbs, eroding the stability of formerly strong communities in the process (George 1998:34). Another leading factor was deindustrialization of the urban areas that led to high rates of unemployment and underemployment as well-paying, unionized jobs were shipped to rural areas or overseas and replaced with low paying service jobs that tended to be part-time and unstable. Lastly as the black urban centers fell into decline, the government instituted urban renewal programs which James Baldwin criticized as negro removal programs. These programs demolished thousands of units of affordable housing and replaced them with sports arenas, hotels, trade centers and the like; entities which continued the cycle of providing inner-city dwellers with low-paying, service oriented jobs (George 1998:34; Neal 2004:366; Rose 2008:43).

Given the socioeconomic fallout and unintended consequences of the civil rights movement, it is easy to see why the pimp, and characters like him, has become a hero to generations of young black men and, ironically, women (George 1998:35). At a time when the black Nationalist Movement was losing political clout and public support and the conditions of black poverty were worsening, the pimps of the 1970s Blaxploitation movies were sticking it to

the man, standing up to the police, controlling their bitches and having sex with the forbidden fruit known as white women (Nichols, 2006:41). Long before rapper 50 Cents had a hit with “P.I.M.P” or Three 6 Mafia won an Oscar for best original song with “It’s Hard Out Here For A Pimp” Blaxploitation films such as *Superfly* (1972), *The Mack* (1973) and *Dolemite* (1975) created legendary pimps that are to this day the very epitome of the *cool pose*, defined by Majors and Bilson (1993:4) as the ritualized expression of masculinity involving behavior, speech, carefully and crafted performances along with physical and emotional posturing that suggests distance, irony, and superiority over others while delivering a clear message of strength and control. Majors and Bilson cite many sources that place the roots of the cool pose in West Africa (1993:57). The preference for and glorification of coolness among Africans may date back to 3000 B.C.E and kings were often given titles that included references to coolness as an expression of patience, control and equilibrium (Majors and Bilson 1993:57).

According to Nichols (2006:40), the stars of the aforementioned movies used the African aesthetic of cool to transform the whole culture of adolescent black males who adopted their style, walk and attitudes of indifference. Hip-hop culture, then in its infancy, readily absorbed the cool pose of Blaxploitation heroes as the definition of black masculinity. Many black men feel that they are under constant scrutiny and that they need to remain “cool” in order to survive. The cool pose enhances the performance of black masculinity on a stage that is never dark.

Akin to the pimp was the numbers runner who, according to George (1998:35), was viewed as a necessary evil in the black community. Numbers runners and bookies sometimes served as community bankers but more often profited off of the poorest members of the community; skimming profits from the winners and conveniently disappearing if someone hit it big. Numbers runners and bookies were the criminal forerunners of today’s legalized lotteries

and off-track horse betting: Just like today's legal operations the numbers runners and bookies sold hopes and dreams while draining money out of the community (George 1998:35-36).

The drug trade and drug dealers have also had a profound effect on the development of gangsta rap. Prior to the 1970s pimping and numbers running were the major criminal enterprises in the black community but all that changed when black Vietnam veterans returned home bringing heroin with them as a hedge against unemployment (George 1998:35-36). During the 1970s, heroin empires sprung up around the United States aided not only by black crime lords but also by the Mafia and possibly by the CIA in a move designed to weaken the Black Panthers and the already fading civil rights movement (George 1998:37-38). The heroin epidemic led James Brown to release the spoken word record "King Heroin" in 1972, using the first-person narrative and the point of view of the drug to vividly describe the effects of heroin on its users. By the 1980s the demand for heroin had been surpassed by the demand for crack cocaine and according to George gangsta rap is a direct by-product of the crack explosion; "first came crack, then came gangsta rap" (George 1998:42). Crack is a cheaply produced, fast-food version of cocaine that provides an intense high that lasts for about five minutes, unlike the heroin high that last for a few hours. The brief nature of a crack high combined with its cheapness to both make and buy turned low-level drug sellers into kingpins and created a fierce competition between drug dealers who were willing to defend their territories by force. The profitable nature of crack sales enabled these dealers to buy bigger and more powerful guns; at the dawn of the 1980s drug dealers were using Saturday Night Specials, as the decade drew to a close they were using Israeli Uzis, Austrian Glocks and AK 47 Assault Rifles (George, 1998; Rose 2008). In many cases the drug dealers were better armed than the police.

The crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s led to a huge increase in incarceration among black males. According to George (1998:43) a 1990 study known as the Sentencing Project reported that 25% of black males between the ages of 20 and 29 were either incarcerated or on probation due to crack related crimes. Ten years after George, Rose (2008:50) wrote that while black people make up only 12% of the American population, black men currently make up 40% of the two million Americans in federal, state and local prisons. Per George, this means that most African-Americans have had a family member or friend who was negatively involved with the justice system and Rose estimates that, if this trend continues, 30% of black males will spend some time behind bars (George 1998:43; Rose 2008:50). Such statistics have had a profound affect on the mentality of black culture. Going to jail or prison has become a rite of passage into black manhood and inside the prison walls loyalty to the crew, suspicion of women and adoption of a stony façade has become a tool of survival. Inside prison walls, homosexual rape shapes many men's future sexual relationships as sex gained through this method was not about love or intimacy but about power and dominion (George 1998:44). Is it any wonder then that narratives dealing with crime and its consequences--- i.e. TV shows like *Cops*, movies like *Boyz n the Hood* and gangsta rap music--- have maintained their popularity within the black culture?

Alonzo Williams has a much simpler and straight forward hypothesis for the popularity of gangsta rap among black consumers:

gangstas have the best beats and we (black people) like the funk. We like to dance, bob our heads and have a good time when listening to music. Conscious rappers were good but they could not compete with gangsta rappers when it came to making music that people wanted to party to.

So back to my original question: Is gangsta rap the cause of criminal behavior, lack of respect for women and disregard for education or is it a verbalized reflection of the reality faced by young men who find that traditional avenues to such milestones of manhood as education,

power, respect and wealth by legitimate means are often closed, or at least severely limited to them? In other terminology, is it an effect?

There is a documented history of black men feeling that the willingness and ability to engage an oppressor in violent confrontation offers a kind of liberation that cannot be obtained through other means. Abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglas is quoted (hooks 1999:90) that he only felt like a man after he fought man to man with his white overseer did:

It rekindled in my breast the smoldering embers of liberty. It bought up my Baltimore dreams and revived a sense of my own manhood. I was a changed man after that fight. I was nothing before---I was a man now.

W.E.B Du Bois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

Almost every law and method ingenuity could devise was employed by the legislatures to reduce the Negro to serfdom, to make them slaves of the State if not of individual owners...the Negro is more and more to look upon law and justice... as sources of humiliation and oppression (1903:25).

Is it any wonder then that black performers have used black musical forms to express the anger, despair, frustration and fear that many black people feel in regards to the government and law enforcement? Is it surprising that Bob Marley's reggae hit "I Shot The Sheriff" is a classic or that one of R & B legend Marvin Gaye's greatest hits contain the lyrics "...crime is increasing, trigger happy policing"? Can we use Du Bois's words to possibly comprehend the mentality behind the "no snitching" code that supposedly rules the inner cities?

In his autobiography entitled *Father Of The Blues*, W.C. Handy wrote of how the bluesmen of the Mississippi Delta became the consciousness of the region as they used their harmonicas and guitars to echo the sonic environment filled with baying hounds and the keening of Negro women and children in search of the remains of their husbands and fathers who had fallen victim to the lynch mobs and killing fields that terrorized the area (Gussow 2002:74).

So as we can see, gangsta rap---while currently being used as the major scapegoat for all that ails Black America--- is nothing new in its indictment against government and law enforcement and the establishment or its “glorification” of “criminal entrepreneurship” when legal means of making a living are unavailable.

Gangsta rap has also been singled out for its propagation of the rape culture, defined as a complex of beliefs supporting a continuum of threatened violence against women that ranges from sexual remarks to actual rape and other acts of violence and sexism towards women. The famous gangsta rap opponent C. Delores Tucker stated that “gangsta rap makes it cool to murder and rape” (Armstrong, 2002:184). However, gangsta rap is no different than other male dominated music forms when it comes to using that music to vent pent up sexual aggression and frustration at not being able to control women. As with gangsta rap, the threat of violence against women is a common thread that is woven throughout many blues songs. Take for example the 1930’s song “Me and The Devil Blues” by Robert Johnson wherein he sings “Me and the devil were walking side by side, me and the devil were walking side by side, I’m gonna beat my woman ‘til I’m satisfied”. Decades later Louisiana Red proved once again how violently misogynistic the blues can be when he recorded “Sweet Blood Call” in 1975. A line from that song goes “How can I miss you baby with my pistol in your mouth”?

Another commonality shared between gangsta rap and the blues is that both are primarily produced by blacks but consumed by whites. I’ve already touched on Rose’s conjecture that this contributes to the popularity of the black gangsta image. Her hypothesis is shared by bell hooks who wrote that rebel black masculinity is alternatively idolized, vilified, romanticized and punished. White men seeking alternatives to a patriarchal masculinity---defined as providing care and leadership to the family--- turned to black men, particularly black male musicians as

examples of phallogentric masculinity and the embodiment of the outsider and rebel (hooks 1999:94, 96).

Whether patriarchal or phallogentric, educators such as Jackson Katz (Nichols 2006:9) regard all expressions of masculinity as a mask or performance that is used to shield vulnerability; Katz labeled this performance as the “tough guise” and it has similarities to the cool pose that has been previously discussed. According to Katz, men learn from social pressures and media images that manhood is defined by dominance and control. Due to limited diversity of images of black manhood within the media black men are more likely to emulate the characteristics that make up the tough guise. James Johnson agrees with Katz’s assessment that the tough guise presented by the media has an inequitable effect on young black men. In his 1995 study entitled *Violent Attitudes and Deferred Academic Aspirations* he conducted a study in which a treatment group of young black men was exposed to violent portrayals of black manhood via rap music videos while a control group watched rap videos that portrayed a young man engaged in the socially acceptable activities of going to college, getting a part-time job etc. At the conclusion of the experiment he interviewed both sets of young men and found that a large number of those who watched the violent videos wanted to be like the characters in the video. In contrast not only did most of the young men in the control group not want to be like the star of the videos that they had watched, many expressed doubt that a black man “could” gain success through the avenues of education and “regular” work.

According to Nichols (2006:9), educational consultant Jawanza Kunjufu believes that most black male youth have a hip-hop influenced picture of manhood that is defined by

1. The amount of pain or violence you can inflict on other people.
2. The number of females you can impregnate without getting married.

3. The amount of alcohol and drugs you can consume.
4. The number of times you can go to jail and still be “un-rehabilitated”
5. The kind of clothes you wear
6. The amount of money you make
7. The car you drive.

Nichols (2006:10) states that he would “like” to dismiss Kunjufu’s findings as racist but he cannot deny their existence in rap music or their influence over youth. Kujufu’s findings may well be validated by the meteoric rise and eventual decline of rapper Ice Cube, one of the original gangsta rappers and the first to successfully collapse the persona onto the emcee (Krimms 2001:95). After leaving NWA, Ice Cube’s early solo efforts, including “The Nigga Ya Love to Hate” and “The Wrong Nigga to Fuck With,” created the identity of the scowling, hard-core, aggressive killer. This persona became so melded with the artist that once he left gangsta rap behind some of his fans no longer considered him real or authentic. A recent viewing of Ice Cube videos on YouTube reveals comments by people that are still calling him a sellout and declaring that he lost his edge because he discarded the “mask” or “identity” that some fans cannot separate from the artist himself.

In contrast REZN does dismiss Kunjufu’s findings as the outlook of someone from the outside looking in. In his experience the fact that a rapper tells stories that highlight certain life experiences or circumstances does not mean that the artist defines himself or his manhood in those terms. The rapper is simply using the tools of the art (braggadocio, wittiness, shit talking and metaphor) to spin his tale (personal communication, November15, 2010).

Another Los Angeles rapper known by the name of Vash Savage also disagrees that rappers and audiences cannot separate the persona from the artist. He stated that just because he

raps about certain things and puts on a show to entertain his audiences does not mean that he lives or thinks that way. He does not feel that his onstage persona has any bearing on his offstage life and he believes that most of his fans are intelligent enough to know a performance when they see one (personal communication, September 2010).

Rappers like REZN and Vash Savage echo what Rose (2008:187) labels as the “We Are Not Role Models” defense of hip-hop music. Proponents of this defense believe that fans, and parents in the case of minors, are responsible for their own listening choices and actions. Rapper LL Cool J stated in a December 2000 interview that parents who let BET and MTV raise their children are going to have problems. Hip-hop legend Grandmaster Flash, on the other hand, believes that rappers should take more responsibility. George (2004:55) quotes him as saying “...people don’t realize that hip-hop has a large influence on people...what you say frivolously, somebody can seriously go out and do.”

