

**MCs & Marx:
Examining Rap from a Historical Materialistic Approach**

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April 29, 2016

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Abstract:

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Hip-Hop culture, and especially the genre of rap music, is too often dismissed and denounced without being properly examined and understood. However, if engaged respectfully and thoughtfully, rap music can help us understand some of the complexities of American culture, especially with regards to race, economics, and consumerist religion.

In this thesis, I inspect rap using Karl Marx’s historical materialism. This approach assumes that a society’s economic base, its material conditions, determines its superstructure, like culture, politics, religion, etc. Utilizing this methodological approach, in addition to studying other academic works on hip-hop, I analyzed a variety of rappers and their lyrics. After months of research, I have concluded that hip-hop is largely a reflection of its originators’ economic situations – or, in Marxist terms, hip-hop is a superstructure of its pioneers’ economic base. Because a culture’s values reflect its economic base, I believe that hip-hop and its consumerism have, in a sense, replaced the role of religion as one of the primary ways to present and define oneself.

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1. Introduction

In an interview with *The New York Times*, hip-hop pioneer Slick Rick noted the rebellious roots of hip-hop. “Hip-hop disrupted the order of things,” Slick Rick said. “It was the pulpit, and if you put the right person in front of the pulpit, they can speak for the youth of the planet” (Gonzalez). Kanye West, a rapper who has famously declared, “I am a God,” is one of the most famous artists at hip-hop’s pulpit today. Admittedly, Kanye West probably isn’t a divine being, but I believe that Kanye can be classified as a sort of religious leader. To Kanye West’s question in his song “Gorgeous” - “Is hip-hop just a euphemism for a new religion?” I would answer yes. While there are many explicitly Christian rappers, like Lecrae, this paper will focus more on mainstream hip-hop, which is mostly secular.

Of all genres of music, few, if any, are criticized as much as rap music. Bill O’Reilly, Lynne Cheney, Oprah, Tipper Gore, and Bill Cosby are among hip-hop’s haters - and they’re far from alone. Still, while acknowledging the problematic “holy trinity of contemporary rap” – women, drugs, and bling – sociology professor and ordained minister Michael Eric Dyson notes, “[W]e can’t pretend that the “bling bling,” or the materialism, of hip hop culture grew out of nowhere. It springs in part from people being squeezed into economic deprivation and hungering for more material emblems, trinkets, symbols, and rewards” (Dyson 8, 76). Especially in hip-hop, consumerism has, in a way, replaced religion. As Kathryn Lofton wrote, “In the United States, consumer culture has effectively become the primary articulation of human values, and religious life has rightly been described as a marketplace” (Lofton).

Building upon this point, and drawing inspiration from Karl Marx’s “The German Ideology,” I hope to examine hip-hop from a historical materialistic approach. With the help of Karl Marx’s historical materialism, I will argue that hip-hop is largely a reflection of the

economic situation of its pioneers, that in many ways hip-hop has replaced religion, and that hip-hop often acts as an ‘opiate for the masses,’ as Marx famously described religion.

As a warning, this paper will quote explicit language, including the n-word, for the sake of authenticity and academic honesty.

2. What Is Hip-Hop?

Traditionally, hip-hop culture is generally understood through four elements: rapping, breakdancing, graffiti, and DJing (also known as turn-tabling) (Dyson, 71). Fashion, as shown in the documentary *Fresh Dressed*, is also often included as a significant part of hip-hop culture. Similarly, in his *Gospel of Hip Hop*, KRS-One includes dances, raps, tags (graffiti), DJ, beats, fashion, and language as elements of hip-hop as well (KRS-ONE 6). However, in this essay, I will focus solely on the rap music aspect of hip-hop culture, and use the terms ‘rap’ and ‘hip-hop’ interchangeably.

Rutgers sociologist Katrina Hazzard-Donald defines hip-hop as “an expressive cultural genre originating among marginalized African American youth” (“Rise”). According to Michigan State’s African American Studies professor Geneva Smitherman, hip-hop “grew out of African oral tradition and other forms of black culture, as well as a long history of interaction between black and Latino urban culture, originating in the Bronx, New York” (“Rise”) (Dyson, 71). In the 1970s, hip-hop started and spread through popular block parties in New York City (which were at least partly made possible because of the economic reality in the area, which can arguably be described as ‘ghettoization’ through racist housing policies). During this time of economic deprivation, Jeff Chang writes in his award-winning *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, “The optimism of the civil rights movement and the conviction of the Black and Brown Power movements gave way to a defocused rage and a long exhaustion” (Chang, 13). Chang points out

that, by the mid-1970s, the average per capita income in the South Bronx was only half of the New York City average and only forty percent of the nationwide average – and the official youth unemployment rate hit 60 percent, with some advocates claiming that the real number was closer to 80 percent (Chang, 13). In the early decades of hip hop, Dyson writes, “budding MCs faced the cruel consequences of Ronald Reagan’s voodoo economics, the alleged benefits of which never trickled down to working and poor people as advertised” – which brings to mind Jay Electronica’s line in “Swagger Jackson’s Revenge” – “What a pity, the hope on a politician's tongue Never ever trickles down the city.” Dyson continues, “Hip hop’s original MCs often grappled with the low economic growth of the seventies and a vicious recession in the early eighties, high inflation and interest rates, energy crises, unforgivably high unemployment rates for black males, and the bottoming out of the manufacturing sector in an economy that brutally transitioned to a service industry where the high end excluded poor and undereducated people of color” (Miller, XVII). Chang writes, “If blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor, hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work” (Chang, 13). Similarly, Dr. Cornel West has described hip-hop as “a cry that openly acknowledge[ed] and confront[ed] the wave of personal cold-heartedness, criminal cruelty, and existential hopelessness in the Black ghettos of Afro-America” (Miller, 38). (While I will expand on the idea of hip-hop as a religion later on, that Dr. Cornel West quote on hip-hop reminds me of how Marx described religion as “a sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions” (Lofton).)

