

SCRIPTING AND CONSUMING BLACK BODIES IN HIP HOP MUSIC AND PIMP MOVIES

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. . . Much of the assault on the soulfulness of African American people has come from a White patriarchal, capitalist-dominated music industry, which essentially uses, with their consent and collusion, Black bodies and voices to be messengers of doom and death. Gangsta rap lets us know Black life is worth nothing, that love does not exist among us, that no education for critical consciousness can save us if we are marked for death, that women's bodies are objects, to be used and discarded. The tragedy is not that this music exists, that it makes a lot of money, but that there is no countercultural message that is equally powerful, that can capture the hearts and imaginations of young Black folks who want to live, and live soulfully.¹

Feminist film critics maintain that the dominant look in cinema is, historically, a gendered gaze. More precisely, this viewpoint argues that the dominant visual and narrative conventions of filmmaking generally fix "women as image" and "men as bearer of the image." I would like to suggest that Hollywood cinema also frames a highly particularized *racial* gaze—that is, a representational system that positions Blacks as image and Whites as bearer of the image.²

Black bodies have become commodities in the mass media marketplace, particularly within Hip Hop music and Black film. Within the epigraph above, both hooks and Watkins explain the debilitating effects that accompany pathologized fixations on race and gender in Black popular culture. The title of this essay foretells the consumerist impulse to support images with which the public is familiar *and* the producer's inclination to feed the public's imagination about what Ross and Rose coin "postindustrial urban America(n)" Black bodies.³ The distribution of these images occurs while being attentive to the general lure—the superintending text of sexuality.

Often when researchers discuss sex and the body in popular culture or everyday human activity, they rightfully make reference to feminist writings for they have been the most perspicacious commentators on this subject.⁴ We are convinced, just as Watkins, that there are also numerous other corporeal inscriptions enmeshed with gender and the hypertext of sexuality, including but not limited to race.⁵ It is also clear to us that most of the mass media research concerning Black popular culture seems forcibly divided into either audience or producer analyses with not nearly enough examination of how these are entwined. Their inextricable linkage is taken for granted in the following discussion in which we will concentrate on the elaborate sexual inscriptions on Black bodies within Hip Hop music, blaxploitation films, and the

resurgent production of pimp movies. When we use the word scripts, scripting, inscriptive, or inscribing, we mean figuratively that the body is socially understood and treated as a discursive text that is read by interactants. The purpose of doing a scripting analysis is not to “point fingers,” but to locate a displaced agency and to discover the source of inscriptions existent on Black bodies and prominent in popular media and explore the effects of these inscriptions.

Although this position is principally about the aggrandizement of sexual dysfunction in Black popular culture, we feel compelled to advise the reader upfront that we are neither claiming nor insinuating that black popular culture invented, has a monopoly over, or is the sole proprietor of sexual perversion—only that it is a vehicle through which brilliant Hip Hop and pimp film artists have further impoverished the conditions in which Black bodies are already negatively scripted.

As we explore the sexual and racial scripting of Black bodies in Black popular culture, specifically Black film and Hip Hop music, it is clear that the underlying concern is that producers of popular culture have seduced Hip Hop and Black film artists into a relationship that has become parasitic, one where artists make money, become popular, and remain generally gratified by how the industry courts them. Yet the audience becomes enwrapped in an insidious arrangement where they are pleased at their own risk. Unfortunately, although these artists are aware these industries have ghettoized blackness, then turned it into a commodity and packaged it for mass consumption, they have been complicit with this stereotype. In fact, it is clear they have facilitated this imagery for profit, fame, and material gain but Hip Hop artists, in particular, are respected and appreciated because of the stylistic ways in which they tell their narratives.⁶

Hip Hop artists consider themselves street raconteurs. Many of these contemporary Hip Hop lyricists consider their role to be aural bridges between the gang, Thug and pimp-related elements of the inner-city’s underbelly and the more diverse and well-to-do petit bourgeois and also affluent segments of society. By mimicking sexual freedom, narrating ghetto life, exposing hypermasculine anxieties and elucidating criminally strategic behaviors, gangsta and Thug rappers, whether male or female, vie for an authentic and panoptic blackness designed to expose the essence of Black existence.⁷ This implicit competition within the Hip Hop discourse community and in many Black films is signaled by the urban call to “keep it real,” which suggests that being down to earth is synonymous with being able to claim and navigate ghetto life despite one’s real origins.⁸ In fact, if one has grown up in any place other than the projects, very little respect is granted within this discourse community. This automatically allows Black ghetto dwellers comprised of otherwise incarcerated voices to be set free to poetically articulate, dispute, and rhetorically reimagine an urban battleground where dwellers are proud, strong, and most fit to survive.

Nonetheless, while caught up in a digital war to technologically determine who has the top rhythmically impressive billboard hit, most “crunk” booty-shaking video, or most lucid film portrayal of indigent Black life that “keeps it real” while not worrying about getting “props” from music award foundations, artists have become entangled in

a moral and ontological crisis.⁹ This crisis involves the direction and influence of a public consciousness tainted by industry-driven racial and gendered differences throughout popular culture that have been essentialized. This is the case especially in the interrelated entertainment genres of music and film where exposing ghetto life is the most lucrative kind of Black cultural and corporeal expression.

For example, in a Black Entertainment Television (BET) interview with filmmaker John Singleton after the release of *Baby Boy*, he claimed his movie about a dependent twenty-something adult Black male who lives at home with his mother in a bad neighborhood in Los Angeles surrounded by violence, drugs, and criminal mischief was not sensationalizing ghetto life, but merely presenting one story about the truth of ghetto living. He claimed this is the way he grew up in South Central Los Angeles; this is merely a snapshot of his life. Later in a series of interviews about the movie, he bragged this was the most potent, true-to-form ghetto movie he has ever seen. In an effort to produce, direct, and depict the ultimate ghetto movie, artists like Singleton comply with the controlling gaze and ominous ideological inscriptions of the Black body as a menace, an act that distances blackness from everything conventional and morally familiar so that everyday American citizens are assigned to the position of spectator when observing blackness. They cannot relate to it, because it is not a part of their real world. It appears manufactured. While it represents a real part of someone's life, it is presented as a universal depiction of what it means to be Black. It is carnivalesque in function and hence, it remains a rough, tattered, and vulgar dimension of common public American life.¹⁰ Stuart Hall explains this detachment as a spectator. He points out that since it is not of the elite or high culture but rather "popular" culture, it is merely an escape, though spectators gaze at it to remind themselves of their own comfort.¹¹ Even still, this distancing conditions audience psyches to associate blackness with civil disobedience, criminal habitats, psycho-sexual dysfunction, dependency, as well as the ghettoized underclass and to be alarmed when these "malignant" Black bodies are performing in alignment with "normal" White bodies. The enormous complexity of this phenomenon is daunting. As David Trend laments:

Not surprisingly, media villains and political scapegoats are often indistinguishable, whether it is in the implied ethnic criminality of [John Singleton's] *Boyz n the Hood* and *Bugsy* or the foreign menace of *Shining Through* and *The Hunt for Red October*. On one level, it is argued that such films help to coalesce an audience around the fear of a common demon that throws national parochialism into relief. But this analysis fails to account for the complex economies of attraction and desire that also characterize constructions of difference. As Ernesto Laclau has suggested, any entity is both defined and limited by objects of alterity. Because the externalized Other is simultaneously a figure of antagonism and radical possibility, It constitutes a part of the self that the self both wants and fears.¹²

So, within a public sphere where common relational values like love, civility, and morality are bound by popular discourses, the fixed notion that Black bodies are

unruly fuels the economy of race relations while satiating audiences' consumptive impulses to be entertained, absorbed, and fascinated by this arcane set of racial differences. This happens in much the same way as lynching, during which members of the lynch mobs pulled out Kodak cameras to preserve the memories of the event.¹³ In both cases, the I-Other dialectic is engaged with audience members both co-producing and validating the lynching while remaining its spectators.

Curiously entangled in this dialectic are Black bodies that have come to access themselves via the discursive inscriptions promulgated by popular media.¹⁴ Moreover, they have come to see themselves as victims desiring what appears to be a far-fetched indeterminacy and sense of agency to define and create their own realities.¹⁵ Consequently, estranged Black bodies in popular culture too rarely transcend the surfaces of their imposed inscriptions and thus are forced to cohabit and become complicit with a manufactured ontological double. If they are not exoticized through popular motifs like singing, dancing, playing sports, or being criminalized, then Black bodies are sexualized.¹⁶

Popular culture, particularly film and music, is littered with intoxicating hedonistic images, patriarchal imprints, and occasionally aesthetically sanitized inscriptions of Black bodies.¹⁷ In fact, Herman Gray and Paul Gilroy remind us film and music are powerful conduits through which individuals are introduced to localized conceptions of attenuated blackness. These institutionally sanctioned conceptions parade as authentic notions of a Black self.¹⁸ We will explore notions of Black authenticity, a theory of complicity, and Black bodies as sites of sexual eroticism, exoticism, and objectification in Black popular culture.