In conclusion of this chapter I now answer my two original questions. 1) Is gangsta rap the cause or effect of the problems faced by poor blacks who live in the inner cities? I’m going to take a centrist stance that echoes Michael Eric Dyson (2009). Gangsta rap may have started out as a more aggressive form of message or political rap but political rap didn’t have a lot of support during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Groups like Public Enemy faded from the limelight as hip-hop became a commodity fetish dominated, in Dyson’s words, by the trinity of broads, booze and bling; this emasculation of hip-hop as a political force is typical when the mass production of a cultural product robs it of its ability to rail against the system. The system demanded the three B’s and that’s what gangsta rap supplied in abundance. As H. Rap Brown wrote in *Die Nigger Die* (1969:137) “What you don’t control can be used as a weapon against you...we dominate in athletics but we don’t control them. Therefore the negro athlete is used as

a weapon against us.” Just like Brown’s Negro athletes, African-Americans have lost control of rap music and it is being used by the dominant culture as a weapon against us; causing strife among hip-hop lovers, among African-Americans and “Niggas” and between the sexes: it’s a common sentiment among African-Americans that black male rappers are the only men who get paid big money to continually and openly disrespect and degrade their women. Ironically the practice of lyrically disrespecting females may be less about disparaging black women than it is about the re-masculation and restoring self-esteem of black men (Cheney 2010:80).

However, although gangsta rap music may perpetuate negative urban images, the problems of urban life are far too complex to be laid at the sole feet of the music. The problems faced by poor black urbanites are more properly caused by long standing structural inequalities and the more recent problems of black flight, deindustrialization and the drug trade. Gangsta rap, because of its ubiquity and popularity makes a convenient scapegoat just as the blues, aka The Devil’s Music, did in the 1920s and 1930s.

2) Does gangsta rap define black manhood? My answer to this is no. It is my conclusion that while the gangsta rap persona embodies many of the characteristics that disenfranchised males seek to emulate to prove their “manhood” these characteristics are not particular to hip-hop culture or gangsta rap. They are the same characteristics that have been glorified and expressed through various cultural media for decades if not centuries. The same tropes of masculinity that are found in gangsta rap are found in many types of music including country, R&B, reggae and blues. They are also found in pre hip-hop Blaxploitation films and films such as *Scarface* and *Goodfellas* and in the writings of Frederick Douglas and W.E.B Dubois. Masculinity is a social construct that changes over time but some things remain. Society teaches men that it is okay, sometimes good, to be aggressive, hard, rugged and individualistic; however

these characteristics have somehow become overly identified with black males by the white mainstream and the white media who seem fixated on the violent, invulnerable, hypersexual black male. It was so in the 1915 silent movie *The Birth of a Nation*, which portrayed black men as inferior and sexually aggressive, and equally so when MTV ran a special edition of “The Real World” in 1998. This edition, a 7-hour long marathon showcasing the series’ most violent conflicts, featured black males in over half of the segments although black males made up only nine percent of the cast (Dirks, N.D.; Nichols 2006:15).

It is clear to me that gangsta rap does not define black manhood nor black identity. What it does do is capitalize on long standing and widely held stereotypes of black males *and* females that not only appeal to white audiences, for good or evil, but also feed the need of romantic identification in young black males who see the rappers success and are thus given hope that if Lil X can make it out of the ghetto, maybe I can too.

In this chapter I have mostly discussed the effects of commodification on male rappers. The next chapter will deal with the effects of commodification on females involved with hip-hop music. Specifically I will how this process has led to the disappearance of female rappers from the mainstream and how women are striving to regain control of their image in hip-hop music and videos.

Alonzo Williams: Gangsta Rap Pioneer and Hip-Hop Motivational Speaker

Alonzo “Lonzo” Williams, age 54, is a founding father of West Coast Rap, alternatively known as gangsta rap or reality rap. In 1979, at the age of 21, he opened the legendary nightclub “Eve After Dark” as a hip-hop dance club Los Angeles and also helped form the rap group “World Class Wreckin Cru” who were the primary group performing at the nightclub. In addition to being a rapper and an acknowledged authority on the history of West Coast Rap, Lonzo has also been involved in song writing, publishing, label ownership and distribution.

Lonzo states that his initial involvement in gangsta rap came in a roundabout way and started when he hired two DJs from the radio station KDAY to spin records at his club. These two DJs were Dr. Dre and DJ Yella, who later formed the legendary rap group NWA (Niggas With Attitude) along with O’ shea ‘Ice Cube’ Jackson and Eric ‘Easy E’ Wright. He recounts the following story:

I hired these two cats from KDAY to spin records at the club and be the DJs for the Wreckin’ Cru. Andre and Yella, they were part time radio DJs and wanted to get in on the club scene. They worked as part of the World Class Wreckin Cru at first but then Dre got arrested over traffic warrants and Easy E bailed him out on the condition that he would make music for him. One of them had a cousin who was part of young crew called CIA (Cru’ In Action) and Ice Cube was part of CIA; back then he was just Shay. They formed NWA and were considered community reporters because of their reality raps that talked about what went on in the ‘hood. I had a recording studio so I provided the tools they needed. In the beginning Easy provided the financing, Dre laid the beats, Ice Cube wrote the lyrics and everybody else just fell in line. You’ve probably heard this but Easy was a drug dealer looking for a legal place to put his money (personal communication, March 22, 2012).

Although Lonzo is considered by many to be the Godfather of West Coast Rap he sometimes regrets his involvement in the genre. He states:

...gangsta rap took all the fun out of the game. The record companies wanted the gangsta rapper without the gangsta so they created all of these characters. Rap music became all about beefin’ and diss records. There was a serious paradigm shift. Back then gangsta rap equaled underground rap; now positive rap is the

underground. I decided to get out of rap in 1987 or '88 when I was touring with the World Class Wreckin' Cru and realized that we were the only non-gangsta act on the bill. All the other acts, like NWA and Just-Ice, were gangsta rappers (personal communication, March 22, 2012).

Today Lonzo is a sought after speaker on the positive and negative effects of rap music on urban youth. As such, he is the founder of the Hip-Hop Hall of Fame and Edutainment Center; a non-profit organization created to educate and groom youth who are interested in entering the hip-hop industry, He has been featured on MTV and VH1 and in publications including the Los Angeles Times and in the hip-hop magazines Source and Vibe. He was also an integral part of the hip-hop documentary "Welcome to Death Row": an expose on Suge Knight's infamous hip-hop record label and he was featured in "Ruthless" the memoir of Ruthless Records co-founder Jerry Heller.



Alonzo Williams

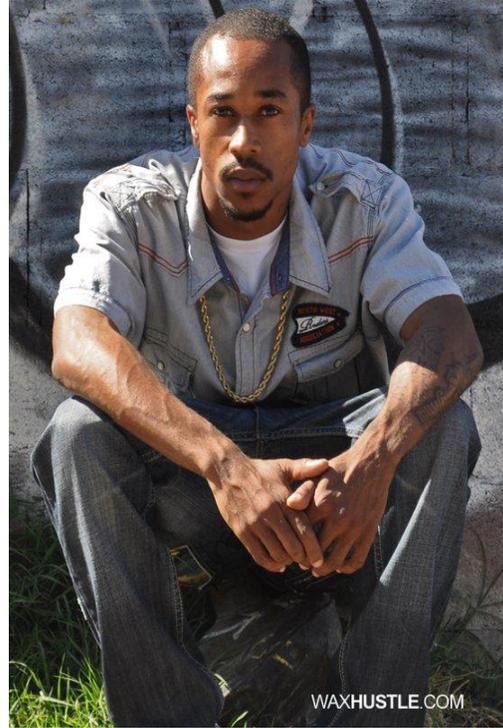
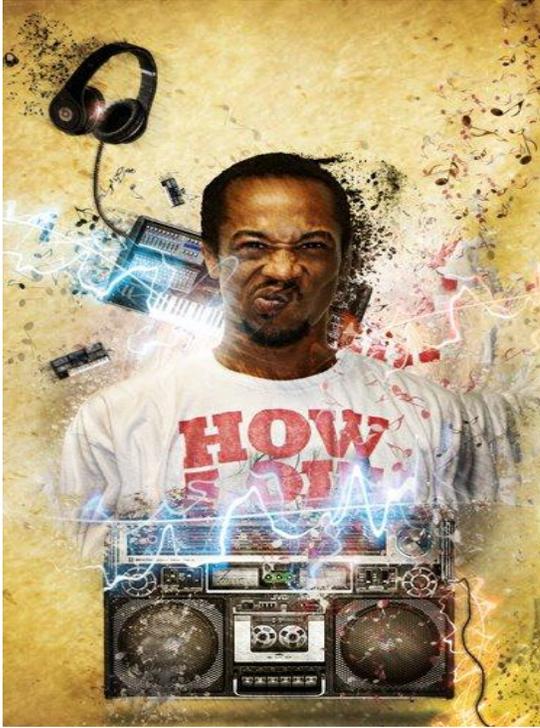
Vash Savage, Rapper and Music Entrepreneur

Ashley Steward, who performs as Vash Savage, is a 27-year-old Pomona, California based rapper who distributes his music under his independent brand Wax Hustle. He started rapping in 2003 when his older brother Vernon got a deal with a management company; however Vernon is no longer rapping.

Vash doesn't consider himself to be a gangsta rapper or feel that he fits into any preconceived category. He also doesn't consider 'Vash Savage' to be a mask or a performance. It is more a personification of his creativity.

He is one of the new breed of rap music entrepreneurs who have taken to social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and MySpace to promote his career. These media provide a vast amount of free supporters and followers which can translate into profitable exposure According to Vash:

Today it's easy to make a CD because you can download all of basic pre-production and audio recording software. The hard part is getting a record deal. But now you can build your fan base online and that can help get you a record deal. You can make your music and put it up for viewing on sites like YouTube and you can sell your music online too. Say if I had a big online following in Europe or somewhere like that, then the record companies here might take notice.



Vash Savage

Chapter 4: Femcees and Vixens: The Voice and Image of Women in Rap Music

According to bell hooks (1999:101), there is a prevailing sense that black men and women cannot simultaneously occupy the limelight shone by white America. Nowhere is this truer than in the case of rap music, especially gangsta rap. In this genre the black male rapper, sometimes called an emcee or MC, has become what linguists refer to as the unmarked category and female rappers, alternatively known as *femcees* are considered to be among the “others”. These other rappers, including those who are female or white, inhabit what Tricia Rose and others have designated as the *underground* or margins of hip-hop (Rose 2008). With few exceptions--currently white male rapper Eminem and black female rapper Nicki Minaj being the best examples -- the rap music industry remains the domain of the youthful black male.

Women have always been an integral part of hip-hop culture as entrepreneurs, graffiti artists, rappers and dancers although their participation has often been discouraged and trivialized (Rose 1994:26, 153; Keyes 2000:255). Cindy Campbell along with her brother Clive Campbell, who is known in hip-hop culture as DJ Kool Herc, is credited with starting hip-hop culture and Sylvia Robinson was the record company executive behind the Sugar Hill Gang and “Rapper’s Delight” (Toop 2000:16; Chang 2005:67). However in *Hip-Hop America* (1998:184) Nelson George confidently states that hip-hop has produced no Billie Holiday, no Aretha Franklin and no Bessie Smith. He contends that in the history of recorded hip-hop no woman has contributed profoundly to the genre’s artistic growth in the way that the aforementioned legends contributed to the development of blues and soul music. His hypothesis for this phenomenon is that the blues and soul music rely heavily on the emotionally charged male-female dynamic. Hip-hop, on the other hand, is usually presented as the narrative of horny, adolescent males with commitment issues.