Early hip-hop was pioneered by DJs who would mix popular music, emphasizing percussive breaks (which is rooted in Afro-Caribbean music) (Dyson, 71). Lacking financial means and access to instruments and music lessons, especially at a time when, according to

Dyson, “budgets for visual art and musical training were ruthlessly slashed,” early hip-hop artists made music with the resources available to them – their voices and turntables (Miller, XVIII) (Sauer). In a Twitter rant against white Australian female rapper Iggy Azalea – who’s commonly used as a perfect example of cultural appropriation – legendary rapper Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest, noted that hip-hop emerged at a time when Black Americans were “Coming off the heels of the CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT and approaching the end of the Vietnam War it was a crossroads 4 America [especially] for blacks in the US our neighborhoods were PROLIFERATED w/a rush of HEROINE” (Jury). He continued, “We weren't at the time skilled musicians as kids. We had records, turntables, ideas and INGENUITY” (Jury). Hip-hop DJs developed a technique called ‘scratching,’ in which DJs move records back and forth on a turntable to produce a distinctive sound. Especially early on, hip-hop DJs would repeat various funk songs’ ‘breaks,’ which were typically percussion-heavy, danceable parts of the song. Soon after, DJs and MCs, such as the “father of hip-hop” DJ Kool Herc, began reciting simple rhymes over the breaks. Despite a great deal of variety within the genre itself, rap music can be generally defined as lyrically spoken or chanted words, usually in rhyme and verse, often over instrumentals or beats.

3. Hip-Hop and Race

While the genre is becoming increasingly diverse, hip-hop is inherently an African-American art form; as Dr. Michael Eric Dyson wrote, “The origins of hip hop have always been informed by Afro-diasporic elements. ... The black diaspora is nowhere better exemplified than in the incredible fusion of multiple languages engaged in the rhetorical, rhythmic, percussive, tonal, and sonic structures of hip hop” (Dyson, 46-47). While noting that “Hip-hop is a family, so everybody has got to pitch in,” DJ Kool Herc notes that “East, west, north, or south – we come

from one coast and that coast was Africa. This culture was born in the ghetto” (Chang, XIII). Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, self-described as “two white yuppies,” argue that “rap has, right from the start, presented itself as a Closed Show ... [and] is, and is very self-consciously, music *by* urban blacks *about* same *to* and *for* same” (Costello, 21, 25). Indeed, following the release of his *The Life of Pablo*, Kanye West tweeted, “To Pitchfork, Rolling Stone, New York Times, and any other white publication. Please do not comment on black music anymore.” He went, explaining: “I love love love white people but you don't understand what it means to be the great grandson of ex slaves and make it this far.” Similarly, Jay Electronica, in his “We Made It” remix, says, “They can’t relate to our struggle, my nigga, we came up from slavery,” so hip-hop’s connection to its African American origins is still very clear (Genius).

Some, such as rapper Lupe Fiasco, have argued, “Hip-hop culture is hip-hop culture; it’s not black culture” (Jury). And, to an extent, this is true. It’s important to note that hip-hop is an increasingly global and diverse genre, and that ‘Black culture’ expands far beyond hip-hop culture. But, in response, Suede Jury argued in *Complex* that, for example, the fact that there are “non-Japanese senseis, and dojos of dedicated people all over the world” doesn’t mean that karate is “no longer Japanese”; similarly, she argued, just because many people around the world eat pasta, does not mean that pasta is “no longer Italian” (Jury). Jury’s point is that “To summarize the origin of hip-hop as black expression does not discount the contributors from other ethnic groups, but zeros in on the point of impact where hip-hop was hewn, and its diasporic context” (Jury).

Especially in its early forms, rap offered a voice for the urban youth underclass, who were forced to deal with poverty, joblessness, and disempowerment (“Rise”). In addition to its role as an “expressive cultural phenomenon,” hip-hop often acted (and still occasionally acts) as

a form of resistance – “a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against white America’s racism, and its Euro-centric cultural dominance” (“Rise”). Hip-hop cannot be separated from its racial context (nor can it be separated from its economic context – which I will address later).

The popularity of hip-hop has empowered some black artists, and some believe that hip-hop has helped Americans reach across racial barriers (Flores). At first glance, hip-hop can appear as a success story for cultural/racial desegregation. Hip-hop’s “polyculturalism,” according to Chang, was founded on “the idea that civil society did not need Eurocentrism or whiteness at its core to function.” (Chang, 421) Hip-hop, according to white Chicago graffiti artist William “UPSKI” Wimsatt, can sometimes allow suburbanites to unite with “ghetto-dwellers” and “Whites could learn to respect Blackness, not merely consume it” (Chang, 422). DJ Kool Herc believes that “hip-hop has bridged the culture gap. It brings white kids together with Black kids, brown kids with yellow kids. They all have something in common that they love. It gets past the stereotypes and people hating each other because of those stereotypes” (Chang, XI). Unfortunately, as Lauren Sauer has written, “The trouble with hip hop and street culture is that it has successfully merged into mainstream pop culture, but most people still have no idea where it came from” (Sauer). In more Marxist terms, Blanchard writes, “The commodification of rap has allowed large paychecks and platinum records to erase the historical, social, and economic contexts, out of which rap has emerged, from public consciousness” (Blanchard). At least partly because of this, now more than any other time in hip-hop’s history, the genre welcomes a diverse set of rappers with a variety of backgrounds – but not without controversy.

Some white rappers have been accused of exploiting a historically black culture. As hip-hop has become more and more mainstream, it's become more commodified, arguably to the point where hip-hop – and blackness – “became a fad to be consumed, without the obligation of learning about or understanding Black people” (Flores). In *The Gospel of Hip Hop*, KRS-One writes that, too often today, too many people “seek the hand and not the face. They seek the luxury but not the culture, the food but not the appetite, the house but not the home, the medicine but not the health, the bed but not the rest. They would rather use GOD/Hip Hop than live GOD/Hip Hop” (KRS-ONE, 10).