BLACK AUTHENTICITY AND ESSENTIALISM

In the popular phrases, "I'm representin'," "keepin' it real" or "stay Black," the predicates describing who one is representing, how real is defined or what Black means is omitted. This begs the question of authenticity, of what is true, what is real, verifiable, and constitutive of blackness that makes it automatically so. The presumption is that we need not explicate or interrogate issues of representation, the realness or blackness—they are terms already reduced to their immediately interpretable meanings. However, the omission becomes even more conspicuous when we begin the discussion of Black cultural *expression*, or *the Black experience*. The glaring fact that there is singularity inherent in each of these constructions, when they both should be rightfully pluralized, is what is meant by essentialism. In defining the immutable essence of a thing, by Western standards, it can be put to a valid test of systematic observation, which will prove its accuracy and veracity. If it does not meet these tests, then it is considered untrue and inauthentic. Certainly, it is clear blackness among Blacks is most well understood within its cultural and cosmological parameters. The primary concern, however, is how Black corporeal inscriptions produced by Blacks sometimes parade as authoritative reflections of *true* blackness when they only repre-

sent a fractional set of what Black means. Examples of this are ghetto-centric representations of blackness promoted as being indicative of “real” Black life.¹⁹ For instance, Thug rapper Trick Daddy raps about his representation of thuggery during a song entitled “I’m a Thug” on his album *Thugs Are Us*. He states:

I don’t know what this world’s gonna bring, but I know one thing that this is the life for me baby cause I’m a Thug . . . Could it be my baggy jeans. Or my gold teeth. That make me different from ya’ll. Ain’t trippin dog. But listen dog. I’ve been raised a little different dog. I’m just doing my thang. These are my ghetto slangs. And I’m representing Thug shit.²⁰

English and Africana Studies Professor Mark Anthony Neal discusses his exploratory in-class focus group of student perceptions concerning Hip Hop, and indicates, “Many students feel that ‘if you don’t have an attitude, if you don’t act a certain way, if you aren’t from the ghetto, the perception is that you are not Black.’”²¹ He further comments,

Some of those who embrace [rapper] DMX include relatively well-off middle-class Black young people who may be bound for professional careers, but crave acceptance by their Black peers and have also based their perceptions of blackness on Hip Hop video and the “ghetto-centric noir” cinema. As a result, whatever its salutary impulses, there is a cost to this ghetto-centric romance, as if Black urban youth somehow define the essence of the Black experience.²²

Neal’s reflections concerning the opinions of his students who he calls post-soul babies are insightful. While trying not to appear didactic or effusive with regards to what authenticity means, we think it is important to be mindful of encoded commentaries concerning authenticity before framing the following discussion with complexity theory.

In an attempt to decipher and explain what is real in the imaginary, metacommunicative universe of popular culture, Black Hip Hop artists and Black filmmakers have frequently drawn boundaries between the authentic and inauthentic.²³ These arbitrary demarcations are well-justified in their minds, since ghetto perpetrators are frustratingly discomfiting to these artists, because *true* Thugs are making money telling their own true stories while *impostors* lie about ghetto experiences, and make ghetto life experiences seem surreal. For example, while asserting their ownership of an authentic Thug experience, Thug Hip Hop artists Jay-Z, Ja-Rule, and Earl “DMX” Simmons discuss their disdain for Thug imposters in their song entitled, “Murdergram”:

I know your type, you hype, all up off that fake shit; You can’t understand why a man would have to take shit. Or steal shit, but this is that real, niggas kill shit, peel shit. I hit you in your head you won’t feel shit!!!²⁴

This comment is also in response to the ever-increasing presence of Black crossover artists who have allegedly “sold out” the Black community and begun writing and performing for a broader market including White audiences. The criticism is concerning the supposedly profligate and undignified nature of crossover artistry, how it taints the artistic elements of Hip Hop production by forfeiting and diluting the essence of blackness. In order to thoroughly understand this indictment, one would have to be acquainted with the humble beginnings of rap music when rappers would sell their homemade rap music cassette tapes out of their trunks.²⁵ They desired larger distribution, but many of them were not willing to seek this distribution at the cost of their allegiance to maintaining their own voice and “keepin’ it real.”

Now that rap and Hip Hop music have gained prominence for their straight-no-chaser, hardcore approach to narrating urban life, there are impersonators who want to appear “ghetto” or claim their attachment to ghetto life when in fact they have never lived in the ghetto and have only walked through the ghetto, at most.²⁶ So, Black authenticity in this regard calls into question discursive points of disarticulation and implies that this mimicry bastardizes blackness. By compromising notions of physical and ontological space and place, impersonating artists jeopardize the authenticity, the realness of Black ghetto life as depicted by *true* Thug-centered rap and cinema. The question is: Who will tell the true ghetto life stories? The controversial and interrogatory reply is, “Does it make them less Black because they tell a different story? Moreover, how do we know what is true and why does it matter who tells the story?”

Authenticity and essentialism issues are neither new in Hip Hop music, nor in Black popular culture. Scholars like Michael Eric Dyson, and Paul Gilroy, among others, have addressed this extensively throughout the years. What is new is how authenticity claims emerge not only in Hip Hop music, but also in Black pimp films, both of which seek to expose Black male sexual domination over Black females and therefore remain complicit with early White hegemonic inscriptions of Black bodies.²⁷

A BRIEF NOTE ON COMPLICITY THEORY

According to its progenitor, Mark McPhail, the idea of complicity “manifests itself in terms of an adherence to the problematical ideological assumptions of position and privilege inherent in critical discourse.”²⁸ In addition, Blacks become complicit with negative inscriptions of their bodies when they uncritically adopt structures designed to demean or essentialize blackness.

Toward their recovery from this inscriptive damage, McPhail recommends “coherent integration of similarity and difference,” which will result in a more sophisticated, holistic and revelatory understanding of cultural standpoints.²⁹ This demands that individuals situate notations of self and other on a continuum of thinking about racialized bodies but does not privilege one cultural representative’s glance over another. McPhail argues this is especially necessary of popular culture. When exam-

ining sexuality in Hip Hop music and film, it is axiomatic to decipher representations of subject and object, elite and subaltern, but also the internal contradictions attendant on these inscriptions.

By using the notion of complicity to analyze Thug personae and the pimp-whore complex, "the Other" is necessarily emphasized as both subject and object when speaking of marginalized group members. McPhail adds to the discussion the following sentiment: "The other illustrates the problem of language in Western culture in its most extreme form, as a figure made flesh that reifies the existence of an essential reality, a reality 'out there,' separate and distinct from the human agents that interact within it."³⁰ Reclamation of agency is not always liberatory however. Sometimes it can inspire the manufacturing of an equally debased and elitist subjectivity, which leads directly to multitudinous objectifications. Such is the case with the brutish personae of the Thug, Ruffneck, and Pimp, each of whom attempt to retrieve agency only to become complicit with patriarchal inscriptions that deny others their dignity and respect.