The competitive nature of hip-hop culture and rap music has also been identified as one of the road blocks to both female access and success (Toop 2000:93-94). The most prominent elements of the culture---dance, rap, graffiti and deejaying---all promote a type of brash, aggressive behavior that most men, who constitute the majority of rap music consumers, do not admire in women. Hip-hop and rap are also associated with the working and lower class culture and according to Susan Gal (2006:339) working class culture identifies “manliness” with toughness and certain types of speech while it identifies femaleness with gentility, respectability and high culture. According to Alonzo Williams:

...the biggest selling point of rap music, especially gangsta rap, is its shock value and women have limited shock value. Before gangsta rap most people were not used to hearing words like “fuck”, “bitch” and “pussy” on a record or seeing men grab and stroke their crotches and they liked it... until women started doing it. Most men will only respect a woman who uses that kind of language for so long and if they start referring to themselves as bitches and hoes then men will lose respect for them that much quicker

In addition to limited shock value, female rappers also appear to have a more limited shelf life relative to age which would explain why while male rappers like Dr. Dre, Ice Cube and Snoop Dogg are rapping into their 40s while early female rappers such as Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and Monie Love--who are in the same age category-- have gone on to other things. Queen Latifah is now an actress, singer and TV producer; Monie Love hosts the radio show “Ladies First with Monie Love” on Sirius/XM Radio (Sirius XM 2012) and MC Lyte is an actress as well as the founder and CEO of Hip-Hop Sisters: a non-profit organization dedicating to promoting positive images of women (Hip-Hop Sisters Network 2012). According to David Toop (2000:95) many women as well as men feel that it is okay for younger women to engage in the shouting, boasting and bragging associated with rap music but when a woman gets older it becomes “unladylike”.

During my field research I explored the connection between clothing style and career longevity for female rappers. Perhaps due to the maleness of the hip-hop world, most early female rappers presented themselves in a manner that mimicked their male counterparts. Rappers such as MC Lyte, Monie Love, Sistah Soljah, The Conscious Daughters and the New Jack Swing trio TLC all used a combination of boyish clothes, mannerisms and “unladylike” lyrics to break into the all boys’ game of rap. Once they got a foothold those that softened their looks and attitudes had a longer run at mainstream popularity than those who did not. It is my premise that the popularity of female rappers declined because the hip-hop audience became unaccepting of women whose performances and appearance mimicked those of men. Of course there were female rapper such as Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown who went to the other extreme and created personas based on the stiletto wearing, money-driven nymph but that version of the female rapper didn’t fare much better than the women in Timberland® boots and Pendleton® shirts because, as pointed out previously, many people will not accept a woman who presents herself as a “gold digging hoe” for very long.

Alonzo Williams, Vash Savage and hip-hop historian/graffiti king CRE8 offer validation of my hypothesis; Williams is quick to point out that Salt-n-Pepa, who were always unabashedly female in their presentation, had a long run at success and that MC Lyte’s initially successful career may have been due to the fact that she presented a kind of androgynous middle ground that was somewhere between masculine and feminine. CRE8 states that he knows many female emcees, such as MC Medusa, who are outstanding at what they do yet remain underground. He believes that it may be their mannish approach that keeps them underground and away from mainstream success. Ironically, early female rappers thought that dressing in this manner would help them to succeed. Female rapper CMG of the Conscious Daughters stated that she and her

partner Special One dressed in baggy, men's clothing because they wanted people to be respected for their lyrics and not have people looking at their bodies or sexy dress (personal communication, October 15, 2012). The documentary "My Mic Sounds Nice" presents the issue of attire for early female rappers as a matter of choice and personal freedom: not one of trying to mimic men. According to the documentary, early female MCs often dressed in fashions that suited their personal style, be it urban chic, Afro-centric or baggy pants and T-shirts. However, with the rise of rappers like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown a new formula developed for female rappers. Female MC's lost their autonomy in fashion choices and were often pressured to dress in sexy, body-baring fashions. Along with their agency in fashion decisions they also lost their voices as men decided that women didn't really have any messages worth hearing but at least they could be pleasing to look at (DuVernay 2010).

Zenith Da Goddess is a Knoxville, TN based female rapper who also believes that the images put forth by rappers like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown are problematic to females in the rap music industry. In a June 27, 2010 email interview she stated:

Women in hip-hop can succeed if they can figure out a way to provide information and knowledge in a creative way through their music instead of just using their bodily assets and if they stop letting men change their image from respectable to slutty because they want to pimp the women in the industry.

Brooklyn based female rapper Lady Loe says that fashion may be one issue but she cannot name any one cause for the disappearance of female rappers. In an email dated May 18, 2011 she wrote:

I'm not sure what led to the demise of female hip-hop artists. I do believe for one reason or another that hip-hop is a male-dominated industry. Every time I go to perform at an open mic or showcase, people stare at me in amazement with what comes out of my mouth as if they thought I'm going to be some bum ass rapper!!! What the hell... These venues are always packed with other male rap artists and male rap fans. I always see very few women. The women there are supporting

their male counterpart... Until they see me... LOL... then they want my card and want to know where I'll be performing next.

Lady Loe doesn't believe that the success or failure of any rapper should be contingent upon some pre-determined, media hyped persona but acknowledges that it often is. She believes that rappers need to be themselves, not play the role that someone else writes for them.

Aside from being careful of what they wear, female rappers must be guarded about their lyrical content as well. Seemingly rap consumers embrace a wide variety of male rappers from conscious rappers such as Common and Talib Kweli to gangsta rappers like Ice Cube and Ice-T to Whiz Khalifa and Soulja Boy Tell'em but there are limited acceptable and respectable types of female rappers. In the beginning, successful female rappers fell into one of three categories: the Queen Mother whose lyrics uplift and inspire; the Fly Girl who dresses in fashionable outfits and exists to have fun; and the Sistah With Attitude--Goldigger who uses the "bad girl" performance to emasculate and ridicule men as a means to subvert male dominance (Keyes 2000:256-263). If a female rapper is not promoting conscious and inspiring lyrics, then the immediate condemnation is that she is failing as a role model. The same criticisms that were hurled at Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim in the 1990s are being leveled against Nicki Minaj in the 2010s. The media has created the category of "titillating rapper" for Minaj, meaning that she must be lyrically proficient while able to serve as eye candy for a perceived male audience (Peterson 2010). However because her lyrics are not seen as conscious and uplifting she is often criticized as a poor role model.

Another perceived problem for female rappers is that their lyrics have often been in response to male lyrics--making what is known in the industry as *diss records*--and this has cast them into a seemingly endless game of follow the leader. One of rap music's earliest female stars was Roxanne Shanté who, in 1984, had a major hit with "Roxanne's Revenge". This song was

made in response to UTFO's hit "Roxanne, Roxanne": a song in which three young men discuss their failed attempts to impress the new girl in town. However not everyone sees diss records as a problem; some see them as an opportunity. In the 2010 documentary "My Mic Sounds Nice" Salt-n-Pepa, rap music's first all-female crew, stated that in the early years diss records were the only way for a female to enter the rap stage; no one took female rappers seriously unless they were challenging somebody. They continued the tradition of the diss record when they released "The Show Stoppa" in 1986 as a response to the songs "The Show" and "La Di Da Di" which were both released in 1985 by Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick. The practice of female rappers responding to males took a more aggressive turn in the 1990s. In 1993 the female rapper known as MC Boss had a hit with the single "Recipe of a Hoe" which contains the line "all bitches ain't hoes". This single was apparently an attempt to confront the prevalent hip-hop image of women as eternal victims by turning the tables and making them the aggressors against men. Boss may have been responding to a recurrent theme in rap music rather than to a particular song but like Roxanne Shanté, and most other female rappers before her but she still fell into the category of responding to a role assigned to black women by black men by claiming the adjectives "bitch" and "hoe" to describe strong or aggressive women.

By the mid-1990s black female rappers had begun to find their own voice and to use it to present the interests and concerns of black women as a whole and from varying viewpoints. This was the golden age of hip-hop and conscious rappers, largely female, were all the rage. During this time female rappers and academics began to view hip-hop as the new site of black female intellectual production. Not only did more black women listen to Queen Latifah and other female rappers than read the literature of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, but music played an important role in the social normalization and political consciousness development of black

women (Rose 1994:153; Collins 2000:16). Female rappers and their neo-soul counterparts became heirs to the blues women of the past who used music to define themselves and to challenge the imposition of inferiority in relation to males (Bartlow 2010:152). Songs like 1994's "U.N.I.T.Y" by Queen Latifah, 1994's "Whatta Man" by Salt-n-Pepa and 1998's "Doo Wop That Thing" by Lauryn Hill were examples of women using hip-hop to address feminist issues from a positive angle while songs like 1996's "Ill-Na-Na" by Foxy Brown and 2000's "How Many Licks" by Lil' Kim used unbridled sexual imagery to address the same issues. Rappers like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown may be unlikely poster girls for feminism but they do provide an empowering image as women who use the archetype of the gold digging dominatrix to their advantage. Their motto would appear to be "Yes I am a gold digger and a hoe but you will still desire me, adore me and take care of my sexual and financial needs". The challenge to male hegemony in rap music has become a global as well as an American phenomenon; young female Japanese rappers such as Yuri Ichii use rap music to challenge traditional Japanese gender roles and defy the limitations and expectations that polite Japanese society places on young women (Osumare 2001:176).

While black female rappers such as Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliot, and Lil' Kim are recognized for their ability to use their Otherness to express varying degrees of feminine power and control, the image of women known as video *vixens* or video models in hip-hop music videos is often represented as something beyond their control. These women are generally considered little more than sexual commodities placed to accent a male rapper's sexuality or a female rapper's dominance (Balaji 2010:8-9). By contrast Melyssa Ford is a video model who has been successful at asserting a measure of agency and control over how she is depicted, thus resisting and subverting the male dominance portrayed in many hip-hop music videos. As an

example Balaji accents the fact that in the video for “Knock Yourself Out” by Jadakiss, Ford continually positions her body in such a way that she dominates almost every frame in which she and he appear together (Balaji 2010:10-13).

MC Medusa, a Los Angeles based female rapper who has been dubbed as the high-priestess of hip-hop, believes that women can save rap music from the ravages of commodification by providing yin energy to balance out the yang energy supplied by the male youth perspective (msnbc 2007); yet the queen mother, the fly girl and the gold digging sistah with attitude have not been able to accomplish this even though they’ve been accepted within hip-hop circles since the 1980s. However a fourth category, that may have a resurrecting effect on hip-hop, arose in the late 1990s; that is the lesbian rapper (Keyes 2000:264). Several of the more notable and successful female rappers, including Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and Da Brat have been rumored to be gay; however their sexual orientation has remained the subject of speculation and has had little to do with their music. On the other hand, a growing tide of openly lesbian rappers beginning with Queen Pen in the 1990s and continuing today with Feloni [*sic*], Alicia Leafgreen (who goes by the moniker White Lesbian Rapper) and God-Des [*sic*] and She are proudly proclaiming their sexual orientation while using hip-hop to shed light on the concerns of the gay and lesbian community as well as confront the heterosexual bias of mainstream hip-hop. Many of today’s “out and proud” lesbian rappers perform in the hip-hop subgenre known as homo-hop.

Homo-hop is not limited to females; nevertheless like much of today’s female rap it operates from what Tricia Rose refers to as the margins of hip-hop. In *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner states that marginal figures often have a humanizing and redeeming effect on the culture that they encircle; that they restore balance to unequal power relations (Turner 1966:110-111).

Like MC Medusa, many believe that this can be said about both homo-hop and female rappers. Ekua Omosupe (Keyes 2000:264) notes in particular that black lesbian rappers confront issues of racism and identity in ways that can only come from their unique perspective. In this way black lesbian rappers are to hip-hop what black feminist are to feminist theory. Tricia Rose, in her book *The Hip Hop Wars*, suggests that hip-hop may be rescued from its current downward spiral by those hip-hop artists that operate from the margins and the underground. In the case of homo-hop and female rap, I think that she may be right. In my opinion, homo-hop artists such as God-Des and She and Feloni offer up a vitality and intensity that is, in my opinion, missing from much today's commercial rap. Furthermore many lesbian and female rappers are using use hip-hop music for its intended purpose of voicing the concerns of the marginalized and the disenfranchised.

Despite the tone of this and preceding chapters, marginalization does not only affect female rappers nor does commodification always lead to marginalization. Chapter 5 will not only discuss how non-black rappers are dealing with their marginalized status vis-à-vis the commodified image of the ideal rapper. It will also examine the effects of commodification on non-black and female hip-hop dancers. Then chapter 6 will demonstrate that the forces of commodification have had quite the opposite effect on women and some men who are involved in the art off graffiti writing.

Chapter 5: Does Commodification Lead to the Marginalization of Non-black Hip-Hop Artists?