In 2014, Iggy Azalea, a white, blonde, Australian, female MC, won two American Music Awards, Favorite Rap/Hip-Hop Artist and Favorite Rap/Hip-Hop Album. In his song “Fire Squad,” rapper J. Cole laments how white artists, such as Iggy Azalea, have “snatched the sound” (All lyrics quoted in this essay are from RapGenius.com):

*History repeats itself and that's just how it goes
Same way that these rappers always bite each others flows
Same thing that my nigga Elvis did with Rock n Roll
Justin Timberlake, Eminem, and then Macklemore
While silly niggas argue over who gone snatch the crown
Look around my nigga, white people have snatched the sound
This year I'll prolly go to the awards dappered down
Watch Iggy win a Grammy as I try to crack a smile*

Of course, not all rappers have an issue with the influx of white rappers in hip-hop. The legendary Snoop Dogg told *The New York Times*, “Rap is supposed to grow. One thing about Iggy and Macklemore: They got soul. They're inspired by hip-hop. I don't care how you're gonna take it to your people and flip it and dip it and serve it” (Caramanica). For others who don't have an issue with Macklemore, it's more about history than race. For example, legendary hip-hop pioneers like Melle Mel of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five as well as Big

Daddy Kane, both of whom worked with Macklemore on his “Downtown” music video, have spoken in support of Macklemore (Clark). Big Daddy Kane wrote on Instagram that “We [the Black hip-hop community] don’t acknowledge our own & get mad when another color [the white Macklemore] does” (Clark). Big Daddy Kane continued, “Learn about your [hip-hop] history & preserve it now,” adding, “If not, SHUT THE F*CK UP!!! [sic] To me this is about real pioneers getting recognition in today’s society” (Clark). In a similar way, Melle Mel argued that Black artists like “J. Cole or Kendrick Lamar or Rick Ross or Jay Z or any of these cats, they would not have done it [paying homage to legends like himself], ever” (Clark). He continued:

“They could have reached back to any of us. If you’re making records and you say you’re Hip-Hop, you’re supposed to have a connection to what Hip-Hop really is. And nobody made that connection until Macklemore made the connection. And I’ve had this conversation quite a few times since everything happened and had that little controversy of, yeah, the white boy, using the OGs, or blah blah blah. And like I said, none of those other guys would have ever done it. And it’s a shame that that’s the reality of what the game is right now.” (Clark)

The Heist by Macklemore, a white rapper from Seattle who was also mentioned in J. Cole’s “Fire Squad,” won the Grammy for the rap album of the year in 2014, beating black artists Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, Jay Z, and Drake (McCann). Macklemore himself admitted that Kendrick Lamar got ‘robbed.’ While most hip-hop heads would agree that Kendrick Lamar’s album *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* was the superior album, it wasn’t nearly as catchy and pop-friendly – and therefore not as accessible to pop music’s (mostly white) audience – as Macklemore’s album. Indeed, as of 2006, whites consumed 70% of hip-hop produced, which hugely benefits white rappers like Macklemore (Flores). Discussing Macklemore’s race in *The New York Times*, Jon Caramanica boldly concluded:

“There have been white rap stars before, and white artists who use rapping in a pop framework, but, in effect, Macklemore is the first contextually post-black

pop-star rapper. He is a harbinger of cultural and demographic seismic shifts long in motion. His success has taken place largely outside of the traditional hip-hop ecosystem, though his songs have crept onto hip-hop radio, an acknowledgment of their ubiquity and of the diversity of the listening audience.” (Caramanica)

And it’s not just others noting that Macklemore has benefitted from white privilege; the white rapper has addressed his privilege in multiple of his songs – as did white rapper Eminem, who rose to prominence years before Macklemore. In fact, Eminem is often considered to be one of the best rappers of all-time, unlike Macklemore, who’s often denounced as too poppy and/or corny. For example, Jury acknowledges that Eminem’s “lyrical ability and wildcard appeal” were “undeniable,” and that his background “as a white kid in the hood felt legit and unforced” (Jury). In contrast to Macklemore, who’s widely been embraced by the white liberal community, Eminem has been widely criticized for his lyrical contents. Wife of former Vice President Dick Cheney, Lynne Cheney, said before a Senate committee in 2000 that rappers like Eminem promoted “violence of the most degrading kind” (McCann). In response to the constant stream of similar criticisms, Eminem showed off the wit that makes rap so appealing in his song “Sing for the Moment,” rapping, “They say music can alter moods and talk to you / Well, can it load a gun up for you and cock it too?” Eminem, knowing that his audience is mostly white “suburban kids / who otherwise would’ve never knew these words exist,” has rapped in the past about embracing the fact that he “became a commodity because I’m W-H-I-T-E, ‘cause MTV was so friendly to me.” On his song “White America,” Eminem raps to White America that he “could be one of your kids” and how white “little Eric looks just like this” and white “Erica loves my shit”; he adds, “I go to TRL [an MTV show that highlighted popular music videos, largely to a white audience], look how many hugs I get.” He continues in the second verse:

*Look at these eyes, baby blue, baby just like yourself
If they were brown Shady’d lose, Shady sits on the shelf*

*But Shady's cute, Shady knew Shady's dimples would help
Make ladies swoon baby (ooh baby!) Look at my sales
Let's do the math: if I was black, I woulda sold half
I ain't have to graduate from Lincoln High School to know that*

Agreeing that whites root for fellow white rappers, white Jewish rapper Mac Miller told *Fader*, white “People are ‘Yeah! A white guy rapping! I wanna support that because not a lot of white guys rap!’” (Trammell). Even for him personally, Miller said, “I remember hearing Eminem for the first time in my kitchen: I had a really little TV that was as big as my head, and “The Real Slim Shady” was on MTV. I definitely had a moment of being a young white kid rapping every lyric in the mirror” (Trammell). In the same interview, Black rapper Vince Staples argued that it’s more about ability than race, asking, “Are we talking about white people that rap, or white rappers? Cause it’s a fuckin difference. White rappers are corny. White people that rap, it’s like, ‘Oh, that’s wassup. You white, you rap.’” (Trammell). Miller confessed that being a white rapper “was always a demon for me. It was hard to sit here and know that, because I was a white dude, I was able to sell easier and be more marketable. That wasn’t tight to me” (Trammell). Staples notes that the appeal of white rappers does make sense: “In general, more people can connect to things in music that are said by white people because white people aren’t as harsh. Not everybody can relate to being in the fucking ghetto and living on welfare and having to kill somebody and having to sell drugs.” Highlighting Macklemore’s hit song “Thrift Shop,” Staples continued, “But they listen to, *I want to shop right now, I only got 30 dollars in my pocket*. It’s like, you know what, I’ve had 30 dollars in my pocket before” (Trammell).