THUGS AND ROUGHNECKS AS CONTEMPORARY BRUTES AND SEXUAL PREDATORS

The Thug or Ruffneck is a contemporary manifestation of the contumacious brute image, and the Thug image is enjoying an epoch in which it is able to captivate audiences of rap music throughout the world.³¹ Consequently, Thug-related themes have become commonplace in Rap and Hip Hop music. It did not begin with present-day Hip Hop music; it is the contemporary musical brainchild of militant 1960s poet pioneers such as Haki Madhubuti (nee Don Lee), Gil Scott-Heron, and The Last Poets, as well as gangsta rap pioneers N.W.A. (Niggaz wit Attitudes) who are said to be the first to use the term on their song "Gangsta, Gangsta."³² Their obscene antics may be attributed to forerunner Luke "Skywalker" Campbell, who was probably the first to appropriate and market sex-shock in rap music on a global scale with men and women having sex on stage at his concerts. He was the archetypal rap artist-pimp publicly overseeing sexual coupling. This interloping was recast as simply obscene and become the subject of a high-profile first amendment trial.³³ Regardless of the outcome, which tremendously slowed his multicity tour, almost bringing it to an end, Luke Campbell proved just how potent sexually-charged rap music could and would become, and precociously introduced a new brand of "rump-shaking" that would continue to rise to different levels of aggressiveness with Thug rap.³⁴

In fact, as Tricia Rose maintains, "Hip Hop articulates a sense of entitlement and takes pleasure in aggressive insubordination."³⁵ A spin-off of gangsta rap music, the Thug role is a vivid manifestation of that "aggressive insubordination." Thugs perpetuate the myth of a socially sanctioned Black male warrior, who by mere coincidence, is also sexually-charged. As Trend suggests, it is entirely too uncritical to assert entertainment audiences are so engulfed by the venue and "irresistibly drawn to violence," and sexism that they become completely unaware of their consumption of these hege-

monic images.³⁶ Audiences' attraction to certain pedestrian images is not accidental. People make choices to engage their negative and arguably counterproductive peculiarity of race and gender. As a result, when we hear Hip Hop music lyrics referring to the Thug, Ruffneck, O.G., or G. (i.e., original gangsta or gangsta, respectively), we should not be surprised that we simultaneously hear laudatory labels like "pimp," "mack," "playa," "big baller" and "dog," several of which refer mainly to his acquisition of cash not just the male's sexual conquest of women and/or the whole mystique of his genital enormity.³⁷ This is characteristic of popular rappers like Trick Daddy, Tupac, Snoop Doggy Dog, the Lox, Dr. Dre, Cash Money Millionaires, Treach from Naughty By Nature, Nas, Ludacris, and Nelly. Each of their scabrous public personae revolve around a ghettocentric personality that accents material wealth gained by previously struggling urban youth, who have now superseded those despondent and uncertain conditions.³⁸ As their televised videos demonstrate, they are also lascivious pimps who without fail are surrounded by beautiful, often sculpted, scantily clad females. These females have four primary functions as they gyrate and genuflect throughout the video—to engage the audience's voyeuristic gaze, to embody the apparatus of sexual pleasure, to fuel the fantasies and imaginations about her innately lascivious nature, and to serve as instruments controlled by the Thug. Ja Rule demonstrates this last point in his song, "Bitch Betta Have My Money," in which he states:

Girl you so hot I feel like Iceberg Slim. I pimp plenty women . . . Game is the topic. And what's between your legs is the product. Use it properly and you'll make dollars bitch.³⁹

Ja Rule and Case explain the Thug mentality in another song entitled "Thug Life." In this song, they forthrightly declare their awareness that thuggish behaviors and treatment of women are inappropriate, but they rationalize:

Everything from the evils to price, from the guns to mic. I'm livin' my life runnin' through hell with no wife. It's a sin, but I tell my lost soul to win . . . Baby, I don't respect shit, with diamonds and live reckless . . . The more resist the better, I'm in it for whatever . . . I respect it cuz niggaz ain't shit, you right.⁴⁰

Thugs seek to re-position the Black male body as being in control of himself and *his* women. We purposefully wrote "women," to suggest that a Thug never commits to one woman, because then he would not be a "playa"; he would be weak or soft as sensitive, loving, nurturing and monogamous, and it is contrary to the definition of the mack to be weak. One of the hallmark characteristics of a Thug is his desensitization, his emotional paralysis. In other words, a Thug does not feel, except when his territory (i.e., family, physical space, or physical person) is threatened. Thugs see themselves as being committed, not necessarily to the community in terms of enhancing its infrastructure, but to "keeping it real" by remembering the people, the dilapidated housing projects and the "hard knocks" lifestyle and exemplifying this remem-

brance via their clothing, hair styles, walk, talk, improvisational discourse, dances, and virtually every conceivable dimension of their lives. With exceptions like Jay-Z who has continually returned to his New York community to "give something back," many contemporary rappers who identify with the thug profile somehow have convinced themselves they have taken agency in lifting up their communities by claiming their origins in the ghettos, which supposedly ensures they have not forgotten their Black heritage. In order to prove this, they make gallant attempts to define their realities and re-script their Black bodies; instead however, they have only complied with the stereotypical illusions about Black male bodies as violent, irresponsible, and lewd. Even though the mostly oversized prison-inspired apparel, timberland boots, and regionally-defined accessories (i.e., bandanas, gold teeth, cornrows in hair, etc.) accompany the Thug image for some and immediately conjure negative images, they are merely the epicenter of a more arcane inscription—the essentialism of the Black male image and presentation of it in consonance with the archetypal minstrel brute belonging exclusively to the underclass.

Mark Anthony Neal tries to unravel the magnetism some segments of the general population, who do not belong to the underclass, have toward performances that glorify Thug life:

I have plenty of students who embrace DMX as a viable [role] model, and not all of them hail from the ghetto or live the less savory side of life that DMX and his lyrics embody. The natural question is, why working- and middle-class Black college students would embrace such a figure. It doesn't quite take away all the mystery to ask the parallel question: Why do so many White middle- and upper-middle class students embrace the Smashing Pumpkins, Aerosmith or Marilyn Manson.⁴¹

The Thug is compelling because of his ruggedness and his authentic ghettocentrism. Rappers DMX & Dyme's song "Good Girls, Bad Guys" on DMX's . . . *and then there was X* album explains why some women are attracted to Thugs. Female rapper Dyme, whose name has become synonymous with a sexy and attractive nonghetto "good girl," is in dialogue with DMX (his words are in parentheses):

Hey yo Boo, I'm diggin you, cause you make me wanna do all them things I was taught I wasn't supposed to. . . . Attractive to me, wit yo' tactics. Hit it like AH!!! Make me backflip. (What to do? You want the nigga wit the slacks, or the jeans and the boots? You wanna be safe or be laced, cause you can be replaced).⁴²

In this exchange, Dyme expresses how DMX's thuggish, edgy, hardcore bad boy image lures her into being a rebel. Everything from his daredevil antics to how he sexes her body to even his Thug uniform of Timberland boots and jeans excites her. He admonishes her to rethink her choices, which apparently are either being with a

straight-laced, genteel, law-abiding citizen who probably will not be able to sexually satisfy her or being with a fearless, sexually outrageous Thug who can make her feel safe. Against all odds, she chooses the Thug.

The Thug is a modern brute, which is revered for his Stagoleean disposition and feared for his out-of-control, haphazard and volatile behavior.⁴³ He is uncontrollable and that aspect of his personality becomes mysteriously attractive to some Dymes. Perhaps it is impulsively connected to their internal desire to feel assured that they will always be protected and safe from external harm and if properly guided by her, the Thug or Ruffneck can prove to be a strong and positive father, and strong husband to the Dyme or "Dyme-piece" as she is sometimes called. Although the sporadic behavior of the Thug does not promise the regularity that child-rearing requires, his bar-none attitude adds a false sense of security that a non-Thug may not be able to supply. This is his lure, but it comes at the price of him being noncommittal, which eventually contributes to the dissolution and incohesion of Black families. It also leads to the steady perpetuation of negative Black masculine scripts.

THUG MISSES

Unlike the weak character disposition of the Dyme, Thug Misses are no domesticated arm pieces to be sported by the Thug, because they too are Thugs. According to Dyson and Rose, these female thugs are prophetic in their unrelenting resistance to the undercurrent of male dominance and female submission.⁴⁴ In an effort to formulate and enact a subversive politic that disputes the pandemic paternalism of Hip Hop's old boy's network, the most popular and rising cadre of female rappers and Hip Hop artists have labeled themselves "gangsta bitches."⁴⁵ In much the same way Black power and civil rights activists and conscious musicians like James Brown repossessed the until-then negative term "Black" making it positive with the slogan "I'm Black and I'm Proud," or in the same way that Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* rescues women's agency by purging, then claiming initially invective epithets like cunt, bitch, and pussy, "gangsta bitches" have decided to take the derisive term "bitch" and used it to refer to women who are angered by some women's passive resistance strategies or simple acceptance of patriarchal abuse. They are boisterously and boldly exclaiming, "Yeah, I am that bi*** you are talking about, so what's your point?" This is never so clear as it is in Lil' Kim's song "Suck my D***" on her album *The Notorious Kim*. She boldly asserts:

To all my motherfuckin' gettin' money hoes, and all my ghetto bi***** in the projects. Coming through like bulldozers. No, we ain't sober. . . . Niggas love a hard bitch. What? I'm loving this shit. Queen Bi****! What bi*** you know can Thug it like this? . . . Been doin' this for years, no need to practice. Take lessons from the Queen and you'll know how to mack this. . . .⁴⁶