If rap music and rappers could be described in sporting terms then the white male rappers Vanilla Ice and Eminem could be described as the Jackie Robinson and the Great White Hope of hip-hop respectively. The 1980s produced a number of successful white hip-hop bands such as The Beastie Boys and 3rd Base and the 1990s ushered in a wave of white rappers that challenged the accepted definition that only a “real nigga” could be a “real rapper”. Starting in 1990, rap legend Easy-E signed white female, gangsta rapper Tairre B to his label Ruthless Records. Her album produced the single “Murder She Wrote” which was a hit on the Hot Rap Singles chart (personal communication, June 8, 2011). In 1991, more than a decade after the beginning of commercial rap music, Vanilla Ice not only broke the color lines by becoming the first successful white solo rapper but also the first rapper to ever have a #1 hit on the Billboard Top 40. In 1999, white rapper Eminem released The Slim Shady LP and proved that skin color was not a determinant in one’s ability to rap and rap well. The album debuted at number two on the Billboard 200 for the week of March 13, 1999 (Billboard.com 2012). However despite the success of rappers like the Beastie Boys, 3rd Base, Vanilla Ice and Eminem the term “white rapper” still remains what linguists call a “marked term” in the language of hip-hop and the words “white female rapper” are virtually never heard in the same sentence.

Alonzo Williams, who helped develop Dr. Dre who in turn developed Eminem, has the following to say about Eminem:

...he’s a good rapper and a great story teller. He’s successful because he can relate to blacks when he talks about being poor and growing up without a father and he appeals to whites when he starts talking about suicide and pill addiction. Those things appeal to white people. One thing that makes him different from black rappers is that black rappers usually rap about what’s going on around them but he raps about what’s going on in his head. That’s the kind of shit that white people like to hear.

I would like to argue here that commercialization of hip-hop does not affect dance and graffiti in the same way that it affects rap music. In chapter five we will read of how commercialization and commodification has benefitted female graffiti writers and certainly males of all races are represented in the graffiti element as one can see by simply driving through the different neighborhoods of any major urban center.

Hip-hop dance is the other major area in which commercialization and commodification has benefitted female and white male dancers. At the dawn of hip-hop culture the dances associated with hip-hop culture were the competitive dances of break dancing, top rocking and similar dances. These competitive dances were usually performed between single males or all male crews (DeFrantz 2004:16; Huntington 2007:40).

In the early 1980s, as Hollywood realized that hip-hop was a bankable commodity, the commercialization of hip-hop dance marshaled its availability for women as movies like 1983's *Flashdance* and 1984's *Breakin* moved hip-hop dance out of the competitive realm and into the social realm of partnered dancing (DeFrantz 2004:16). In the first decade of the 21st century Hollywood released a number of hip-hop dance movies that featured white men and women in the major roles. 2001's *Save the Last Dance* paved the way for several movies--such as *Honey* (2003), *You Got Served* (2004), and the *Step Up* franchise which thus far has spanned the years 2006-2012--whose aim seemed to be to show that white people can hip-hop dance as well or better than black dancers.

Aside from selling movie tickets, hip-hop dance is also used to sell a variety of consumer goods including Sear's appliances, Jell-O[®], automobiles, fast food, dog food, Pepto-Bismol[®], soft drinks and trendy clothing. According to Huntington (2007:37) hip-hop dance sells whatever it is associated with. Huntington wrote (2007:120) that these advertisements accomplish their

sales goals by the “browning of America”; meaning that the advertisers employ models of indeterminable ethnicity in an attempt to make hip-hop dance relatable to as many people as possible. However in 2012 it is now common for these consumer ads to portray white people performing the dances as in the middle-aged executive who performs the Cabbage Patch in a commercial for Jack-In-The-Box restaurants, the Sear’s salesmen who use break-dancing to demonstrate the power of Kenmore washers or the sexy, young white woman who “drops it like it’s hot” in the commercial for Sun Drop® soda. If one pays close attention it is fairly easy to note that hip-hop dance, when used as a marketing tool, is usually performed by white dancers, or hamsters as in the case of the ad for the Kia Soul.

So why is it that after nearly 40 years of commercial rap music that rappers who are white or otherwise non-Black have to deal with the idea that they are novelty acts, cultural thieves or, as Allison Samuels (2003:62-63) labels them, minstrels in backward caps and baggy jeans while white hip-hop dancers do not share the same fate? Why have they been banished to the hip-hop margins along with female rappers while white hip-hop dancers take center stage?

Perhaps it is because that many believe as hip-hop historian Kevin Powell (1997:206) does, that rap music is the vehicle of black male expression; a method by which many black men define their manhood and their blackness. However Huntington (2007:40) makes similar assumptions about hip-hop dance. In her analysis the Running Man represents the fear held by many blacks that they are always running but getting nowhere; the Cabbage Patch represents making something out of nothing and the Snake tells us how to survive by remaining essentially still and moving only what is absolutely necessary to move (2007:42-47). In fact many black hip-hop scholars appear in agreement that, for blacks, hip-hop culture is a celebration of being a threat and a menace to society; however for white people the fascination with hip-hop culture is

just a cultural safari and that removing it from its proper context renders it meaningless (Powell 1997:210; Samuels 2003:62; Huntington 2007:47).

Alternatively, it could be that commercialization and commodification have been the leading contributors to the marginalization of white rappers. White rapper Slimm-C of Kansas City, MO believes that the corporate driven image of the rapper as an angry, militant, black thug has made it hard for whites, Asians and other races to succeed in the rap music industry but his outlook remains optimistic: “That type of thing really doesn't bother me, I truly love rap music at its finest and it is a part of me.... so people can talk and have their own opinions, but at the end of the day my love for the music still stands (personal communication, June 6, 2011).

When it comes to the marginalization of white male rappers through commodification one does have to wonder why this practice continues; especially when more than 60% of rap music sales are to white consumers and the major producers and distributors of rap music, i.e. BET, Clear Channel and the major record companies are all owned by whites (Rose 2008:20, 88). If white people “own” rap music as well as purchase most of it, why do the record companies continue to promote the image of the ideal rapper as the violent black male and to a lesser degree the slutty black woman despite the demonstrated ability of some white men and women to rap as well as their black brethren? As pointed out in Chapter 2, H. Rap Brown wrote in *Die Nigger Die* (1969:137) that when a culture loses control of a field that it dominates, that field can then become a weapon against the culture. Could it be that the powers that sought to destroy and discredit rap music 30 years ago because of its perceived potential as a weapon against the system have found a way to deal with the problem of inner cities and poor black urbanites by turning rap music into a weapon against the very people who created it? By and large violent rap music and imagery causes the most harm to the audience that resembles the

performers. Young black males who are fans of rap often take to heart the idea of “killing a nigga ‘cause he looked at me funny” that they observe in rap videos and songs and all too often they become the victims of *beefs* that turn violent. Examples include Dolla who was killed the day he arrived in Los Angeles from Atlanta (Quinones, et al 2009) and M-Bone, the dancing member of Cali Swag District, who was killed while sitting in his car outside an Inglewood, CA liquor store (Markham 2011). Female rappers also fall victim to violence as in the case of Magnolia Shorty, the New Orleans’ Queen of Bounce Rap who was shot and killed in December 2010 (Johnston 2010). Although black women are seldom the casualties of hip-hop beef, they are often the victims of the rage, frustration and cynicism that rap music evokes. According to Powell (1997:214) black women become easy prey for black men who really want to attack “the man” but are too afraid so instead they turn their rage against the victim who cannot kill them, fire them, billy-club them or send them to prison.

So perhaps the answer to the question of why white record executives continue the practice of relegating white rappers to the hip-hop margins is that in doing so they keep the social problems wrought by the gangsta rapper image at a comfortable viewing distance yet out of their own communities.

In conclusion I’d like to analyze the much hyped news that hip-hop sales have declined sharply in the early 2000s leading to the conclusion that “hip-hop is dead” a phrase made famous by rapper Nas. He defended his position in an MTV interview with the following statement:

When I say 'hip-hop is dead', basically America is dead. There is no political voice. Music is dead ... Our way of thinking is dead, our commerce is dead. Everything in this society has been done. It's like a slingshot, where you throw the muthafucka back and it starts losing speed and is about to fall down. That's where we are as a country ... what I mean by 'hip-hop is dead' is we're at a vulnerable state. If we don't change, we gonna disappear like Rome. I think hip-hop could help rebuild America, once hip-hoppers own hip-hop ... We are our own politicians, our own government, we have something to say (Reid 2006)

It is my own conclusion that the stagnant state of hip-hop music that Nas refers to is due in large part, though not totally, to the marginalizing effect of commodification. The big record executives have created the narrow definitions of what it means to be a “real rapper” and have placed severe limitations on hip-hop’s ability to evolve and expand. I firmly believe that if hip-hop is to survive and thrive it must again embrace the spirit of progressiveness, social awareness and love of the human race espoused by its more fringe elements. I agree with Ms. Rose that if hip-hop is to be saved from itself, the rescue will come from the margins and from the underground. As Turner demonstrated in *The Ritual Process* marginal actors often possess the power to restore the balance of power to societies where that balance has been lost. In this case, the voices of gay and lesbian rappers, female rappers and non-black rappers can provide the impetus for positive change and growth that, in turn, will have the potential to liberate hip-hop music from the shackles of the industry imposed commodified stereotypes. Chapter 6 will discuss how commodification has helped to create a less age-biased and more gender-balanced environment in the world of graffiti art.

Chapter 6: Getting Paid For Getting Up: Is it Graffiti if it's Legal or Paid For?

Graffiti is the plural form of the word *graffito* which defines any image or lettering that is scratched, scrawled or painted on public walls (Oxford Dictionary 2006). This definition encompasses everything from simple words to elaborate wall murals. However, in popular usage graffiti has come to mean art work or messages placed on public or private property without consent. When I first started my research I worked with the dictionary definition but I soon encountered resistance from the general public, traditional muralists and even from some graffiti artist who object to the derogatory connotations that the word graffiti carries. Therefore out of respect to those whom I study, I employ a type of code switching. Depending on my audience I may use terms such as urban art or public art as an umbrella for both graffiti and traditional wall art.

Usually when the word graffiti is mentioned it is the lower forms of the art that come to mind. Images of basic *tags* (the calligraphic writing of one's crew name) and *throwups* (more elaborate tags, featuring bubble letters that are often colored in) are what many people think of when they hear the word. Tags and throw-ups proliferate because aspiring graffiti writers earn their stripes by placing illegal tags and throw-ups in as many places as possible; this is known as *getting up* and even experienced, older writers enjoy the thrill of getting up. The general public often cannot discern hip-hop tags and throw-ups from gang-writing: leading to associations with criminal violence and gang activity. It seems beyond the imaginative capabilities of many to associate the beautiful, colorful *pieces* and murals that decorate such areas as the walls along the Wilmington or Slauson railroad tracks, let alone a work of art such as The Great Wall of Crenshaw, located in Southwest Los Angeles, with a word as negatively charged as graffiti. Graffiti writer CRE8 states that the public's conflation of graffiti with violence is the fault of the

news media, which in the early 1990s pitted the Los Angeles public against all forms of graffiti as part of the ongoing war on graffiti (personal communication, September. 25, 2009). As Sonjin Kim wrote (1995:13), graffiti is often discussed with words evocative of war, combat and contagion. Graffiti writer OZ, who prefers to be called an aerosol writer because of the negativity associated with the word graffiti, reports that during the 1990s the Los Angeles news media was big on using scare tactics such as saying “when you hear the sound of a spray paint can being shaken, the next sound you’ll hear is gunshots” (personal communication, Oct. 16, 2009). The conflation of graffiti with crime and violence ensures that its value continues to be a hotly contested topic. Susan Phillips (1999:23) wrote that the general consensus is that graffiti is always illegal and is always vandalism. However she also writes that graffiti is a system that lies somewhere between art and language and that it is all about relationships, individuals and motives; therefore as a researcher one needs to study it from the ground in order to understand it (1999:23, 39).

The value of *free walls* and other legal graffiti venues is also a contested topic. The outlaw spirit inherent in graffiti writing is what fuels many graffiti artists; therefore they want no part of legally sanctioned and regulated graffiti. However others feel that free walls and legal venues are a valuable resource. Many graffiti artists who scoff at the “zero tolerance” laws designed to prevent graffiti believe that the availability of free walls is a more effective deterrent to illegal activity (Halsey 2002:9). Such walls can also provide a source of tourist revenue that can be used for community improvement and opportunities to educate the public about graffiti. The Pico-Union Graff Lab, located in Los Angeles, CA, is one organization that provides free walls to graffiti artists. According to the Graff Lab’s social director Ricardo Guerrero, the provision of such a space was made in an attempt to curtail graffiti and gang-related violence, such as what

happens when one gang is crossing out the tags of another, in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles (personal communication, July 27, 2011).