Which brings us back to Macklemore. While even Mac Miller, who’s earned the respect of Kendrick Lamar and other prominent Black artists, has struggled with being defined as a ‘white rapper,’ Macklemore is in many ways the face of ‘white rappers’ – but Macklemore hasn’t shied away from that role.

In 2005's "White Privilege," Macklemore acknowledges in the hook that "hip-hop started off on a block that I've never been to / to counteract a struggle that I've never even been through." In one of his verses in the same song, Macklemore raps:

*Where's my place in a music that's been taken by my race
Culturally appropriated by the white face?
And we don't want to admit that this is existing
So scared to acknowledge the benefits of our white privilege
Cause it's human nature to want to be part of something different
Especially when your ancestors are European Christians
And most whites don't want to acknowledge this is occurring
Cause we got the best deal, the music without the burden
Of being black in a system that really wants you to rock*

Notably, after Macklemore achieved international fame, he dropped "White Privilege II" in 2016. As I've previously written for the *Dallas Observer*, white people don't like to talk about race. White people especially don't like to talk about white privilege — that is, if they even acknowledge it exists in the first place (*Observer*). For example, in 2015, a HuffPost poll found that only thirty-one percent of white Americans consider racism to be a "very serious" problem in society, compared to sixty-eight percent of Black Americans; additionally, fifty-six percent of white Americans said that "racism isn't really an issue in my community" (Velencia). Perhaps most embarrassing is the fact that, according to a 2014 poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute, fifty-two percent – a majority – of white Americans "believe that discrimination against whites has become as big of a problem as discrimination against minorities" (Piacenza).

With that said, white people *really* love Macklemore, the radio-friendly white rapper most famous for his Grammy-winning "Thrift Shop," which has sold over 10 million copies and is one of the most-watched music videos of all time. Macklemore's "White Privilege II," a nearly nine-minute-long song featuring Jamila Woods, will — hopefully — open more than a

few white eyes to the widespread problem of racism. We can debate whether or not Macklemore's song is actually any good, but the message he's trying to communicate with it should be acknowledged and appreciated. Which is not to say he's some sort of White Savior or hero, either. Honest and self-aware to an almost awkward extent, Macklemore's "White Privilege II" begins with the rapper attending a protest responding to Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson's killing of Michael Brown in 2014. He wants to help the movement, he wants to help the cause, but he's not sure if it's his place to do so. He wonders, "Is this awkward? Should I even be here marching?" noting that he might look more like the cop that killed Michael Brown than most of the protesters. (Later in the song, after unpacking white supremacy, he acknowledges that his "success is the product of the same system that let off Darren Wilson.") He wonders if it's "my place to give my two cents or should I stand on the side and shut my mouth for justice?" In the second verse, Macklemore addresses how white people (specifically namedropping Miley Cyrus, Elvis Presley and Iggy Azalea) have "exploited and stolen the music." He even recites one of the main criticisms of his music, admitting its reputation as a "watered-down pop bullshit version of the culture." He goes on to explain that, yeah, sure, he tries to join marches and tweet out support, but knows people still wonder, "'You speak about equality, but do you really mean it? Are you marching for freedom, or when it's convenient?'" In the third verse, Macklemore raps from the perspective of a white parent who explains how much her kids love his "Thrift Shop" and "One Love" (the actual name of the song is "Same Love") and how "even an old mom like me likes it cause it's positive." But then the white parent complains about a Black Lives Matter protest, saying, "If a cop pulls you over, it's your fault if you run," exposing the disconnect between many of Macklemore's fans and hip-hop culture. Macklemore admits that, "It seems like we're more concerned with being called racist than we

actually are with racism.” In arguably the song's best line, Macklemore, a white rapper who's become famous in a historically black culture, asks, “We take all we want from black culture, but will we show up for black lives?”

Macklemore isn't the first person to address racism and white privilege, and it's unquestionably unfair that so many people of color have made the exact same points (and often in a more sincere and elegant way) for years and years without receiving anything close to the praise that Macklemore has gotten for it in the past. In a thought-provoking column for the Daily Dot, Alexandra Samuels, a black female writer, notes, “On the one hand, if he doesn't say anything about #BlackLivesMatter, police brutality and white privilege, he's seen as just another white person appropriating black culture when it's convenient” (Samuels, Alexandra). However, she also notes that when Macklemore does speak out, it can be “tiring that white people have to learn about their privilege through a white man, but they won't listen to black people telling them their first-hand experiences.” Talib Kweli, a legend to many hip-hop fans, has also defended Macklemore as “an artist who realizes his position in this culture and is doing everything in his power that he can do” (Robertson). Kweli added, “He can't not be white” (Robertson). Even long before he became an international star and before he “stole” Kendrick Lamar's Grammy (for which he, controversially, apologized), Macklemore acknowledged and addressed his “White Privilege” in 2005 on *The Language of My World*. Recognizing that she's not the target audience, Samuels compliments Macklemore for “leveraging his platform and privilege to send a message to his audience, which is predominantly composed of other white folks, that there's an issue within our society and we need to address it. As ironic as it is, he's using his white privilege to address that it's there” (Samuels, Alexandra). Too often, Samuels

writes, while black people are “portrayed as ‘angry’ or ‘bitter’ for voicing our opinions, Macklemore is not and he knows that” (Samuels, Alexandra).