Lil' Kim is representative of a set of female Hip Hop thug artists that we will call

Thug Misses and Ruff Ryders.⁴⁷ They have developed a trendy erotogenic persona of the no-nonsense “around-the-way” or ghettoized girl. The seemingly endless list of such artists include popular rappers Li'l Kim, Foxy Brown, Da Brat, Khia, Eve, Gangsta Boo, Missy Misdemeanor Elliott, and the FlipMode Squad (including Rah Digga, Groove Armada and Trina). The words “hard,” “raw,” and “sexy” best describe the perverse scripting of Thug Misses' Black bodies. They are reactive, young, Black “down-for-whatever” females who, like their Thug and Ruffneck counterparts, are inviolable ruffians supposedly ready for any kind of confrontation or challenge, physical or otherwise. As they “hit the chronic” and “grip the 40s,” and do the things the male rappers do, they are using these gestures as an “alternative economy,” perhaps even a “prop,” but for them, it is part of the ensemble that constitutes the Thug image.⁴⁸ It comes along with the “black net cleavage, flawless skin, and coiffed hair” that bespeaks a certain maturity one might expect of a male-scripted heroine; however, it is their creation.⁴⁹ Essentially, they see themselves as warrior-princesses. The mythic Xena, Princess Warrior would be considered too soft for their tastes, but the idea resonates. Instead, Thug Misses are ghetto soldiers with an involutive split personality, both delicate and sexually pornographic as well as courageous and bold. They are not necessarily promiscuous just defined by their raw, sexualized disposition.

Even more profound is the masochism inherent in this sumptuous interplay of difference and devaluation. Black female rap artists have always functioned on the periphery of the rap music industry, so this reproduced image is meant to retrieve her agency and prove her worthiness while formulaically attracting consumers, because it is what consumers are used to viewing—Black women's bodies objectified and sexualized. Of the Thug Misses listed earlier, Rah Diggah, who perhaps is most like Xena, is the least likely to be scantily clad. She intentionally evacuates the site where her Black female body is seen as simply an object of male pleasure and attempts to teach her audience that thugging requires revolution and involves being in control. Self-perceived as one who will lead females away from their colonized location, their site of suffrage, through being a Thug, Rah Diggah calls herself “The Harriett Tubman of Hip Hop” in her song “Do the Ladies Run This.” Incidentally, even the title of the album signifies her interest in re-emplacing the anteriority or leadership of Black women in cultural production. In the vein of Homi Bhabha's postcolonial lines of thought, she along with other Thug Misses is attempting “to speak Outside the sentence or the sententious . . . to disturb the causality” and to mount a subaltern rebellion.⁵⁰

Rah Diggah was dubbed by *YRB* fanzine as the “Harriett Thugman” of Hip Hop. She perceives herself as an insurrectionist, re-possessing her Black body by taking control over her own lyrics and Thug persona. In concert with this Thug image, she also has developed a creative gangsta line of clothing called Rugged Apparel, combining cross-stitched jeans with chain-link chokers and sterling zippers and buttons topped off with a half-cocked brim.

On her debut album *Dirty Harriet*, she proclaims, “Black chick with intellect, who wanna match wits? Write my own rhymes so can't no nigga tell me shit.”⁵¹ By keep-

ing her persona “gangsta,” she ensures audiences will see her as neither weak, tender, nor overly effeminate nor one who is able to be overlooked. As an aside, the audiences she is directing her message at are mostly those that have come to be known as the “Black youth culture” despite the fact that non-Blacks represent the majority of gangsta music consumers.⁵² As mentioned previously, Digga attempts to counter the sexualized image that often accompanies the Thug Miss persona, and simply asserts herself as hardcore and lyrically savvy.

Somehow by seizing their own licenses to re-script the Black female body to be able to inflict torment while appearing impervious to pain, Thug Misses accomplish a subversive politic of corporeal representation and see themselves as having arisen as heroines in their own right among rap audiences, rather than forgotten shadows of the Thug or simply objects of sexual commodification. Thug Misses are modern hybrids of the Sapphire, Jezebel, and Brute. They are self-assured, independent, bad girls who supposedly do not tolerate nonsense. Unfortunately, this inversion of a codified patriarchy is underwhelming at times and so slippery, it can be easily be read as unimaginative and counterproductive. Although it is perhaps initially exciting to hear female rappers “rock mics” using the same formula of taunting the competition, exposing bravado, and skillfully rhyming about familiar themes, that does not take away from the fact that the formula is not inventive. Nonetheless, innovative capitalization and enhancement of the Thug image is the principal claim of female thug rappers. By eroticizing a hegemonic Thug fantasy and embodying it with a female standpoint, Thug Misses may have only divested themselves of any possibility of reclaiming true agency. Instead, they put themselves at risk to become lost once again in the shadows, but this time in their own poisoned reinvention of Black female bodies’ sexual mystique. To put it plainly, in many ways, the scripting of the Black female body in Hip Hop as a thug is derivative at best. It is merely emblematic of a master narrative—old guard, male representations of women as feisty, overreactive, sexualized mistresses. So, Hip Hop women’s counter-narrative occupies a space that simply aligns with the master narrative rather than running against it as we suspected it would.

Whether Thugs or Thug Misses, the contemporary brute image remains well intact. It is pervasive throughout Black popular culture and is one of the most intricate images to be found, because of its admirable resilience in the face of tribulation, yet its frequently demonstrative counter-affectionate, uncivil, unruly, and irresponsible inscriptions. For example, popular cultural images have taught consumers that the average Thug does not see women as potential companions deserving of commitment and love; instead they are considered “bitches,” and as such are mere commodities. Rap artists DMX and Sisqu articulate this point in the song “What These Bitches Want” on DMX’s sophomore album entitled . . . *and then there was X*. The rap says:

Aiyyo!! Dog, I meet bitches, discrete bitches. Street bitches, slash, Cocoa Puff sweet bitches (WHAT?) . . . I fuck with these hoes from a distance. The instant they start to catch feelings. I start to stealin they shit then I’m out just like a thief in the night. I sink my teeth in to bite. You thinkin life, I’m thinkin more like—whassup tonight? Come on ma, you know I got a wife. . . .⁵³

Even while keeping in mind that "rap music is the contemporary stage for the theatre of the powerless," it can also be argued that these artists and their producers are opportunists taking advantage of modern consumptive and voyeuristic audience impulses to witness violence and acquire pleasure from commodified sexual images that excite the senses.⁵⁴ Puzzlingly, Dyson is not so severe in his appraisal of these images; he seems to extol them, suggesting there is an evangelical call to arms afoot via Thug rap. In fact, he nimbly apprehends the critical practice of contextualizing and unraveling Thugs' motivations for thuggery. In the same breath in which he admits that gangsta rap music has been rightfully criticized for its vulgarity, commodification, and paralysis of Black women's bodies, he rationalizes that the complexity of these rappers' despondent backgrounds leads them to filter these images to the public so they can feed their families and monetarily uplift their communities.⁵⁵ Essentially, all they want to do is escape and give back to the ghetto enclaves from which they emerged. Though true for some artists, we are afraid that Dyson's sonorous critical deconstruction is potentially more damaging than assistive. We agree that all texts should be considered within context and by virtue of pretext, but it is entirely too uncritical to release gangsta and Thug rappers' sexual perniciousness from social critique and intellectual scrutiny. In our reading of his analysis, Dyson appears to have concocted an intellectual elixir that conveniently relieves gangsta rappers and the newer breed/genre of Hip Hop thugs from any responsibility.

It is not that the self-proclaimed Thug artists' experiences are not real; and it is not that the telling of their experiences should be avoided. It is also not the case that Thugs are without viable reason for their gangsta behavior. It is that the hyperfascination with this monolithic industry-driven inscription of blackness exposes many negatively scripted Black stereotypes. The fallout from this suggests a perhaps unintended artistic complicity. Both Dyson and Rose are correct in that Thug rappers and their producers have mutually exploited one another and that their artistry is evolving. The artists have cunningly duped the industry into buying a product that was initially thought to be uninteresting; however their compliance has consensually granted producers the opportunity to commit an even larger grievance via the perpetuation of imagery that is considered far from fantastical in the inscriptive gaze of the guardians of patriarchy.⁵⁶ The microcosm of Thugs and Thug Misses as bad boys and bad girls is unfolded via sexually-charged and violent Hip Hop narratives, and these popularized elegies do not exist in a vacuum. Due to the wide appeal of Black cultural expression, they dramatically affect and abet the deleterious inscriptions of Black bodies everywhere.