The Graff Lab is world famous and often hosts discussions and demonstrations by current and former graffiti legends. Guerrero stated that he sees an emerging market for graffiti tourism in Los Angeles. He said that he has had people from all over the world, including Germany and Japan, come to the Graff Lab to see graffiti in a safe, tourist friendly environment. Sometimes they come as part of organized tours and sometimes they come on their own. In August 2011, he hosted a group of 80 students from Japan. Guerrero states that at first the graffiti artists who frequent the Graff Lab were apprehensive. They wanted to know who these people were and why they were taking pictures. However he explained to them that this was an opportunity to educate the public about the history and value of graffiti and promised to let them know in advance of tourists arrivals so that anyone who wanted to leave could. He also reminded them that the first rule of the Graff Lab is “don’t trip ‘cause Papa Ricky trips harder” (personal communication, September 15, 2011). He always announces the arrival of tourists in advance so that anyone who doesn’t want to be bothered by them can choose not to be there that day. To his delight, most of the artist no longer feel apprehension or irritation at the tourists and now welcome them into the area. The demand for graffiti tourism is becoming so strong that Guerrero is considering plans to start a touring company similar to the ones in New York City.

Though its value may be contested, it is my observation that graffiti artists provide a vital, often community driven enhancement to the urban art scene as well as a service to the communities in which they paint. Unlike traditional muralists who paint what they are commissioned to paint, graffiti artists often, but not always, provide their services for free in response to what is going on in their community and the world at large. According to Los

Angeles based traditional muralist Michael Massenberg (personal communication, November 30, 2009), graffiti artists paint from their heart and soul and relate to their artwork in ways that traditional muralist cannot because they are expressing their vision and not that of the patron. In this way graffiti writers and the murals they create can give voice to those who feel that they have none, including the graffiti writer himself. They act as visual activists; described by Helen Page and D. France Oliviera as members of oppressed groups who produce interpretive images of both the historic and contemporary relationships between their own group and the dominant society. These images usually stand to confront and deny the prevailing images that the dominant culture holds regarding the oppressed group (1997:80).

If the feelings of Massenberg and Page and Oliviera are correct, that graffiti artists paint from their heart and stand in opposition to hegemonic forces whereas traditional muralist paint from their pockets and paint produce what the patron wants them to produce, then can there be such a thing as “paid graffiti”? Not according to some scholars, consumers of paid graffiti, and perhaps most importantly, not according to some professional graffiti artists. As I pointed out earlier, some of the artists at the Pico-Union Graff Lab choose not to paint when tourists are on the premises. Who can predict the consequences caused by such reticence? One also has to wonder if some artist or being influenced to paint and behave in ways that will be construed as “tourist friendly” and thus attract more tourism. Yvonne Daniel (1996:784) expressed concern with the acculturation that often accompanies cultural tourism when she wrote that “Sometimes with outside contact, foreign elements have been incorporated within traditional dance performance and over time, these new forms and styles have emerged as authentic.” Xie (2007:453) offers another example when he and his colleagues wrote “Since tourism has transformed music wherever they’ve come together, musical performances have been adapted to

the limited gaze of the tourist.” Bradley Bartolomeo argues that legal or paid graffiti has lost its message of resistance; that the legalization of the art form causes it to lose much of the ritual, tradition and ideological framework on which it is based (Bartolomeo 2001:22-23). For New York City graffiti legend LADY PINK, who I will discuss more fully later in this paper, the difference between graffiti and art is permission and with permission comes responsibility. She censures her trainees and admonishes them to not use their art to make controversial political or social statements. She also doesn’t allow her trainees to paint “nipples” (Queens Tribune ND). Graffiti artist MOEZART 1 does not believe that graffiti is something that can be legalized, bought or sold. Although he does a large amount of paid work and mentors artists through the Pico-Union Graff Lab he states that all graffiti is illegal; if it is legal or paid for then it is “graffiti inspired artwork” (personal communication, August 31, 2011). MOEZART 1 states that while he does legal work to pay the bills he will never give up illegal graffiti because that is where his soul lies. Likewise, graffiti artist MEME will never give up her illegal graffiti activities. In an email dated March 25, 2012 she wrote:

I got my start doing illegal graffiti at the age of 17 and I feel the word graffiti has always meant illegal. When I started getting paid for it wasn’t an option or something I had in mind. I don’t do as much illegal work now as I used to but when I’m out I try to get more landmarks added to my resume.

KNOX is another graffiti artist who believes that “true graffiti” is mostly illegal vandalism and what he does now does not fit that description. He started doing illegal graffiti as a form of expression when he was 14 years old but by the time he was 18 he was doing paid work in order to help his sick mother pay the bills. His introduction to paid work was the result of fortuitous circumstances. He states that when he was 16 or 17 he was being chased by rival gang members after he had been caught tagging in their space. He ran into the first open door he found and was thus introduced to an organization called Positive Alternatives for Youth, a non-

profit dedicated to saving young people from gangs. He began donating his art skills to the organization by designing T-shirts and flyers using graffiti style lettering. He emphasized that it was all done by hand without the aid of a computer. By the time he was 18, the organization was paying him for his work. At the age of 19, he sold his first canvas for 100USD and he thought that was too much. Now he regularly sells canvases for 300USD-400USD. He also teaches a class in urban art at Reseda High School in Reseda, California. His class not only teaches the methods of the art, such as can control and lettering techniques, but also the history of graffiti and the rules of the culture behind it. KNOX acknowledges that he catches flak from other graffiti writers and that he has been called a sell-out because he no longer does illegal work. However he proudly stated that the name KNOX has come to mean something and he will not risk his reputation by getting caught doing illegal work just to silence his critics. Now in his early twenties, he has graduated from being a graffiti vandal to a respected artist, muralist, teacher and soccer coach. He knows how to put together a gallery opening and has been featured in several museums. He is not going to lose the life he has built by going to jail for stealing paint or doing illegal graffiti (personal communication, September 3, 2011).

In contrast to MOEZART 1, MEME and KNOX, artist INK REZN believes that graffiti is the term that should be used when discussing both paid work and illegal work. According to him:

If we can't respect the word graffiti how can we expect anyone else to. Words like urban art and street art are just euphemisms. It's all in how you sell it and it's up to us to educate people about the product we're selling. People need to stop thinking of graffiti as illegal... (personal communication, August 22, 2011).

INK REZN is one of an emerging class of professional graffiti writers that defy the misconceptions associated with his profession. He approaches his craft as a business and has carefully honed the professional image that goes with being a business person. He has business

cards and a portfolios and he knows how to prepare and present professional bids on high paying assignments, while educating his potential clients on the benefits that graffiti wall art provides to business owners. In November 2011 INK REZN completed a mural of community activist Juanita Tate on the north wall of the newly formed Aspire charter school (Fig. 6M-6N). He says that this particular assignment reminded him how “political” such work can be. He had to use diplomacy to navigate the mine field between respecting the input of the school superintendent and satisfying the organization that was funding the mural (personal communication, December 31, 2011). Also due to the political nature of his field, he declined to divulge the source of funding because he states that the paid graffiti field is so competitive that if other graffiti artists found out the name of his patron, they would likely approach the patron and offer to undercut his price. INK REZN’s art is high demand and some of his recently completed assignments include work for a 1980s music special on MTV (Fig. 6P) and the background graffiti for the debut music video by singer Crystal Starr.

Wall advertising in general is often employed by small and large businesses alike (see fig. 6A-6C). However small, urban businesses have long used graffiti style advertising though many are reluctant to refer to it as graffiti, as I found to be the case with South LA Mortuary. In contrast, large corporations have only recently begun using graffiti style advertising (Jones 2007:30). Though both large and small businesses use graffiti style advertising, their goals are very different. According to Jones (2007:30) large corporations use graffiti advertising as a ploy to reach the coveted 18-34 year old demographic. The press releases regarding these ads employ carefully chosen buzz words cherry picked to resonate with the intended audience; words like freedom, risk, authentic or crew when referring to the artistic team.

In contrast small, urban businesses employ graffiti style art as a deterrent to what they view as actual graffiti (POET, personal communication, September 5, 2011). Graffiti murals have an effect of discouraging the gang writing that mars the walls of many urban businesses. Gang writing on a building is more than unsightly. It contributes to gang violence and discourages customers from patronizing the business. Nicole Montague, funeral director of South LA Mortuary, is a small business owner who hired a team of graffiti writers, including POET, to paint murals on the wall that her business shares with Nancy's Flower Shop (see fig. 6E-6F). She had the following to say in a May 24, 2011 telephone interview:

We don't view the murals on our walls as graffiti. The murals are a deterrent to the gang tagging and writing that used to be a problem for the wall. It got to the point where the property owners had to constantly repaint, so when the muralist approached us with the idea that the murals would deter gang writing we reluctantly agreed to let them use the wall. I have to agree that the murals are much nicer than the gang writing and that violence related to cross-out and tagging wars has ceased in this particular location. Sadly though, the taggers have taken to tagging the church across the street.

The reason that graffiti style murals deter tagging is that there is an unwritten, though not always adhered to, rule against tagging murals. KNOX states that is part of the reason why Reseda High School commissioned him to paint three murals on the campus. The administration hoped that the unwritten rule against tagging murals would deter gang writing and quell gang violence in the process (personal communication, September 3, 2011)

Despite the social benefits that paid graffiti art has to offer there remains the question of can one receive payment to do graffiti and still be a true writer as opposed to a sell-out? POET and CRE8 are in agreement that if an artist has put in the time and learned to do the art in the traditional manner and if that artist has taken the time to learn the history and culture associated with it then, and only then, should he or she accept money as a graffiti artist. Graffiti writers start as young as nine years old and a graffiti writer who makes it to 30 is considered an old man in

the culture. Paid graffiti art allows artists who have invested twenty or more years in their craft, and are now entering their late 30s and early 40s, to make a living at doing what they love and to be able to practice their art without worrying about the associated risks such as getting arrested and imprisoned or death from gang violence, drug use, falling from heights, getting hit by trains and the effects of inhaling aerosol paint fumes. As INK REZN put it “I’m 36 years old. What would I look like going to jail for stealing paint”? So as we can see, paid graffiti offers several social benefits. It helps to beautify urban neighborhoods and make them safer by reducing gang violence. It also enables older graffiti writers to continue practicing their art in ways that are financial viable and physically safe.

Women benefit from paid graffiti work because it allows them to participate more readily in a field dominated by men. LADY PINK, alternatively known as PINK SMITH, is a 47 year old female graffiti artist from New York City who began her career as a “graffiti vandal” in 1979 when she was 15 years (Woodbury ND:1). While still in high school she appeared in the 1983 graffiti movie *Wild Style* and at the age of 21 mounted her first solo art show. LADY PINK retired from the graffiti scene in 1987 but returned in 1993 after meeting her husband and fellow graffiti legend SMITH. Together they collaborate on murals and commercial ventures (Woodbury ND:1). Today LADY PINK mentors aspiring artists by teaching them to put their creative energy into murals instead of tagging; teaching them to become famous rather than merely annoying (Queens Tribune ND). When LADY PINK began painting in 1979 it was for attention. At the time she was considered to be the only female capable of competing with male artists. Today her work appears in fine arts museums and her canvases command 8000.00USD (Queens Tribune ND). San Fernando Valley based KNOX believes that illegal graffiti is still a “man’s world”. Mostly because much of it is done at night and in out of sight places that are

unsafe for women. However he is quick to admit that some of the best graffiti writers that he knows are female; but that most male writers do not like the idea of women graffiti writers and will harass and haze them when they try to do graffiti in the traditional way. He agrees with female writer SAND 1 (see fig. 6K-6L) that paid graffiti is the best avenue for most women because, in addition to paying well, it is usually done in the daylight and in open spaces.

According to SAND 1:

Well first of all graff is for men so everywhere you go there's men. And being a woman in between so many men you will get harassed, indirect comments, double meaning conversations. So I rather do everything while the sun is out. I like paid work, I love it and I refuse to believe in being a starving artist so I make sure I eat good ...illegal stuff well, it's a sick rush, I have done minimal illegal work but I feel that it's too risky I'm a scary cat big time!! And since I'm always alone I stay where the sun shines bright...lol. If I was to find trustworthy people to do illegal work well maybe I'll deeply consider coming out. I think women that do illegals have a lot of balls!! which I am definitely missing like half of!! But also some one that goes with them ...but most women stick to daytime!! and I'm pretty sure you do to :)" (personal communication, September 14, 2009).

In addition to doing murals, SAND 1 also offers a line of handbags and other accessories hand-painted with graffiti style designs and maintains a blog dedicated graffiti at www.sanddoner.com.