In the song, after voiceovers of white people dismissing the idea that they're privileged, Macklemore notes that there are "a lot of opinions, a lot of confusion, a lot of resentment. Some of us scared, some of us defensive — and most of us aren't even paying attention." And that's exactly why Macklemore's new song is so important: Most white people aren't even paying attention. That's part of the problem with white privilege: One of the key privileges is the ability to act like racism isn't really an issue. White people can choose to ignore racism and their privilege, despite living in a society built upon white supremacy. As Macklemore has said before, “Racism is uncomfortable to talk about. White people, we can just turn off the TV when we’re sick of talking about race” (Block). Too many of us think that as long as we aren't yelling racial slurs, white people are off the hook. Without having to confront our privilege, we can act like it doesn't exist. In an ideal situation, white people wouldn't need a white rapper to explain the idea of white privilege and racism — we would actually listen to those who are discriminated against. But, then again, in an ideal world, white privilege and racism wouldn't be an issue to address in the first place. Britt Julious addressed this point in *Esquire*, writing that as “a 28-year-old black woman” the “reality and perpetual damage of white privilege – white supremacy – historically and in contemporary society” is “inherent in my bones, blood, and livelihood” (Julious). Rather than addressing people like herself who are already aware of white supremacy, Julious writes that Macklemore’s song “is intended for the people who don't feel complicit, but are. It is for the nameless faces who say, "Not me!" but stop there in their outrage. It is for the minds who will do a little less than "just enough" to make the world a better place, and see no fault in their lack of actions” (Julious). She continues, arguing that what makes the song

important is that ““White Privilege II” asks its listeners to do better, to look within themselves and examine the entitled decisions they make that perpetuate a world of degradation and hate” (Julious).

But the expectations that come with race in hip-hop aren’t limited to white rappers. Few artists are as popular as Drake right now, but Drake’s background doesn’t fit the stereotype of most rappers. The former child actor from Toronto has a Black father from Memphis, Tennessee and a white Jewish Canadian mother. Growing up, Drake attended a Jewish day school and had a Bar Mitzvah. In 2014, he told *Vibe Magazine*, “Jewish kids didn’t understand how I could be black and Jewish,” adding, “It was just stupid, annoying rich kids that were close-minded and mean” (“Drake”). But now as an artist, Drake deals with accusations that he’s too ‘soft’ for hip-hop. In “You & The 6,” Drake raps about this contrast:

*I used to get teased for being black
And now I'm here and I'm not black enough
Cause I'm not acting tough
Or making stories up 'bout where I'm actually from*

While hip-hop is popular among fans of all races, “That we are all dancing to the same beat does little to change the real social and economic conditions of those oppressed” (“Rise”). (I’ll further discuss the commodification of hip-hop later.)

Further revealing the relationship between race and hip-hop, Bethany Bryson wrote, “[R]acism increases the probability of disliking genres whose fans are predominantly non-White” (Bryson). Bryson argues that musical tastes are often evidence of pre-existing social boundaries. For example, although “musical exclusiveness decreases with education,” the genres “whose fans have the least education – gospel, country, rap, and heavy metal – are also those most likely to be rejected by the musically tolerant” (Bryson). However, the relative taboo of

hip-hop, an art form that often relies on white consumers, is arguably part of its appeal – “The music’s paranoia, together with its hermetic racial context, maybe helps explain why it appears just as vibrant and impassioned as it does alien and scary, to us, from outside” (Costello, 25).

And this is by no means a new occurrence; Dyson has written:

“Black humanity and art have always been viewed, on the one hand, with suspicion and skepticism and, on the other hand, with paranoia and fear. It’s true that many white folk have admired our culture and interpreted it through the lens of their experience. Many whites have loved and identified with black culture while maintaining intellectual distortions, avoidances, and obstructions” (Dyson, 4).

Becky Blanchard of Stanford University has noted, “In order to understand hip-hop, it is necessary to look at it as the product of a set of historical, political, and economic circumstances and to study the role it has served as voice for those subjugated by systematic political and economic oppression” (Blanchard). In my attempt to more fully understand hip-hop, I will now briefly discuss the ideas of Karl Marx before more fully explaining how they connect with rap music.

4. What is Historical Materialism?

Karl Marx discovered, according to Friedrich Engels, “that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion” (Pals, 118). For Marx, economics form the foundation, or “base,” of all social life; everything else, Marx argued, is part of the “superstructure,” which “not only arise from the economic base but are in significant ways shaped by it” (Pals, 130). From this perspective, history hasn’t been determined by the ideas of a few individuals, but rather by changes in the material conditions. As Marx wrote, “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their

social existence that determines their consciousness” (McElwee). So how does that relate to hip-hop?

5. Hip-Hop and Historical Materialism

As we’ve established, rap has been, and continues to be, seen as a Black genre. Inspired by Marx’s historical materialism, I would argue that the culture, and especially the exclusionary nature of the culture, is simply a superstructure of the base. From their very arrival, African-Americans have been economically (and politically, socially, and so on etc.) oppressed, beginning with slavery, through Jim Crow laws, and even today with the ‘War on Drugs,’ (which has been called the New Jim Crow). Indeed, hip-hop didn’t emerge out of nowhere; it could arguably be considered essentially a reaction to its pioneers’ economic situation. Growing up in Baltimore, Maryland in the late 80s, writer Ta-Nehisi Coates describes “the extravagant boys of my neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers, which was their armor against their world” – highlighting the materialism of hip-hop culture, which I’ll later discuss in more depth (Coates, 14). He describes how the “boom boxes full of grand boast and bluster” – aka rap music – “told them, against all evidence and odds, that they were masters of their own lives, their own streets, and their own bodies” (Coates, 15). Coates has also written in *The New York Times* that, “When your life is besieged, the music is therapy, vicarious mastery in a world where you control virtually nothing, least of all the fate of your body” (Coates). Recalling his own childhood, Coates continues, “I had a friend in middle school who would play Rakim every morning because he knew there was a good chance that he would be jumped en route to or from school by the various crews that roamed the area. But, in his mind, the mask of rap machismo made him too many for them.” (Coates).

The economic base of hip-hop also affected the content of rap music. Touré notes, “In the 1980s, hip-hop’s primary audience was black, male and urban” which was a time when “hip-hop embraced black nationalism, Afrocentrism and social consciousness; it was rebellious and almost always antidrug” (Touré). On this note, an analysis of rap lyrics by Tony Abraham, Nikhita Koul and Joe Morales of the University of California, Berkeley, did indeed find that “Rap songs preaching revolution were extremely popular in the early-to-mid-'80s, but not so much now” (Barnes). In the 1990s on, however, “young suburban white men were hip-hop’s dominant audience; they bought more of the music than any other demographic”; after that transition, Touré argues, “many MCs embraced criminality and sold the image of the criminalblackman. Black nationalism was out, embodying drug dealers was in” (Touré) [The concept of ‘criminalblackman’ will later be explained in more depth.]