Rap and Hip Hop have become their own combined enterprise. This industry is a multibillion dollar institution that does generate positive outlets for personal expression, wonderful alternatives for struggling youth, and ameliorative psychological conditions for Black community well-being. It accomplishes this with the music of artists who function on the edge of the genre like Alicia Keys, Mary J. Blige, Erykha Badu, Indie Arie, as well as Jill Scott, and more centrally Sister Souljah, Lauryn Hill, Queen Latifah, Mos Def, Will Smith, Common, The Fugees, Wyclef, and others. However,

these artists and their most important “conscious rap” are a relatively small faction comprised of the exceptions, rather than the rule.⁵⁷ Thug elegists primarily occupy the contemporary landscape of Hip Hop music—they are the rule, considered the most authentic rap storytellers in the present era.⁵⁸

THE CONTEMPORARY STOCK MINSTREL THUG IN BLACK FILM

The Buck, Brute, or Thug, in all its manifestations, has also seized a distinct sphere of cultural production that serendipitously has been perpetuated in Hollywood blockbuster movies like *New Jack City*, *Harlem Nights*, *Boyz N the Hood*, *Crooklyn*, *Friday*, *Next Friday*, *Set It Off*, *The Wash*, *Baby Boy*, and a whole slew of Black popular and independent films. Yet the Thug’s sometimes maniacal, perennially dystopic “penis-as-animal,” behaviors only recapitulate and exacerbate the public paranoia about the beast-like nature of the Black male as brute.⁵⁹ The silver screen is exploding with these iconographic images, preoccupied with a Black representational gaze fixated on almost nothing but the ugly aspects of Black existence that celebrate trifling ghetto living and poverty, neither of which are indicative of a composite Black culture, but pretend to be.⁶⁰

Here, it would be easy to cite devastating or optimistic statistics concerning the well-being of Blacks in order to illustrate by comparison actual versus depicted Black life.⁶¹ Additionally, the spectacular consumption of rap music is another avenue of discussion that would permit a segue into conversation about the commodification of Black bodies.⁶² It might even be intriguing to talk about the ironies of capitalism and Black youth or expound upon the parallel of Thug life to the self-inflicted and painfully disengaging experience and physical bodily inscriptions imposed via tattooing and body piercing.⁶³ However, as the citations foretell, this work has already been done, and accomplished exceedingly well we must add. Instead, we have chosen to analyze a heuristic as well as an intriguing extension of the discussion of Thug-related Hip Hop artistry—the Thug-induced “pimp-whore complex” in Black pimp films.

AN ANALYSIS OF *AMERICAN PIMP*: MINSTREL BRUTE PERSONIFIED

The recent proliferation of pimp-related films remarkably reproduces grotesque dialectics between subject and object as well as historical and contemporary corporeal representations. In consonance with the minstrel brute, the Black stud, playa, mack, and pimp images are all Black bucks trying to come to terms with masculinity. A common scapegoat used to justify these roles is emasculation. According to Robert Staples, Black men incurred psychological damage from enslavement, which left them as undignified expatriates in their own homes, removed from familial responsibilities except as breadwinner, and in some severe cases castrated.⁶⁴ As a result, he was emasculated, dethroned if you will. Anxious to recapture the ultimate attribute and sign of a man—control—his only recourse was to seize reckless control over every visible

aspect of his life from women to materialistic resources.

Ellis Cose counters Staples' redemption logic and contends, "those with a sense of history know that the stud image did not spring from the Black community but originated with Whites searching for signs that Blacks were intellectually inferior and morally degenerate—and therefore suitable for use as slaves."⁶⁵ There is little relief resulting from either assertion or rationale especially when Black filmmakers facilitate the perpetuation of the stud, thereby reproducing Black male subjectivity and substituting white hegemony for Black hegemony. The truth is the stud is like the playa and the pimp, both of which are embodiments of masculine representation and regulation. The male pimp, mack, playa, and stud unscrupulously seek out and secure sexual liaisons with multiple consenting, but still very emotionally vulnerable partners. Hence, as in *American Pimp*, it is highly unlikely that two playas will be sexually engaged by one another. That destroys the power-driven sensation, the libidinal thrill, and the rush that the playa experiences when he is able to accumulate multiple partners, then emotionally destabilize and objectify them so that he remains psychically detached from the activity. For him, it is a pimp game, nothing more than a leisurely activity comprised of paternally bound rules and objectives. He chooses to become the master gamesman, rhetorically recasting the dangerous act of prostitution as play. The idea of play, as signified in the commonly used phrase "pimp game," has powerful resonance with sex and pleasure as entertainment devices. It is severely beyond the range of conventional tropes related to men "scoring" with women.⁶⁶ Women are treated as mere game pieces, chips, or tokens on the region-bound game boards Thugs use within the game of survival.

Metaphorically, Thugs are the players who mobilize and control the movements of the game pieces. The Thugs set the rules, revise the rules; also, they often play the role of banker. Sometimes Thugs play for large cash rewards and sometimes they do "nickel pimping," which involves mooching off of women for favors, money, shelter, or some other material resource.⁶⁷ Thugs are selfish; the primary concern of a Thug is his own survival, so he will do whatever it takes to make that happen. This is evidenced in several pimp films of the late twentieth century.

With the release of White filmmaker Beeban Kidron's *Hookers*, *Hustlers*, *Pimps and Their Johns* came a spate of copycat films directed by Blacks who were convinced their depiction of prostitution as a "pimp game" was even more authentic than the last.⁶⁸ These movies included Dre Robinson's *Pimps*, Brent Owens' *Pimps Up, Hos Down*, and the Hughes Brothers' Albert and Allen more noted film documentary *American Pimp*, for which motion picture studio executives competed. Common to all of these films, there is a celebration of unmediated misogyny and pandering. With this surge of epics, there is also an energetic embrace of profound masculine anxieties associated with control and domination of mostly Black women; hence the present examination of the Black pimp-Black whore complex. Rather than systematically and intelligently interrogate the abrupt interception of Black agency in defining Black bodies, films like these suggest many Black artists including filmmakers and musicians are vying for elitist subjectivity over portions of the composite community. In center-

ing the masculine *subject* as pimp and marginalizing the female *object* as prostitute, any collective sense of the black body is fractured.

Aware of this, the Hughes brothers explained to an audience of moviegoers why they chose to present the film as they did. One of the bonus tracks of the DVD version of *American Pimp* showed this live interview and discussion with Albert and Allen Hughes, the directors of the documentary. They explained that they purposefully presented the film with a nonjudgmental tone. They also noted they were fully aware of the negative consequences a film like this could have, so they chose a documentary mode that would allow the pimps and prostitutes to speak for themselves while exonerating the directors from responsibility for what was said. The Hughes brothers' interest in directing this film was intricately tied to their childhood during which they witnessed pimping firsthand by a close relative. They wanted to expand the audience's imagination to capture the reality that there are rampant occurrences of prostitution across the United States and this activity often goes unchecked. However, they also wanted to invite outgroup audiences into a world they would probably never come to know. Defying the directorial urge to tidy up filmic endings, the Hughes brothers reveal their conscious choice to leave a resentfully painful denouement with the audience. They intended for the audience to feel as though this situation was unresolved, and it is, especially with each revitalized repetition of pimp imagery.

Just as Black slaves functioned as devices of labor for their master, the reproduction of the machinery of enslavement is exemplified in several pimp films in which the Black male is owner and the Black female is property. Her body and mind is summarily exploited, abused, and treated as an instrument. She is treated inhumanely, denigrated with slurs like "bitch" and "ho," though as the Hughes brothers show us in *American Pimp*, these are allegedly considered affectionate nicknames in the "pimp game."

It does not require a sophisticated analysis to lay testimony to such a transparent straw argument. Just as "nigger" and "boy" were affixed derogatory labels used to describe, besmirch, and refer to Black men during slavery, "bitch" and "ho" function to sabotage and subjugate Black women's bodies, minds, spirits, and hence their identities. But, the more sophisticated question is what does this signify about the economy of the gaze—to name and see her as a female dog or whore? In response to a larger project concerning the dismissal of women's standpoints within a limited range of patriarchal epistemologies, Judith Butler indirectly ruminates on this question and surmises:

Women are the "sex" which is not "one." Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*. In other words, women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity. Within a language that rests on univocal signification, the female sex constitutes the unrestrainable and undesignatable. . . . This association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female

sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed becomes paradoxically the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom.⁶⁹

Consequently, the paradoxically autonomous male body grants itself permission to name, and out of functional necessity, he initiates controlling and persecutory practices that complement his derogatory linguistic rendering of the female body. Remember, in the pimp game, she is merely a token.