The preceding paragraphs have shown that although graffiti culture is considered to be a male dominated, youth culture obsessed with getting up, there are many artists who are female and--or over 30 years of age who no longer exists solely to see their name scrawled on every other post, wall or freeway overpass. In fact all of the artists that I have personally spoken to are men and women in their early to late 30s that have learned to make a living from their art and other associated ventures. While many (especially younger) artists prefer to limit their graffiti skills to creating illegal works, a large portion of older and female artists are actively seeking commercial outlets for their creativity. The sale of graffiti art through business advertising,

gallery shows and working as legal beagles (graffiti artists who only do legal pieces) are three of the more common ways in which the commodification of graffiti has helped many adult and female graffiti artists to transition their passion into profit. However as mentioned previously in this paper, some artists believe that legal work can never be true graffiti: a belief that dissuades many from taking this path. Jones (2007:39) relays the belief that gallery art can never be a substitute for true graffiti because there is no risk involved in painting canvases. However, painting gallery canvases now comes with its own brand of risk. Ironically the commodification and popularization of graffiti is helping law enforcement officials in their war on graffiti as graffiti based museum exhibits draw once elusive artist into the limelight. For example, in April 2011, graffiti artist REVOK (age 34), was arrested shortly after his art was placed on display at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary art. At the time of his arrest he was boarding a plane to Ireland where he had been commissioned to paint a mural (Audi 2011). Just as the art and corporate worlds are embracing graffiti for its artistic value and marketability, anti-graffiti efforts are being galvanized around the country and police are using intelligence gained from art shows to help track artists whom they previously have been unable to find (Audi 2011). In the case of REVOK, he was arrested for graffiti related parole violations dating back to 2009: showing that even if an artist leaves illegal activities behind, transitioning into legal graffiti can have unpleasant legal consequences. Perhaps this new element of risk will entice more talented graffiti artist to undertake legal graffiti assignments and commissions.

Images of graffiti and traditional advertising art



Fig. 6A: Coca-Cola & Pepsi Mural. South Los Angeles, CA. Artist unknown.
Photographer Connie Jones-Steward



Fig.6B: Coca-Cola and Diet Coke Mural. Inglewood, CA. Artist unknown. Photographer Connie Jones-Steward



Fig. 6C: Frito-Lay Mural. South Los Angeles. Artist unknown. Photographer Connie Jones-steward



Fig. 6D: Pepsi Mural. Southwest Los Angeles. Artist unknown. Photographer Connie Jones-Steward



Fig 6E: South L.A. Mortuary, South Los Angeles. Artists: POET, PINK 135, MARK 7 and others.
Photographer Connie Jones-Steward



Fig. 6F: Nancy's Flower Shop, South Los Angeles. Artists: POET, PINK 135, MARK 7 and others.
Photographer Connie Jones-Steward



Fig. 6G: The Ave Grill, Crenshaw District. Artist: MARK 7. Photographer: Connie Jones-Steward

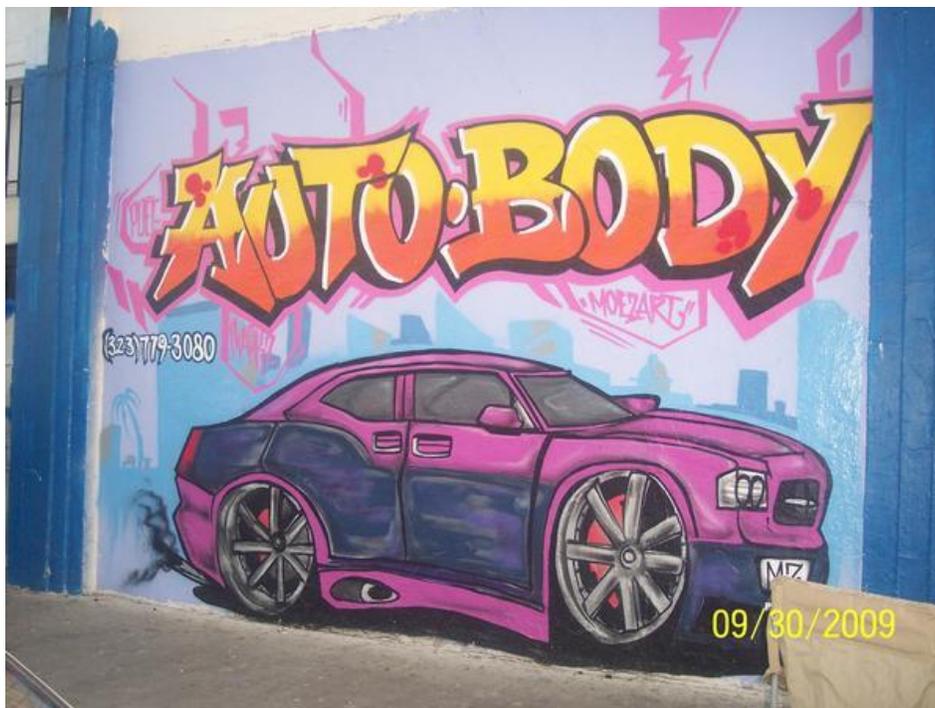


Fig. 6H: Chico's Auto Body Repair, South Los Angeles. Artist MOEZART 1. Photographer Connie Jones-Steward.



Fig.6I: Miriam's Market, South Los Angeles. Artist unknown. Photographer Connie Jones-Steward

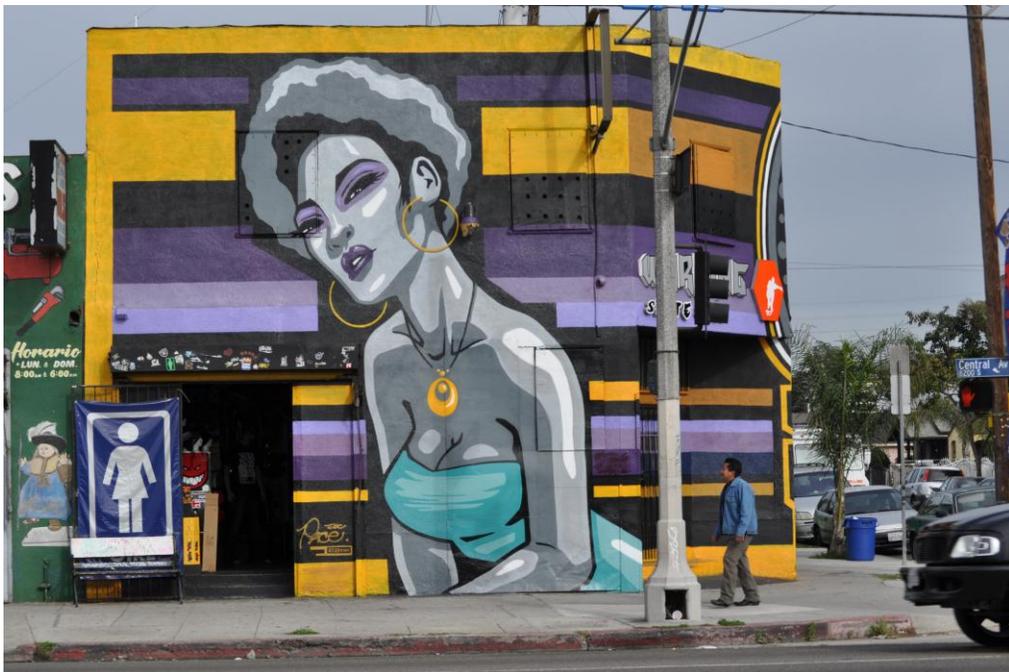


Fig. 6J: Waring Skate Shop, South Los Angeles. Artist DÖC and PACE.
Photographer Connie Jones-Steward



Fig. 6K: Boutique on La Brea, Melrose District. Artist SAND 1. Photographer: Connie Jones-Steward



Fig. 6L: Hand-painted handbag. Artist SAND 1. Photographer unknown



Fig. 6M: Mural of community activist Juanita Tate located at Aspire charter school. Artist INK REZN. Photo used with permission of Rezinated Theory



Fig. 6N: Completed mural of Juanita Tate. Artist INK REZN. Photo used with permission of Rezinated Theory.

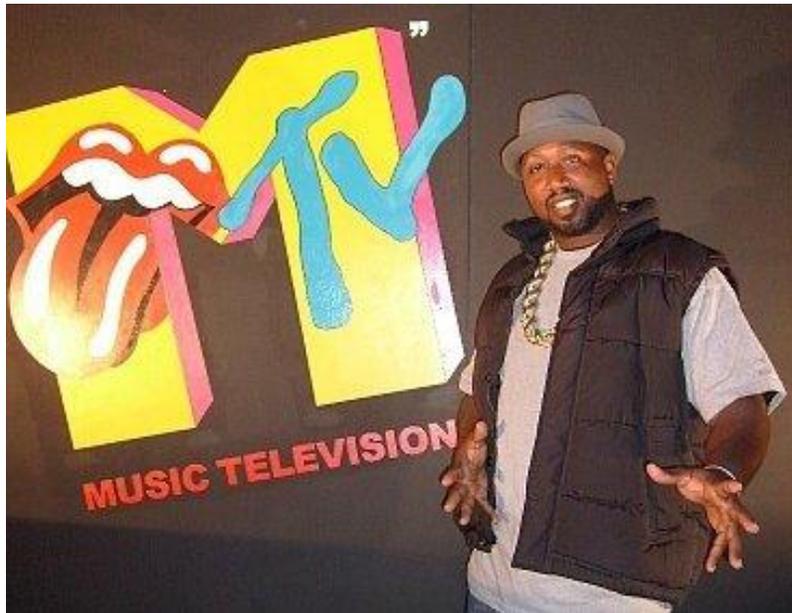


Fig. 6P: INK REZN with a work he completed for MTV. Photo used with permission of Rezinated Theory.

King CRE8: RTN, LTS

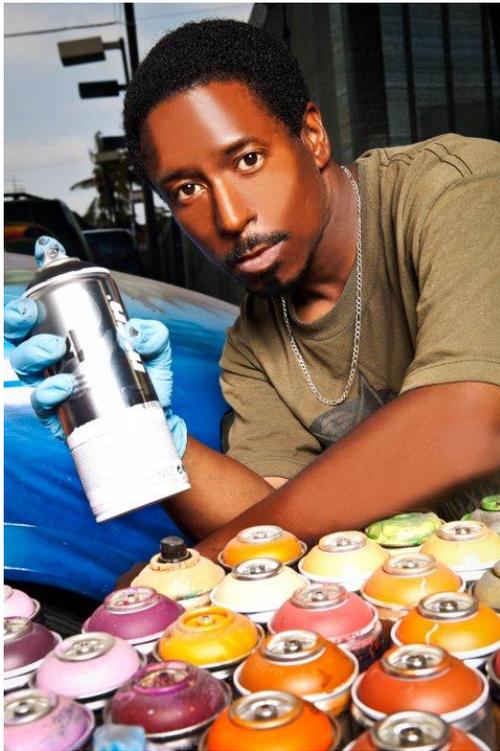
CRE8, age 38, is a South Los Angeles based graffiti king, traditional muralist, advertising muralist, illustrator, package designer and photographer. He is also a hip-hop dancer and historian. As a graffiti artist he maintains active membership in the RTN and LTS crews which he joined at age 11. Both crews are famous for their urban murals that are heavily influenced by all of the elements of hip-hop culture. His graffiti canvases are frequently displayed in art shows, galleries and museums. They have appeared in music videos for Mya and Ginuwine and in movies such as *Friday after Next* (2002) and *Anchorman* (2004). His commercial clients, who value his creativity and originality, have included General Motors, Dodge, and M & M Mars. As a hip-hop historian and educator, CRE8 frequently gives lectures on the history of graffiti and hip-hop culture at seminars, schools and universities and he co-curates the annual Urban Hieroglyphics art exhibition. CRE8 sees both the positives and negatives inherent in the commodification of graffiti. When asked how he feels it has impacted the art and culture of graffiti in general he replied:

As graff writers we have to push this on our own but commodification provides a larger audience and makes it possible for us to sell to a mass market. But graff writers should all start in the traditional manner because just jumping in devalues the art and leads to silly things like We Pasting which is a totally different culture based on placing stickers that look like graffiti. It also leads to people trying to take classes and get into graff in their twenties and thirties when they shoulda been learning this as kids. I know this one woman in her thirties whose just starting out. That's cool if you're just playing around but it's kinda awkward for everybody if you're tryin to be serious. Just because you can learn to do graffiti at any age doesn't mean you should be out there tryin' to hang (telephone interview, February 20, 2012).

In response to my question about how commodification has affected his career, he made the following observations:

Well graffiti wasn't designed to be a career. It was just supposed to be something that kids did but because it's become commercial older guys like me can still spend time with the can perfecting my skill and staying sharp. It gives people like

me the chance to shed light on the elements of graffiti. People still think that graffiti is just crazy kids running around with spray cans. They don't realize that there's a whole vocabulary and culture and that there are so many techniques aside from spray cans. Our tools include spray cans, markers and pens. In the right hands these tools can manifest great things. People are amazed that long ago writers were producing masterpieces in the dark where they could barely see. I've given lectures to educators and business men in suits and ties that were blown away. The room would be totally quiet except for people telling me afterwards that they now have a whole new understanding of graffiti hang (personal communication, February 20, 2012).