Even today, decades after hip-hop began, “African-American youth are the most likely group in the nation to live in poor households and neighborhoods, to be unemployed, to be the victims of homicide or AIDS, or to spend time in prison at some point in their lifetimes,” according to Blanchard. (Blanchard). As of 2015, for example, one in 15 Black males is in the prison system, compared to one in 106 white men, according to the Center for American Progress; even when convicted for the same crime as white men, Black males often face longer prison, according to the U.S. Sentencing Commission (Velencia). Furthermore, Blanchard writes, “Specifically, the African-American experience has been shaped by the legacies of slavery, segregation, and economic and political subjugation, and has been marked by institutions and incidents of violence” (Blanchard). These points have been expressed in rap songs in countless ways. In “All Falls Down,” Chicago’s Kanye West raps:

*We buy our way out of jail, but we can't buy freedom.
We'll buy a lot of clothes, when we don't really need 'em.*

*Things we buy to cover up what's inside.
'Cause they make us hate ourselves and love their wealth
That's why shorty's hollering, 'Where the ballers at?!'
Drug dealer buy Jordans, crackhead buy crack,
And a white man get paid off of all of that.*

Indeed, even as Kanye West has grown rich, he can't escape the entrenched racism in society; as he says later in the song, "Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe." Essentially, since "a white man get paid off of all of that," Kanye West and other rappers (and arguably most people in capitalist economies) become little more than commodities, to be marketed and sold by the rich white people in charge of record labels (and generally society as a whole) (Pals, 134). While Marx basically argued that all laborers were commodities, African-Americans have an especially clear history as *literal* commodities: Dr. Tommy Curry explains, "The enslaved African/Black body was not simply a commodity to be bought and sold, but commodified into what whites desired, feared, and sought to vacate from (white) virtue into (Black) degradation - creating the darkened/racialized Nigger." (Curry, 132).

For Rapper Ice-T, who debuted in 1987, rap wasn't about being the best or getting famous: "My only objective was to get out of the street. ... I knew my days were numbered to low digits in the streets. I wanted out, but I didn't know how to get out" (Serrano, 4). As Kanye West tweeted on February 15, 2016, "The system is designed for colored people to fail and one of our only voices is music. One of our only ways out is music." Jay Z is a perfect example of a rapper beating the odds. According to Shea Serrano, who cites a 2014 report by the Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project, black males born between 1975 and 1979 who dropped out of high school had a seventy-percent chance of spending time in prison by their mid-thirties, compared to only a ten-percent chance for white males born during that time who dropped out of

high school (Serrano, 208). Jay Z, Serrano describes in a matter-of-fact manner, “does not have a high school degree. He has about half a billion dollars but no degree” (Serrano, 208).

While Kanye West, like many rappers, is criticized for his lyrics about drugs, money, violence, women, etc., Curry argues that, facing such entrenched economic (and racist) oppression, it’s an almost unavoidable outcome that alienated rappers will discuss topics that are controversial to the ruling classes:

“With little to no economic prospects, the economy available in the dark spaces that confine Blacks is illegal; and drugs, violence, and incarceration seem like predetermined ends. . . . The disparate treatment of Blacks is about the already present and different realities of Blacks and whites, where individual choices are illusory, and structures/institutions determine the essence/substance/(B)eing of Blackness.” (Curry, 132).

6. Hip-Hop’s ‘Deviance’

Of course, not everyone is as sympathetic about much of rap’s content. Bill O’Reilly has argued that many young people are held back by “these guys with the hats on backwards” and their “terrible rap lyrics” (Feldman). O’Reilly’s solution to the problem? “You have to attack the fundamental disease if you want to cure it. You’re going to have to get people like Jay-Z, Kanye West, all of these gangsta rappers, to knock it off” (Feldman). Acknowledging that there’s often a “convergence of rap and rap sheet” in hip-hop, Sanneh writes, “Hip-hop is a particularly easy target for cops and senators, because rappers make their living by telling stories that sound like autobiography, and they do so in lyrics that are spoken, not sung” (Sanneh). In his preface to *Religion in Hip Hop*, Dyson writes that, historically, “Black art has been relentlessly mocked as a hodgepodge of inferior form and puerile content” and that, still today, “hip hop is widely viewed as the soundtrack to black pathology” (Miller, XV). O’Reilly’s view, according to Sauer, isn’t uncommon: “While the social roots and context are paramount in understanding the music and

art surrounding it, most people will just take it at face value as something aggressive or offensive” (Sauer).

Noting the role of white people in creating the environment for many African Americans today, *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow explains that nobody simply woke “up one day with a burning desire to live in the poorest, most violent parts of our cities. Generations of discriminatory housing, banking and employment practices created those powder kegs.” After all that, Blow notes, “And then we blame racial culture rather than racist culture for their constant explosions” (Blow). Far too often, hip-hop is blamed for the struggles and inequality of the Black community – to quote Jonathan Blanks, too “much of the rhetoric today about racial disparities comes off not so much as white racial supremacy, but black cultural inferiority” (Blanks). For example, on Fox News, Geraldo Rivera argued that hip-hop is “this distinctive culture that is removed from the mainstream” (Grow). Rivera continued, saying that rappers “have encouraged people to be so different from the mainstream that they can't participate other than the racks in the garment center and those entry level jobs,” adding “I lament it; I really do. I think it's been very destructive culturally” (Grow). But as Blanks wrote:

“The scapegoating of “black culture” for the problems of the black community begs the question, presuming that “black culture” has developed independently of how blacks have been treated by American society. The externalities that American society puts on black people—ghettoization, substandard public schools, abusive criminal justice systems, and decreased economic prospects—are swept away by social condemnation and absurd allegations against hip hop.”
(Blanks)

Hip-hop, a culture that spawned out of economic deprivation, is now being blamed for that very inequality. While it's true that hip hop “is still a testosteronecentric affair often booming with patriarchal ambitions,” when considered critically it's easy to reach the same conclusion as