Giving credit to the novel *Iceburg Slim, American Pimp* is interspersed with excerpts from blaxploitation films like *Willie Dynamite*, *Slaughter's Big Rip Off*, and *The Mack*. *The Mack* has a title character explicating the "game" as follows: "Anybody can control a woman's body, but the key is to control her mind."⁷⁰ In fact, in the documentary *American Pimp*, each of the 30 pimps and prostitutes interviewed suggested that the pimping "game" is properly "played" only when the female prostitute understands she is simply a sexual apparatus. As noted with the Thug, the Pimp's hallmark characteristic is desensitization or emotional paralysis. He does not feel, and as hooks asserts with respect to adolescent boys, there is violence in this "abusive insistence . . . that they not feel."⁷¹ In allowing the pimp to control her perceptions and self-esteem, she forces herself into a precarious position where she is unable to experience unconditional and unselfish love. Love only complicates the situation. In excusing the behaviors of pimps, several prostitutes explained the pimp's role as a protector, an overseer, suggesting prostitutes could choose to be free of this enterprise, but then they would be unsafe, especially if they stayed in this profession. One pimp described the archetypal pimp's duty as follows: "I supply the food. I supply the shelter, and I supply the medical bills. I supply everything. All she gotta supply is the money."⁷² In this tragicomical synopsis of pimp responsibilities, we return to the Black male's dependency on women to facilitate his survival. All he has to do to fulfill his obligations is be a ruthless, cold-hearted, mind-controlling, objectifying, hypermasculine mack of emotionally and psychologically vulnerable women. Upon closer examination though, this complicit behavior carries with it an implicit interposition of identity negotiation, which suggests a connection between the Thug's anxiety about his socially subjugated masculinity, his maintenance of the pimp image/style, and his psychological investiture in the pimp-whore complex. The disquieting reality, as Cornel West puts it, is

For most young Black men, power is acquired by styling their bodies over space and time in such a way that their bodies reflect a uniqueness and provoke fear in others. To be "bad" is good not simply because it subverts the language of the dominant White culture but also because it imposes a unique kind of order for young Black men on their own distinctive chaos and solicits an attention that makes others pull back with some trepidation. This young Black male style is a form of self-identification and resistance in a hostile culture; it also is an instance of machismo identity ready for violent encounters. Yet in a patriarchal society, machismo identity is expected and even exalted—as with Rambo and Reagan. In this way, the Black male search for power often reinforces the myth of Black male

sexual prowess—a myth that tends to subordinate Black and White women as objects of sexual pleasure.⁷³

West is absolutely correct to suggest that Black macho rigidity is entangled in Black men's quest to be acknowledged, valued, and emotionally secure. He is only secure when he is able to reconstruct knowledge-forms and narratives that fit his fantasies about retrieving custody over his own social and ontological agency. This is evidenced during *American Pimp* with the pimp-whore relationship creation narratives.

The documentary shows pimps who mouth platitudes concerning the origins of and their participation in pimping. These wide-ranging narratives glorified pimping. One "genesis of pimping" story was told of Black male slavehands directing enslaved girls to have sex with the White slavemaster in order to get physically close enough to him to retaliate by stabbing or trying to hurt him. Another pimp suggested pimping began in ghettos as a way to escape the financial ruins of ghetto life while plunging into entrepreneurial endeavors. One pimp from Atlanta named Sir Captain opined that pimping must have evolved from a need to overcome the street life by mastering it. He audaciously remarked, "The street game is the Black man's game. . . . It's the only game he [the White man] can't control. He can control all the dope dealers in the world. He can't control the pimp." These prefatory ruminations lead to a discussion of how pimps were introduced to and how they "play" the "game." Some claimed an innate capacity and drive to be a pimp, while others suggested they learned about it later in life and worked hard to secure respect as a pimp. It should be mentioned that some pimps, like one named "Bishop" from Chicago, who was a pimp for over twenty years before he was ordained as a minister, would take some of their profits and give back to their communities by purchasing and distributing free school supplies to the children and generally ensuring the safety of the families and children in the community. Though his pimping was well-known, his charitable and altruistic acts of kindness salvaged his relationship with the community and permitted a sort of redemption of his image. Respect is a term that reverberated throughout the documentary—respect from prostitutes, from the pimp's family, from the surrounding community, and from other pimps who validated and uplifted him. As viewers, we play witness to a "Players Ball" in Milwaukee in which hundreds of well-manicured men dressed in fur coats, long hats, and snakeskin shoes attend a gala where they would compete (by showcasing their scantily clad, booty-shaking prostitutes) for trophies as rewards for acquiring and managing a bevy of prostitutes. It is suggested these balls take place throughout the United States each year, from San Francisco and Las Vegas to Milwaukee and New York. The predominant tropes being presented in *American Pimp* are disquieting. The reality is that sexual deviancy, inherent in the pimp-whore complex as exhibited professionally with a pimp and his prostitutes or via interpersonal relationships, robs the transformative potential and liberatory possibilities of vulnerable Black bodies and causes us to regress to the blaxploitation era of filmic caricatures like the Superfly, Mack, Shaft, and Sweetback who perhaps were useful and heroic in their own time, but contemporarily are misfits.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE PIMP IN BLAXPLOITATION FILMS

It is important to recognize that blaxploitation is an intentional anti-establishment genre just as rap music was when it began. It is difficult to make the argument that Hip Hop began this way, but its stylistic elements, swagger and youth appeal, as well as its innovative lexical form and content have significantly transformed a sizeable portion of the present generation of individuals 35 and under, and in that way it may be accurate to say Hip Hop has “bucked the system.” As discussed earlier the pure, bottom-line profit generated by mainstream record labels that support Hip Hop alone warrants reconsideration of any claim that Hip Hop has completely bucked the system. Nonetheless, thug-related Hip Hop music seems to have taken notes from blaxploitation films as much of the early images of the smooth-talking pimp were present in these films.

In retrospect or from afar one might think of the wildly clad bevy of film protagonists during this period as nothing more than a gallery of criminal misfits, pimps and prostitutes, and ghetto-dwelling savages trying to assume a position of authority within the underbelly of society just for the sake of having power. Yet, that would be a hasty generalization. While the characters are in fact presented this way, their roles are purposefully scripted this way in order to represent the kind of retaliation that cannot be controlled. No one controls the *Superfly*, the *Mack*, *Shaft*, or *Sweetback*. Whether they embody the role of a drug kingpin, pimp, detective or whatever, they are not the docile, meek Black male protagonists of the 1960s whose first instinct is deference to Whites and “playing by the rules.” Their characters develop their own rules and force the Man to deal with them on their terms. It compels the audience to side with the villain because the villain is presented as the true underdog who seems to have no other options available to escape the trap of a structurally disadvantaged lifestyle but to become the embodiment of the very thing the establishment despises and fears. It is a direct message to White society that if White xenophobia and racism is rooted in this unfounded fear that Blacks are inherently violent, criminal, reckless, savage, intimidating, and flawed just because of how they look, then since there is no way to interrupt that cycle without Blacks becoming a victim of it we will fight back by being the quintessential object of White fear. It is the only domain where Whites lacked control over the Black body, but ironically these representations were so well-aligned with White stereotypes about Blacks that White audiences curiously supported them wholeheartedly at the box office. The same thing is happening with Hip Hop music. Hip Hop artists are contemporarily complying with racial scripts about Black male and female bodies by redefining their bodies as delinquent, unafraid, violent, criminal, and reckless. The unintended consequence of this is that the music has captured the hearts and minds of youth of ALL nationalities and backgrounds, so Hip Hop artists have become the intoxicating symbols of rebellion, fun, self-centeredness, and individualism. At the same time, as their audience grows and with the emergence of every lucrative album slinging ghetto rhymes, the underdog status of thug Hip Hop artists dissipates. Even after we are moved by the necessary coupling of profanity and ghetto narratives, it

becomes less and less believable that these artists truly represent the underclass.

In the same way that Hip Hop has been a lucrative enterprise, film studios during the blaxploitation era made millions of dollars and while all-black casts benefited, Black images and representations on film both regressed and movie-going audiences in the 2000s still witness some of the residue and the indelible impact of these pathological images. The blaxploitation era did not as much initiate this line of stereotyping as they did significantly expand it and master it on film. Contemporary thug-related Hip Hop music will leave the same legacy to future generations.