Eric "King CRE8" Walker

MEME: Female Graffiti and Tattoo Artist

MEME, age 30, is a female graffiti artist who has been active since the age of 17. She states that because of her skill level and ubiquity that many people have trouble believing that she is female. She prefers a certain level of anonymity and believes that due to her style of dress and the way she presents herself that most people “in a million years wouldn’t have a clue that she does graffiti and tattoo work”.

A lot of people still question if I’m a male or female in this game. I have heard that many still don’t believe that I’m female and assume that I’m a dude or an entire crew. No one believes that a female writer can put in that much work. It really doesn’t bother me at all if they think I’m a guy and I leave that for them to figure out. It’s been a long road for me but I still love being in the game (email, March 28, 2012).

MEME believes that her success in designing graffiti inspired clothing is due in part to the commodification of graffiti. She considers herself to be one of only a few female graffiti artists who dedicate their time and skills to generating creative clothing designs that adequately portray the struggles hardships faced by under-ground, hip-hop and graffiti artists. She designs from an insider perspective and believes that most outsiders would not be able to appreciate or recognize the messages portrayed by her designs. She also believes that the commodification of graffiti will help to dispel the generally negative ideas that the public holds in regards to graffiti.

As graffiti artists continue to utilize art as their voice and continue to articulate their introspections through the evolution of graffiti---via the art of the streets, canvases, stickers and clothing designs---people will begin to realize that graffiti artists are not just immature people who decide to write on walls (email, March 25, 2012).

MEME involvement with graffiti also influences who work as a tattoo artist and she states that she runs her tattoo business with a “graffiti state of mind”. She enjoys tattooing friends and acquaintances because she can freely discuss how she came to tattooing from a graffiti background. However when dealing with strangers or people who don’t know much

about graffiti, she tends to keep things on a more professional level. She is reticent when it comes to allowing customers to photograph her work but does allow it as long as they do not photograph her face because she does not like advertising her herself. When asked her thoughts on the status of women in graffiti, MEME offered what I consider to be a profoundly unique assessment:

Yes, graffiti will always be a male dominated game but it's not difficult for a female writer to rise in it. There are not many female artists so it can be easier for a female writer to be in the limelight and gain exposure than for male writers. However female writers do face the problem of being viewed as sex symbols and not being taken seriously when they first begin. For this reason I hardly associate with other writers and I don't like to expose the fact that I'm female. Maybe that's why it's taken 13 years for me to finally begin receiving respect and recognition as a female writer.



MEME

MOEZART 1 aka MOEZART the GENERAL: KWS, RTN, OTR, RTDK

MOEZART, age 39, is an imposing figure. He stands well over six feet tall and sports tattoos from his neck to his ankles. Like most of the graffiti artists that I interviewed for this research, he is an old man in a culture where artists start as young as 11 years old and seldom live past the age of 50 due to the health and safety risks inherent in graffiti: gang violence, drug use, falling from heights, getting hit by trains and the effects of inhaling aerosol paint fumes. MOEZART is recognized as both a king (someone who has mastered all of the techniques and levels of graffiti) and a legend (someone who is looked up to as a mentor who teaches the art and culture to successive generations).

He began his graffiti career at the age of 14 and his mentors at the time were WEB, CASTRO and OUCH of the KWS. Interestingly, his primary mentor, OUCH, was only 11 years old at the time; a scenario that shows that the mentor is not always the junior member of the mentor-apprentice relationship. OUCH made him his first fake bus pass which allowed him to go citywide with his graffiti *bombing* campaign and to congregate with other artists; both of these actions are virtually universal requirements for fledgling graffiti artists. After 25 years, MOEZART still maintains primary allegiance with the KWS crew and still works with OUCH and CASTRO. WEB has since retired.

In addition to graffiti work, MOEZART is the owner of From the Hip Ink, a mobile tattoo service. He prefers to operate as a mobile artist because some people prefer to get tattoo work done in the privacy of their own home; in fact this interview was written while he was busy tattooing a client who was oblivious to our conversation. He learned the tattoo trade seven years ago during his last stint at Centinela State Prison.

MOEZART believes that the effect of commodification on graffiti has been generally positive but has not had a major impact on his personal career. When asked for his personal observations he stated:

Commodification has helped the art a lot. It's helped expel the negatives and changed how people think. Now people can go to central places like art galleries and free walls to see graffiti art, even if it's not real graffiti because real graffiti is illegal. I'm a centrist. I do the legal stuff but I'm still out bombing freeways and putting up my tags wherever. It's the illegal shit that keeps me relevant. When I'm fresh out of jail, tagging is my way of letting the community know that I'm back and still grinding. I've worked as an office clerk, wheel chair attendant at LAX, construction worker and security guard but going in and out of the prison system and liking to get high limits my ability to hold a 9-to-5. I do some of my best art work after six blunts and a drink. Commodification is good but I'd be a success even without it. I have a reputation and I get most of my work through word of mouth. I've done work for Snoop Dogg, Warren G and Blink 182. I'm not into working for large corporations though; I choose to work for local businesses only. That's one way I keep it real (telephone interview, February 28, 2012).



MOEZART 1 aka MOEZART the GENERAL

INK REZN: RTN, LTS

INK REZN, age 40, is the owner of his own graphics design business---Rezinated Theory---as well as a Los Angeles graffiti king and legend. He is also a locally known rapper (he prefers the label MC) who has released six albums and a freelance artist whose work has appeared in MTV promotions, music videos, album covers and video games. He also holds a wealth of knowledge about the history of graffiti and rap music. I first became acquainted with him via MySpace in the summer of 2009. However we had our first face-to-face meeting at a graffiti art show on September 13, 2009 where he had six graffiti canvases on display for sale. He also performed several rap songs that evening.

As mentioned previously, INK REZN is both an MC and a graffiti artist and he feels that these two occupations represent different aspects of his personality; the MC is more aggressive and is expressed through a persona that is all about braggadocio and “talking shit”. In contrast, the graffiti artist represents his whimsical side. This is the side that loves childhood themes and loves to manifest itself through cartoon characters like Looney Toons and Oscar the Grouch. He feels closer to the graffiti artist persona because the real Ron Lewis is a man who loves children and loves to be playful and have fun.

INK REZN has mixed feelings about the commodification of graffiti art. He summarizes his feelings in the following way:

On the one hand it can hinder the creative process because it's a roadblock between the artist and the artist the work as he wants to do it. Examples include having to obtain permits. This step can prevent some artists from doing legal work because they don't have the patience or tenacity to go through the process. Some cities are less lenient than Los Angeles and require the space owners to go through a lengthy process. On the other hand the advent of graffiti art shows is a good thing for guys my age and I like the idea of free walls because they give us a way to continue writing in a more responsible manner.

Due to his standing in the graffiti community, INK REZN has been successful in asking for and receiving free walls from the City of Los Angeles. The free walls where he and his crew, RTN, frequently paint include the train tracks along Slauson Ave. between Normandie and Budlong Avenues in Los Angeles, CA. Even though these walls have been officially delegated to RTN, they frequently share space with KWS. He feels that it is better to share the walls than to argue with KWS which is also prolific in the area. Like many artists of his stature, INK REZN has had graffiti supplies donated to him and even had paint colors named after them. He also feels that, partly due to his fame, commodification has had little effect on his personal career:

Aside from art I do a lot of different things including sanding floors, dry walling, fixing leaks and interior painting. Being able to do interior murals is an added dimension that lessens the chance of a customer saying no. However, the art of graffiti is just one element of what I do. The legalization of graffiti hasn't hurt or hindered me because I can always do something else including murals and commercial signs for businesses. But with legal work I don't have to worry about going to jail or having the police harass me. But I do have to sometimes tone things down. For instance the lettering has to be legible to the average person meaning graffiti influenced but not true wildstyle. The coloring, flair and styling techniques can suggest graffiti but I haven't been called to do any commercial signs in actual wildstyle. When a customer hires me to do personal art such as a mural I can be more relaxed but if it's for his business then I have more restrictions.



Ron “INK REZN” Lewis

Conclusions

American and European white people have a long standing obsession with the bodies, lifestyles and spirit of black people including African-Americans. Sometimes that obsession was merely “politically incorrect” as in the black face minstrelsy which was one of the most popular forms of entertainment in 19th century America (Cockrell 1997); other times the obsession became downright inhumane, bordering on murderous. One such example of this is the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment where black men were left to endure untreated syphilis for the four decades between 1932 and 1972, ostensibly to study the course of untreated syphilis on the human body. Another example is provided by the Hottentot Venuses: at least two South African women of the Khoi-khoi tribe who were exhibited around 19th century Europe as freak show attractions due to what the Europeans perceived as unusually large buttocks and enlarged labia (Crais and Scully 2009:134) The most famous of these Venuses was Sarah Baartman who died in 1815 yet her skeleton, preserved labia and brain were kept on display at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974. Even after her remains were removed from public view they were still held as the “property” of the French government until February 2002. On August 9th, 2002--nearly 200 years after her death--she was finally given a proper burial in her homeland of South Africa (Crais and Scully 2009:164).

To the Europeans of the 19th century the anatomy of Sara Baartman, whose true name has been lost to history, was proof of the inferiority and untamed sexuality of darker skinned people in general and African women in particular. She was considered more ape than human--a missing link--and assigned to the classification of *Homo sapiens monstrosus* (Crais and Scully 2009:2).

In the new millennium, black bodies and lifestyles continue to fascinate the dominant culture and confirm the low opinion of black Americans held by some members of other cultures (Rose 2008; Jackson II and Camara 2010). The gangsta rapper and the hip-hop hoe of today serves as “evidence” of the untamed sexuality of black people and the images of poverty and criminality presented by gangsta rap serve as “proof” of our intellectual and cultural inferiority (Rose 2008:61-74). Meanwhile those in power continue to find ways to profit from that fascination and the “liberal white guilt” that sometimes accompanies it.

The commodification of hip-hop culture is one method of profiting from the fascination with black bodies and a phenomenon that has been covered by researchers from many disciplines including anthropology, feminist studies, sociology, history, and tourism studies. Most studies have focused on the effects of commodification on the music known as rap music but few have compared the differing effects of commodification the discreet elements of hip-hop culture. Neither have they studied how, or if, it effects men, women and non-black artists differently.

The goal of my research was to present a thesis that examined how commodification affects men, women and non-black hip-hop artists in different ways and to examine the differential effect on the separate elements. To that end I have presented my findings on how commodification affects the music, dance and art of hip-hop culture.

My research consisted of primary and secondary research. Primary research involved interviewing and observing many people involved in hip-hop culture and related areas. I spoke to rappers, graffiti artists, dancers and oral historians. Since hip-hop is a culture that is relatively new I was able to speak directly to people who were instrumental in bringing the culture from the East Coast where it was born to the West Coast. Secondary research involved review of the

many books, journal articles and documentaries that have been produced on the topic of hip-hop culture.

My findings supported my original thesis which was that commodification affects different people in different ways depending on their sex or ethnicity. It also affects the different elements in different ways. The most wide-ranging effects appear to have been on the music as commodification propelled the rise of gangsta rap: facilitating a negative view of black people and inner-cities, silencing the voice of many female rappers and driving most non-black rappers to the hip-hop margins. The imagery inherent in gangsta rap music has created an image of the black male that fosters violence in the black community whether it is male on male or male on female. The commodification of rap music is a leading contributor to the sentiment that “hip-hop is dead”. The vitality, variety and creativity which once characterized rap music has given way to formulaic, cookie-cutter music and predictable gangsta rappers whose message predominately focuses on getting money, getting cars and getting women who, in turn, the rapper has to keep from getting his money. The commodification of rap music fuels what James Stewart (2005:118) calls the Black Political Economy Paradigm in which racial identity becomes an income and wealth generating production, though not for the benefit of black people. The Black Political Economy Paradigm creates and depends on images, such as the gangsta-pimp-hoe trinity, that serve to line the coffers of the mostly white owned record industry executives while leaving most in the black community to deal with the effects of crime, violence, misogyny and homophobia that is glorified in rap music and videos as well as portrayed in movies targeted to hip-hop audiences. According to Stewart (2005:118), the Black Political Economy Paradigm also serves to channel young black men into the prison industry complex as they strive to live up to a commodified racial identity that justifies criminal behavior.