Dr. Michael Eric Dyson: “This stuff didn’t start with hip hop; the reality is that patriarchy and sexism and misogyny are tried-and-true American traditions from which hip hop derives its understanding of how men and women should behave, and what roles they should play” (Miller, XVII) (Dyson, 22). Indeed, while hip-hop and the Religious Right seem like (and, in many ways, are) opposites, they actually have a lot in common, specifically when it comes to gender roles. Admittedly, hip-hop’s prejudices are often expressed in more blunt, offensive terms, but the ideas themselves are very similar. “The hip hop industry is built in large measure on the dominant masculine voice, a voice that rarely expresses respect for women as peers – only as mothers. Rappers love their mamas but hate their baby-mamas” (Dyson, 111). Religious communities, especially Christians, also are dominated by men – and the Christian God is a male and the Christian Savior is a male and the leaders of the church have almost always been and almost always continue to be males – and the two most celebrated women in the Bible (Eve and Mary) are defined by their roles as mothers. Dyson notes that hip-hop’s prejudices are actually rooted in Christianity; “If hip hop has a theology, it’s pretty consistent with the biblical justification of male misbehavior by blaming the seducing female” (Dyson, 110). Dyson writes, “The greatest insult from one man to another in hip hop (and beyond) is to imply that he’s less than a man by calling him a derogatory term usually reserved for women or gay men” (Dyson, 114). Expanding on the relationship between evangelicals and hip-hop, Dyson writes:

“What’s quite interesting, perhaps even paradoxical, is that hip hop in this regard reflects the values of mainstream conservative culture when it comes to the victimization of women, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender folk. ... [T]he same religious folk who have historically subscribed to a biblical literalism that castigated black folk and justified our oppression and enslavement now use the same principles of interpretation to justify resistance to gays and lesbians. ... Ironically enough, hip hop, which is equally reviled in conservative circles and in many quarters of established black America, for its allegedly decadent morality, is in full agreement with these regressive viewpoints.” (Dyson, 115-116).

I would also argue that the criticisms of violence in hip-hop are unfair as well. After all, as Dyson put it, “violent masculinity is at the heart of the American identity. The preoccupation with Jesse James, the outlaw, the rebel, the social outcast – much of that is associated in the collective imagination of the nation with the expansion of the frontier in the modern West” (Dyson, 94). Or, in other words, “The fact is, this country was in love with outlaws and crime and violence long before hip-hop” (Blanchard). To further put hip-hop’s violence into perspective, consider what Blanchard wrote about it:

“If rap music appears to be excessively violent when compared to country-western or popular rock, it is because rap stems from a culture that has been seeped in the fight against political, social, and economic oppression. . . . Violence in rap is not an affective agent that threatens to harm America's youth; rather, it is the outcry of an already-existing problem from youth whose worldviews have been shaped by experiencing deep economic inequalities divided largely along racial lines.” (Blanchard)

So not only is violence present throughout society, rappers, and blacks in general, are unfairly connected with violence. While rappers are criticized for discussing violence in their songs, other artists, such as actors, aren’t blamed. KRS-One, in his song “Necessary” (inspired by a Malcolm X. quote), notes the double standards when it comes to how art and violence are viewed: by White America standards, “Oh no, it’s not violent when under the Christmas tree there’s a look-alike gun / But, yes, of course it’s violent to have an album like KRS-One.” After all, while Bill O’Reilly eagerly denounces “gangsta rappers,” he’s been silent on artists like John Wayne and Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis and Sylvester Stallone who glorify violence in their movies. Countless kids grew up watching Looney Tunes, yet, as far as I know, nobody has tried giving anyone a dynamite cigar. Millions upon millions of Americans seem to have turned out just fine after growing up with the glorification of violence through toy soldiers (McCann).

So why the double standards? I would argue that it comes down to what sociologist Howard S. Becker calls ‘deviance.’ Becker’s writing can help us understand the ‘outcast’ status of rap: “Deviance is not a quality that lies in behavior itself, but in the interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it” (Becker, 22). For example, in his song “That’s Life,” rapper Killer Mike questions why he and other rappers are condemned for simply rapping about crime, while others, like Martha Stewart, “actually do crime, and do time,” and “come back out and have a TV show with an all-white audience.” Because “the status of deviant” (in this case, simply being a rapper) is a “kind of master status,” rappers don’t have the same privileges as others, especially wealthy white people (Becker, 23). Related to this issue of deviance is what legal scholar Katheryn Russell-Brown has called the myth of the “criminalblackman,” who is supposedly the “source of all crime, proof of the natural connection between race and criminality” (Touré). Touré, discussing the work of Russell-Brown, points out that, “in the 1990s, whites comprised 70 percent of those arrested and 40 percent of the incarcerated, but that white crime did not reverberate outward to say something about the character of all white people. By contrast, black crime suggests something is wrong with the entire race” (Touré).

But the myth of the ‘criminalblackman’ existed long before hip-hop. In his *Atlantic* article “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” Ta-Nehisi Coates points out that even as far back as the 1890s, the myth of the ‘criminalblackman’ “would become one of the most commonly cited and longest-lasting justifications for black inequality and mortality in the modern urban world,” Coates writes, quoting the director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, Khalil Gibran Muhammad (Coates). By simply being Black, by nature, by birth, Black males were viewed as inherently criminal brutes, Coates

argues (Coates). Even earlier, in 1868, Southern white-supremacist Hinton Rowan Helper wrote about “the crime-stained blackness of the negro” (Coates). Similarly, in 1886, a physician in *The New York Medical Journal* wrote that Blacks were “naturally intemperate” and inherently susceptible to indulging “every appetite too freely, whether for food, drink, tobacco, or sensual pleasures, and sometimes to such an extent as to appear more of a brute than human” (Coates).

The myth of, and the panic over, the ‘criminalblackman’ hasn’t left, even today. In his 2002 Plan II Thesis, “Rap Sheets: America’s Fascination with Crime and Hip-Hop,” David Yolun Chung wrote of the “moral panic” that occurred as rappers and their music were “considered a threat to societal values” (Chung, 5). “Contrary to many rappers’ intentions,” Chung wrote, “attempts to draw attention towards problems that existed in the ghettos were overshadowed by arguments trying to scapegoat rap music for the creation of crime” (Chung, 5).