The conflicting nature of both Hip Hop and blaxploitation films is rooted in how and why it should be celebrated. These entertainment utilities represent brands of artistry that are bold, unafraid, energizing, empowering, and supportive of Black artists and actors. Unlike films where Blacks simply played in roles in which they were expected to "act White" prior to blaxploitation, music, from jazz, rock-n-roll, and blues to gospel, reggae, and rhythm and blues (R&B), has always been indisputably influenced and enhanced by Blacks. Although many Black music artists did not own or maintain copyright to their music, and therefore lack creative and financial control, their contributions were clear. Black audiences of both music and film had become both used to and fed up with the servile status given to Blacks. They wanted the kind of respect that White artists and actors seemed to get without asking.

The similarities between Black music and film are not only compelling because of this seizing of agency (which is a major factor), but also simply because Black film has always been influenced by music, and vice versa. For example, it is important to recall that not all blaxploitation films were male-dominated and geared toward the stud, mack, player image. In fact, a slew of films such as *Mahogany*, *Foxy Brown*, *Sparkle*, and *Coffy* introduced a Black heroine who was even more sexy and doubly brutal when compared to the male protagonists in other blaxploitation films. The soundtracks complimented this edgy, yet sensuous tenor to this genre. The music in these films became extremely significant after Earth, Wind and Fire performed the score for *Sweet Sweetback Badaass Song* and Isaac Hayes was awarded an Oscar for developing the score for *Shaft*. Every studio executive wanted this unique rhythmic sound seemingly most readily available among Black artists like Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, Quincy Jones, Staples Singers, Donny Hathaway, Aretha Franklin, and others. The soundtracks were produced with the hope that they could achieve the fame and fortune of Hayes' LP. This was never repeated to the same magnitude. Yet the audience excitement and energy in anticipation of these films was unprecedented and that is largely due to this marriage between Black music and Black film.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

It is not surprising that contemporary Hip Hop music and Black film resonate with one another. They always have in one way or another. They certainly are commenting on the same cultural reality despite the narrow focus on one type of Black reality—ghetto life. It is significant, however, that they coalesce around certain

themes despite the generational differences. Generational legacies are being left with every new iteration, every new Hip Hop elegy, and every new thug film. The fascinating thing is that this thug persona is transcended by the artists themselves. More and more Hip Hop artists like Master P, Jay-Z, DMX, Ja-Rule, LL Cool J, Snoop Doggy Dog, Queen Latifah, Lil Bow Wow, Xhibit, Ice Cube, and others have become prolific actors who continue to vie for the minds and dollars of the larger public. Their messages shift. We get the sex-crazed, wil'in out pimp-player whose anthem calls out for the dogs and the ho's within Hip Hop music, then we see a range of positive and negative images of these artists in film. The ultimate message is to "chase that paper" (i.e., make money) regardless of how you get it, which makes the whole Hip Hop persona seem theatrical and unreal. Nonetheless, the realness of the effects of thug-related artistry is still quite devastating.

To cast it another way, plurisignant hegemonic inscriptions of Black bodies, no matter whether at the hands of White or Black producers, are still tragic. We, the populace of moviegoers, Hip Hop fans, and general consumers of Black popular culture, are still debilitated with the emergence of each reinvented minstrel figure and each recreated and lauded act of misogyny. Indeed, even at its best in popular culture, when paternalism was supposed to make the public feel safe, protected, and affirmed, instead it has shown us hypervigilant, narcissistic, and exploitative metanarratives that contravene any attempt at liberation.⁷⁴ It is not that we are doomed, but that we are survivors of epistemic and cosmological violence; yet, the incipient healing from the scars inflicted on us is being routinely interrupted by inscriptive regimes of truth and authenticity in popular culture. We masochistically return to popular culture to be pleased by its modernized romanticization of heterosexual men's misogyny, hegemony, and colonization. Hence, there is a mutual dependence on one another that may be explained as the I-Other, victimizer-victim, scripter-inscribed dialectic. Audiences' penchant for accepting these images is akin to saying, as singer Bill Withers croons, "if it feels this good gettin' used, then use me up." This involution should stimulate hyper-awareness of the emotive conditions in which the aesthetic is confined; however, we are seemingly apathetic or blinded by the motives, or perhaps just forgiving of the scripters who have exposed us to the destructive mythofoms we now accept as real and verifiable inscriptions.

We also forget about how our sexuality is confounded by this discussion of sex. For heterosexuals, it is easy to overlook the heterosexual tendencies unitarily displayed in filmic depictions of sexuality. This is certainly parallel to Whites overlooking the privileges granted to them and being stupefied by any assertion that others are not equally privileged. Heterosexual experiences possess privileged space in popular culture, and homoerotic experiences are relegated to secondary or tertiary levels of importance. Increasingly, this is changing, but the incontrovertible reality is these ontic relations and their economies are still fairly new to consumers of mass media. We devour the nude when it is presented heterosexually, and we voyeuristically embrace it when it is presented to us in shocking ways, such as with the 2 live Crew or in *Pimps Up, Hos Down*. It directly affects our memory and desire, our fascinations

about the sexual object, and potentially our treatment of women. Without our conscious volition, we find ourselves seeing women as objects, gazing at them sexually even when there is no mediated device to stimulate such an observation. We then comply with the hegemonic inscriptions of women's bodies. Again, it is what we do with the inscriptions that is potentially dangerous.

There must be a rewriting of Black male and female bodies in popular media. In seeking this desiderate agency to corporeally re-inscribe culturally progressive meanings, particular attention must be paid especially to patriarchal effacement and materialization of these bodies in the consumptive interests of market values like competition, greed, money, and power. It is hardly enough for artists like N.W.A., Luther Campbell, Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, P. Diddy, and Master P to own their own record companies and labels. Hip Hop music of the ilk described here is readily accessible to American youth, youth who sometimes are searching for acceptance. This image is popular, and when embraced often comes with a certain degree of respect.⁷⁵ Yet, the temperament of thug-related Hip Hop music disengages audiences who are not enchanted by the misogynistic impulses of the genre. Consequently, there is a moral, social, and cultural estrangement experienced by those who first hear Hip Hop music and wonder if its nihilism, sexual perversion, and apolitical tenor is simply the result of a generational shift or if this genre of music really does offer poison to our youth.

Invariably, we are left with romanticized depictions of ghetto life that only seem attractive because of the ghetto dwellers resilience, perseverance, and down-to-earth dispositions. From this menagerie, we come to understand from a middle-class perspective that we can expect a chilling candor that bespeaks courage and fear at the same time—courage to sustain and fear of never being treated as capable, competent, normal human beings. This dialectic emerges and centers around commodified Black bodies that have been scripted as pathological.

For too long, Blacks have looked at themselves through the eyes of others. Historically, Blacks have had to detach themselves from the scripted stereotypes about them that are presented in popular media and elsewhere. As we have explored throughout this paper, two conspicuous effects have surfaced as a result of negative scripts in the popular media: distancing and complicity.

One result has been that Blacks have distanced themselves from the images they see portrayed on film. Yet collectively we are so intrigued by these plastic inscriptions that we support them. Many Blacks still find humor in *Bringing Down the House* and *Head of State*. Furthermore, we are entertained by movies like *Baby Boy* despite their formulaic typecasting, harmful implications, and stereotypical portrayals of Black bodies. In fact, we are left with few filmic alternatives that depict Black lives positively and productively. The sad message we are sending the entertainment industry, when we support these films with our dollars, is that we are prepared to be degraded. When films and music yield millions of dollars in profit, the only way to read this is as a measure of success; hence this leads to even more degrading images.

Another result has been complicity. Producers of negative scripts about Black bodies, some of whom are Black, have constructed a unifocal perspective of blackness

that sees it in its most pathologized form. When criticized for having done this, typical responses are that the product is simply for entertainment purposes or that it is representative of a very real and vivid portrait of Black life. They often fail to comment on how this one-dimensional portraiture debilitates Black identities by scripting Black bodies as deviant, criminal, aloof, degenerate, depraved and deprived. No one takes responsibility for the negative effects these images have on Black lives and American race relations. In fact, there appears to be complicity with these images, which only serves to isolate and polarize Black bodies from what can be understood as normal unless we define normal Black identities as universally ghettoized. The result has been Black entertainers and producers who are trading consciousness for profit, and this is not the sole conundrum or fault of Hip Hop music or Black films. This is endemic to the entire entertainment industry where we witness pockets of responsible entertainment between debilitating discourses that disprivilege impressionable minds and succumb to consumerist impulses.