Undoubtedly, the commodification of rap music has provided some urban youth with a means of obtaining financial success. After all, Forbes magazine estimates that rap music alone generates 10 billion dollars in revenue with 10s of millions of more dollars being generated by hip-hop fashions, art and other cultural products (Oliver and Leffel 2006:23). However black hip-hop entrepreneurs remain largely relegated to small social networks and enclaves of hip-hop entrepreneurship that depend on ghetto knowledge and street connections to get paid; they thus fly under the radar and evade inclusion in formal statistical surveys of employment (Basu and Werbner 2001:257). Even the most successful black owned record labels depend on white owned distribution channels: a situation that began with the invasion and colonization of rap music by major record labels that then set up one-sided distribution deals. These one-sided deals eventually eliminated the black owned independent rap record labels like Sugar Hill Records, Winley Records and Enjoy Records (Bynoe 2002:220). Despite the successes of rap moguls like Russell Simmons, P. Diddy and Jay Z, the vast majority of and rappers do not benefit financially from the multi-billion dollar hip-hop industry which is ultimately controlled by whites.

In contrast, commodification has had a rather “equalizing” effect on the areas of dance and graffiti. As I have shown the effects of commodification have opened up these two areas to people who would not ordinarily be allowed to participate in a culture dominated by “angry, young, black men”. Commodification has allowed women and older men to participate in graffiti as a way to make a respectable living while continuing to use the art as a creative and political outlet. This is evident by the fact that all of my graffiti consultants were professional artists who were either female or males over the age of thirty. Many of these artist have no intentions of ever giving up the thrill of tagging any blank wall or overpass that catches their fancy, yet they have no qualms about doing legally sanctioned graffiti inspired art in order to pay the bills. Women

graffiti artist in particular benefit from opportunities to do paid graffiti because it gives them a creative outlet without having to experience the dangers common to traditional graffiti practice: dangers such as those inherent in painting in dark, abandoned places late at night. It also removes the need to endure the hostile working environment created by males who believe that females should not be doing graffiti.

Commodification of hip-hop also allows non-black hip-hop performers, even middle-aged white males, to find work doing hip-hop dance moves in movies and television commercials. The commodification of hip-hop dance transforms blackness into a commodity by linking it to a wide range of consumer goods which, when consumed by white people, provides a sense of being “down with the struggle”. It also transforms blackness into a mask that non-blacks can don when it is fun and discard when it becomes inconvenient.

However the equalizing effects of commodification do present an interesting paradox; the successful commodification of hip-hop is dependent on hip-hop cultural tourism; both actual and virtual. However most cultural tourists who are looking for an authentic experience consider such authenticity to be the result of the repetition of history and they want to feel that the artist are keeping it real by doing things in the same manner that their forbearers did; yet the desire to attract tourism (sell CDs, concert tickets, hip-hop clothing etc.) often causes artists to adopt foreign and new elements into their practices which are then promoted to the tourist as authentic. In my observations, such acculturation is the predictable handmaiden of political economy.

The commodification of hip-hop has led some to believe that it no longer belongs to the people and culture that created it; that it now belongs to the corporations and tourists. They further believe that this co-opted ownership will eventually lead to the death of the culture. I would have to disagree. While I do believe that commodification, “tourist demand” and

globalization has forever changed the outward face of hip-hop culture, the flavor is still there in the female rappers who proliferate along the margins; the young rappers who sell their independent mix-tape CDs on the street and promote them through social media; the 40 year old professional graffiti artists who refuse to give up tagging and the hip-hop griots and historians that are happy to impart their knowledge to anyone who cares to listen or read. Hip-hop culture is no longer a “youth culture”. The pioneering hip-hop generation is now composed of middle-aged men and women and who have mortgages to pay and families to feed. As MOEZART proudly states on his Facebook page “I am an artist. This does not mean I will work for free. I have bills just like you”. It is also not, nor ever was, devoid of female contributions. Women contributed in profound ways to the birth of hip-hop culture and they are still helping it to get through out of its “awkward phase”. Commodification of hip-hop culture, as controversial as it may be, allows these trailblazers to continue making relevant contributions to the culture while making a living for themselves and their families.

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Appendix A: Additional Consultant Bios

Guerrero, Ricardo: Social director of the Pico-Union Graff Lab; an organization that provides graffiti free walls, graffiti training and public education about graffiti.

Lady Loe: Brooklyn, NY based female rapper who performs conscious, woman-centric hip-hop music. Lady Loe is a prolific writer of rap lyrics and wrote the theme song “60 minutes from Hell” for the Washington DC based DC Divas, an all-female tackle football team.

Lord Yoda X: Founder of and spokesperson for the Universal Federation for the Preservation of Hip-Hop Culture located in New York City.

OZ: Los Angeles based aerosol artist who contributed to the Crenshaw Wall mural project; a pictorial timeline of African and African-American history that spans a full city block beginning at 5100 Crenshaw Blvd. in Los Angeles

POET: South Los Angeles based graffiti king, muralist and tattoo parlor owner, His primary crew is KWS. He also owns Drop Ink tattoo parlor.

Slimm-C: Caucasian rapper from Kansas City, MO who believes that the commodification of rap music has made it hard for non-black rappers to achieve success.

KNOX: San Fernando Valley, CA based graffiti artist, youth coach and graffiti mentor. He teaches classes in the techniques and history of graffiti at Reseda High School.

Zenith Da Goddess: Knoxville, TN based independent female rapper. Zenith is also a motivational speaker who manages her record label Cosmos Entertainment and designs her own marketing materials, costumes and photo shoots.

Appendix B: A Glossary of Hip-Hop Terms

Music and Dance Related

Breaks, The: The break is the part of a record consisting of only music and beats. Early hip-hop DJs frequently played these parts on a loop in order to excite the crowd.

B-boy, b-girl: Originally male and female dancers who would dance to the breaks played by DJs. Sometimes used synonymously with breakdancer; however some hip-hop purists consider the term “breakdancer” to be a creation of the media.

Beef: A public, ongoing argument between rappers; sometimes resulting in the death of one or more parties.

Chasing Paper, The Paper Chase: The act of flagrantly chasing money or trying to make a living.

Cool Pose: A ritualized manner of speaking, standing and moving intended to relay strength, detachment and superiority.

Crew or Cru: A group of people dedicated to one or more areas of hip-hop expression. There are rap crews, graffiti crews, dance crews and crews comprised of people proficient in one or more of the hip-hop arts.

Diss record: A record made to insult or disparage another person or group. Roxanne Shanté is credited with making one of the first hip-hop diss records entitled “Roxanne’s Revenge”.

Emcee, MC: Originally the rapper who was in charge of verbally exciting the crowd, while the DJ played the music, with such phrases as “throw your hands in the air”. MC stands for master of ceremonies, mover of crowds or mic checka. Today the term MC is generally applied to a rapper who has paid his or her dues and is believed to possess great vocal style and ability.

Femcee: A female emcee or rapper

Gangsta rap, gangsta rapper: a subgenre of rap music that focuses on illegal activities, violence and mistrust of the law. Alternatively known as **reality rap** due to the fact that it deals with social issues common to inner-city, urban areas.

Hood: Slang for neighborhood, especially the neighborhood that one lives in or hails from.

Mean mugging: To present a scowling, glaring facial expression, usually as part of the cool pose.

Mixologist: A deejay who is skilled at mixing records to maintain a continuous dance beat

Rap music: The musical element of hip-hop culture; involving lyrics spoken in a fast-paced, rhythmic manner over background music.

Rapper: One who raps

Swagger: noun or verb meaning to move in a confident, cocky manner

Underground: Not part of the mainstream. Not well known beyond a limited fan base

Vixen, Video Vixen: A vixen is a clever, attractive and sexy woman. Such women who appear in rap music videos are known as video vixens.

Graffiti Related

Bomb: To do widespread illegal graffiti, especially in a short time span.

Burner: A piece of graffiti considered to be of superior artistic quality and requiring great skill.

Cross out: To draw a line or “x” over the work of another as a sign of disrespect.

Free walls: Walls that are donated to the graffiti community as a location where graffiti can be legally placed. Often this is done by businesses in order to deter tagging and gang-related graffiti.

Getting up: The act of doing illegal graffiti on public spaces.

Go over: To paint over the work of another as a sign of disrespect.

King: A graffiti writer who is considered to be a superior artist, thus deserving of respect within graffiti culture.

Legal beagle: A graffiti writer who only does legal work.

Legend: A graffiti master who is renowned for having gained proficiency in all the tools of graffiti including spray paint, pen, rollers and brushes.

Piece: Describes a complex graffiti mural, usually requiring the cooperation of several artists. Short for masterpiece.

Tag, tagging: A tag is simply the name of an artist or crew. Tagging is the act of placing these names in illegal places. Graffiti artist usually begin by tagging, sometimes as a form of initiation into a crew.

Throw-up: A piece of graffiti consisting of outlined letters that are sometimes filled in. Throw-ups are the next phase of traditional graffiti training.

Appendix C: Sample Statement of Informed Consent

California State University, Northridge

Project Title

Chasing Paper: The Effects of Commodification on the Arts and Artists of Hip-Hop Culture

Statement of Informed Consent

Introduction

This thesis study is conducted by Connie Jones-Steward as part of the requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Anthropology and is designed to assess both the positive and negative effects of commodification on three elements of hip-hop culture: Graffiti, Dance and Rap Music.

Description of Research

This research will add to the growing body of scholarly literature on the subject of hip-hop culture and its evolution as a social, political and economic force.

Subject Information and Risks

The commodification of hip-hop culture is a sensitive and highly charged subject therefore participants may become uncomfortable with some of the questions asked or themes presented. Should this happen the participant may stop the interview, withdraw participation or decline to answer the question.

I anticipate that interview run time will be between 20 minutes and two hours. Should the participant become tired or need to leave, we can take a break or continue the interview at another time. Multiple interviews can be scheduled if the participant desires.

All field notes will be handwritten. There will be no video or audio equipment used during this research, however still photography will be used with permission.

All field notes will be kept confidential. They will be stored on my computer hard drive which is password protected and destroyed one year after publication of the final thesis.

Photos will be held indefinitely and stored on an external zip drive. They will be used to illustrate my thesis and may be later used in a book and website dedicated to the documentation and preservation of hip-hop culture. When used for publication, photos will be captioned with the crew names (if known) of those who created the art being photographed. This is to give credit where credit is due.

I alone will have access to data collected during my field studied.

Confidentiality and Final Disposition of Data

All field notes and photographs will be confidential. Field notes will be destroyed one year after final publication of thesis. Photos will be held indefinitely for documentation and publishing purposes such as a planned book and website dedicated to graffiti photography.

Consent to Being Photographed

_____ Please initial here if you consent to having yourself or your work photographed. Photographs of graffiti writers and dancers at work will be used for documentary purposes and may appear in the thesis.

Future Use of Photographs

_____ Photographs may be used for future projects such as a planned book and website dedicated to hip-hop culture and/or graffiti art. Please initial here if you consent to your art being used these purposes .

Benefit of Participation

Potential benefits involve increased personal prestige that may be derived from participating in a scholarly project that advances academic knowledge about hip-hop culture. There is no monetary compensation offered for participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is fully voluntary. You may initially refuse to participate and you may withdraw your consent at any time.

Right to Request a Pseudonym

Please initial whether you do _____ or do not _____ agree to your professional moniker or crew name being published in this study. If you choose not to have your known name published a pseudonym will be created for you.

Concerns

If you wish to voice a concern about the research, you may direct your questions to Research and Sponsored Projects, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330-8232 and by phone at (818) 677-2901. If you have a specific question about the study, you may contact Dr. Magliocco, faculty advisor, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330-8244 or by phone at (818) 677-4930

Subject Signature

I have read and understand the conditions outlined for participation in the described study. I have been given a copy of this consent form and my participation is fully consensual.

Signature *Date*

Witness/P.I. Signature *Date*

Return Form To:

Your verbal consent is sufficient for your participation in this study. However if you do decide to sign this form please return a copy to:

Dr. Sabina Magliocco
Dept. of Anthropology
California State University Northridge
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330-8244

Please keep a copy for your records.

Thank You!

California State University, Northridge

Research Consultants Bill of Rights

The rights below are the rights of every person who is asked to be in a research study. As a research consultant I have the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is trying to figure out.
2. To be informed about of any potential risks that may arise from participation in this study.
3. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
4. To refuse participation in the beginning or to withdraw from the study at any time
5. To allow my crew name to be published or to request that it not be.
6. To be free of pressure when considering whether I wish to agree to participation in this study.
7. To receive a copy of this signed and dated consent form.

If I have any questions I should ask the researcher or contact Research and Sponsored Projects, California State University, Northridge, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330-8232 or call (818) 677-2901