We need positive, healthy, productive, and liberatory discourses to accompany agency. It is not enough to have a Hip Hop clothing line or record label. Perhaps, our saving grace is that although inscribed bodies appear intractable, they can be transformed. What we have sought to illustrate is that transfigurations of Black bodies have essentially rotated hegemony, flipping it on its side; hence the reinventive, or subletting, Black corporeal scripts discussed here have maintained the same posture as the previously inscribed ones produced by Whites; they have moved in place, not forward. Yet the powerful will and resilience of thug rappers to be appreciated for their indigenous experiences is encouraging. There is no salvation in losing connection with one's cultural self. What is most needed is a popular cultural transformation that will couple retrieved agency and potent discourse with emancipatory will.

NOTES

¹bell hooks, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* (New York, 2003), 222.

²Samuel Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago, 1998), 154–55.

³Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture* (New York, 1994), 71.

⁴Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990); Gwendolyn Foster-Dixon, "Troping the Body: Etiquette Texts and Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 13 (1993): 79–96; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, 1994); Judith Hamera, "The Ambivalent, Knowing Male Body in the Pasadena Dance Theatre," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 14 (1994): 197–209; M. J. Smythe, "Talking Bodies: Body Talk at Bodyworks," *Communication Studies* 46 (1995): 245–60.

⁵Watkins, *Representing*.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, 1995).

⁸Michael Hecht, Ronald L. Jackson, and Sidney Ribeau, *Black Communication: Exploring Identity and Culture* (Mahwah, 2003).

⁹One of many laudatory and complimentary words referring to the greatness or splendor of something

- being described, David Toop, *The Rap Attack* (Boston, 1984).
- ¹⁰Todd, Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You: Popular Culture from the Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington, 1997); Colin MacCabe, *The Eloquence of the Vulgar* (London, 1999); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Popular Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, 1994); Watkins, *Representing*.
- ¹¹Stuart Hall, "What Is This Black in Black Popular Culture?" in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle, 1992), 21–36.
- ¹²David Trend, "Nationalities, Pedagogies and Media," in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (New York, 1994), 231.
- ¹³James Allen, Leon F. Litwack, Hilton Als, Leon F. Litwack, Hilton Als, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Twin Palms Publishers, 2000).
- ¹⁴Robyn Wiegman, "Black Bodies/American Commodities: Gender, Race and the Bourgeois Ideal in Contemporary Film," in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and American Cinema*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Urbana, 1990).
- ¹⁵Felipe Smith, *American Body Politics* (Athens, 1998).
- ¹⁶Michael Eric Dyson, "Be Like Mike?: Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire," in *Between Borders*, ed. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, 119–26; Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bobos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York, 1992).
- ¹⁷Watkins, *Representing*.
- ¹⁸Herman Gray, "Television, Black Americans and the American Dream," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (Summer 1989): 376–86; Paul Gilroy, "Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of the Changing Same," *Black Music Research Journal* 10 (Winter 1990): 128–31.
- ¹⁹Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?*; Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (Hopewell, 1990); Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (New York, 2000).
- ²⁰Trick Daddy. 2001. *Thugs are US*. Slip-N-Slide Records.
- ²¹Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York, 2002), 188.
- ²²*Ibid*.
- ²³Dyson, "Be Like Mike?," 119–26.
- ²⁴DMX, Ja Rule and DMX. 2005. *Murdergram Lyrics*. Def Jam Recordings.
- ²⁵Melbourne S. Cummings & Abhik Roy, (2002). "Manifestations of Afrocentricity in Rap Music," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 13 (2002): 56–79; William Eric Perkins, *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia, 1996).
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- ²⁸Mark McPhail, "Complicity: The Theory of Negative Difference," *Howard Journal of Communication* 3 (1992): 5.
- ²⁹Mark McPhail, "From Complicity to Coherence: Rereading the Rhetoric of Afrocentricity," *Western Journal of Communication* 6, no. 2 (1998): 115.
- ³⁰Mark McPhail, "Complicity," 1.
- ³¹Alex Ogg and David Upshall, *The Hip Hop Years: A History of Rap* (London: 2001).
- ³²Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York, 1998).
- ³³Perkins, *Droppin' Science*.
- ³⁴Ogg and Upshall, *The Hip Hop Years*.
- ³⁵Rose, *Black Noise*, 60.
- ³⁶Trend, "Nationalities," 138.
- ³⁷"Playa" is the same as player as in someone who plays the field, alternating positions. The metaphor

implies the relational activity of a polygamous male. "Dog" is a term one would think would be considered despicable, but the term, when used among some males has been altered to mean someone who is cool and is part of a posse of males who share similar interests. Playa and Dog are used pretty much interchangeably in Hip Hop music, just as Thug and Ruffneck are. George, *Hip Hop America*.

³⁸James Jones, "The New Ghetto Aesthetic," *Wide Angle* 13 (Spring 1991): 32-43.

³⁹Ja Rule. 2001. *Bitch Betta Have My Money*. AMG Records.

⁴⁰Ja Rule. 2001. *Thug Life*. Def Jam Records.

⁴¹Neal, *Soul Babies*, 187.

⁴²DMX and Dyme. 1998. *Good Girls, Bad Boys. And then there was X*. Def Jam Records.

⁴³Stagolee is the muscular, mythic hero in Black folktales who, armed with rhythmic skill and profanity, intimidates all would-be foes. See Hecht, Jackson and Ribeau's, *Black Communication* and Lester's *Urban Images* for more details.

⁴⁴Dyson, "Be Like Mike?," Rose, *Black Noise*.

⁴⁵Mark Shelton, "Can't Touch This! Representations of the Black Female Body in Urban Rap Videos," *Popular Music & Society* 21 (Spring 1997): 111.

⁴⁶Lil' Kim. 2000. *Notorious Kim*. Undereas/Atlantic Records.

⁴⁷"Thug Misses" is the title of female rap artist and Tampa, Florida native Khia's 2002 album. The instant hit "My Neck, My Back" is a song filled with sexual innuendo. Ruff Ryders is a rap artist syndicate comprised of about a dozen rappers like Eve, Swizz Beats (the producer), Chivon, Wah Dean, Timbaland, Bubba Sparxxx, and JadaKiss.

⁴⁸Shelton, "Can't Touch This!," 111.

⁴⁹Ibid, 113.

⁵⁰Homi Bhabha, "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York, 1992), 56-68.

⁵¹Elektra/Wea. 1999. *Dirty Harriet*. Elektra Records.

⁵²Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of Black identity* (New York, 1996).

⁵³DMX, *What These Bitches Want*.

⁵⁴Rose, *Black Noise*, 101.

⁵⁵Dyson, "Be Like Mike?"

⁵⁶Ross and Rose, *Microphone Fiends*.

⁵⁷Cummings and Roy, "Manifestations of Afrocentricity in Rap Music," 56-79.

⁵⁸Neal, *Soul Babies*; Watkins, *Representing*.

⁵⁹Susan Bordo, "Reading the Male Body," in *The Male Body: Features, Destinies, Exposures*, ed. L. Goldstein (Ann Arbor, 1994), 270.

⁶⁰Watkins, *Representing*.

⁶¹William Pinar, *The Gender of Racial Politics and Violence in America: Lynching, Prison Rape and Crisis of Masculinity* (New York, 2001); Peter Lang, Neil Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchell, *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences* (Washington, 2001).

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⁶³Watkins, *Representing*.

⁶⁴Robert Staples, *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* (San Francisco, 1982).

- ⁶⁵Ellis Cose, *The Rage of a Privileged Class: Why Do Prosperous Blacks Still Have the Blues?* (New York, 1995), 158.
- ⁶⁶Deborah Borisoff and Dan Hahn, "Thinking with the body: Sexual Metaphors," *Communication Quarterly* 41 (Spring 1993): 253-60.
- ⁶⁷Joseph Scott and James B. Stewart, "The Pimp-Whore Complex in Everyday Life," in *Crisis in Black Sexual Politics*, ed. Nathan Hare and Julia Hare (San Francisco, 1989), 57-62.
- ⁶⁸*Pimps and Their Johns* is the only one in the list that is produced and directed by whites.
- ⁶⁹Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), 9-12.
- ⁷⁰Michael Campus. 1973. *The Mack*. New Line Home Video.
- ⁷¹hooks, *Rock My Soul*, 195.
- ⁷²Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes. 2000. *American Pimp*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.
- ⁷³Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York, 1993), 305-06.
- ⁷⁴Michael Awkward, "Black Male Trouble," in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*, ed. J. K. Gardiner (New York, 2002), 290-304.
- ⁷⁵Watkins, *Representing*.