Becker makes another relevant point: “[B]eing branded as deviant has important consequences for one’s further social participation and self-image. The most important consequence is a drastic change in the individual’s public identity” (Becker, 22). Lots of hip-hop music revolves around drugs, sex and violence – which is often criticized. Yet it’s often the case that drugs, sex and violence sell. So while many rappers actually lived the lives that they rap about, others utilize a constructed persona that fits the social construction of what it means to be a rapper. For Touré, hip-hop’s embrace of the ‘criminalblackman’ was bizarre, but understandable. Quoting Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, Touré argues that embracing the stigma of the ‘criminalblackman’ (or any other stigma of your own) is “an act of resistance and defiance in a society that seeks to demean a group based on an inalterable trait” (Touré). Realizing that, from birth, society frowned upon them as criminals, young Black males embraced the stereotype; for example, words like ‘thug’ are sometimes used in implicitly racist ways by

some white people while countless rappers have embraced the ‘Thug Life.’ To put in more bluntly, “If you gotta be a monkey, be a gorilla,” as Redman rapped on “I’ll Bee Dat!” in 1998. In an opinion column for *The New York Times*, Brent Staples says Black boys are constantly reminded by society that “we fear you and view you as dangerous” (Staples). Similar to Alexander’s point, Staples notes, “Boys who are seduced by this version of themselves end up on a fast track to prison and to the graveyard” (Staples).

On the other hand, for some rappers, being “seduced” by and embracing the ‘criminalblackman’ stereotype is a way to create a persona that sells in hip-hop. Rapper Rick Ross is a great example of this. As Touré wrote, Ross swallows the drug dealer stereotype whole:

He is a former corrections officer who took on the name of a legendary cocaine dealer — “Freeway” Ricky Ross — and proclaimed himself “the biggest boss that you’ve seen thus far” in his song “The Boss.” He’s just one of many MCs who have made millions by swallowing the drug-dealer stereotype whole, and thus deploying the drug problem and the criminalblackman myth for personal gain. (Touré)

William Leonard Roberts II, the real name of Rick Ross, has built a career out of his drug-dealer-turned-rapper persona. In many of songs, Rick Ross rhymes about drug trafficking and murder and various other criminal activities. But that’s only Ricky Rozay’s invented ethos – far from his actual personal history. Surprisingly, despite his completely invented ethos, Ross has found – and continues to find – a great deal of success in a genre that emphasizes authenticity, a genre that focuses on ‘keeping it real.’ Roberts was raised in Florida. After graduating from Miami Carol City Senior High School, Ross attended Albany State University on a football scholarship (Handelsman). And, most notably, between 1995 and 1997, Roberts worked as a correctional officer. For months after that past was made public, Ross denied his past as a correctional officer. Eventually, Ross did address his past in multiple publications. For example, while Ross admitted to being a correctional officer, he said it was only a job he did for a short

time. Defending himself, rapper Ross told *XXL*, “The stuff I talk about is real. The dope is real. The gun talk is official. Look up [notorious Miami gang member] Kenneth ‘Boobie’ Williams. Look where he’s from. That’s not nothing to be proud of. I wish that on no man. But, just to let you know, that’s what I witnessed. It’s a reality. I cannot discuss certain people that’s still in the streets, and I will not. I took a street oath, and I’mma live by that, and I’mma die by that. And it’s not about a music career, ’cause that sh–, I’m good. It’s about me and being in the streets” (Reid). For the first time, Ross talked about his past life as a corrections officer – an opportunity, he says, to “wash my hands” after his best friend was sentenced to 10 years for trafficking cocaine and heroin: “This was my best friend, who I ate peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches with, and pork and beans with, my buddy, my partner, my number-one dude. Suddenly I’m talking to him over federal phone calls. Hearing the way it was building, I knew I couldn’t take nothing for granted,” says Ross. “My homey’s father was a huge influence on my life, too . . . He was the one who was like, ‘Yo, go get a job somewhere, man. Go be a fireman. Or go be a fucking corrections officer. Just go sit down somewhere” (Eells). Yet his story, despite his attempts to defend himself, seems to be a completely invented persona – largely based on real life drug kingpin ‘Freeway’ Ricky Ross. The real-life gangster sued the rapper, but it was eventually thrown out. The judge in the case wrote:

“Roberts created a celebrity identity, using the name Rick Ross, of a cocaine kingpin turned rapper. He was not simply an impostor seeking to profit solely off the name and reputation of Rick Ross. Rather, he made music out of fictional tales of dealing drugs and other exploits – some of which related to plaintiff. Using the name and certain details of an infamous criminal’s life as basic elements, he created original artistic works.” (Selby).

Whether you think that Rick Ross is a phony disgrace to hip-hop’s authenticity, or an entertaining performer simply putting on a show, Rick Ross’ widespread success seems to point to a shift in hip-hop’s emphasis and standards of what it means to be ‘real.’

While some rappers have embraced the thug persona, others have tried to change that stereotype. Which reveals one of the more problematic issues with how the media deals with rap; as Dyson notes, “The white media have largely ignored black resistance to rap’s rhetorical malevolence” (Dyson, 132). For example, while most don’t doubt there’s violence in hip hop, I would assume that less people (especially white, non-hip-hop fans) would be less familiar that others have often addressed violence. In “Everything I Am,” Kanye West raps about the toll of gun violence:

*I know that people wouldn't usually rap this
But I got the facts to back this
Just last year, Chicago had over 600 caskets
Man, killing's some wack shit
Oh, I forgot, 'cept for when niggas is rappin'*

In another example, writing for *The New York Times* in February, 2013, Ta-Nehisi Coates highlights Kendrick Lamar’s major-label debut album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, which “shows us how gun violence extends out beyond the actual guns” (Coates). Coates writes that many young people living in the “gang-infested Compton” neighborhood in California are forced to deal with the threats and dangers of violence. While “Hip-hop originates in communities [like Compton] where such hazards are taken as given,” Coates points out that “Rappers generally depict themselves as masters, not victims, of the attending violence. Their music is not so much interested in exalting to our preferred values as constructing a fantasy wherein the author has total control and is utterly invulnerable” (Coates). As in lots of rap music, “Fantasies of rage and lust are present” in the album, Coates writes, “but fear pervades Lamar’s world” (Coates). While other rappers glorify and embrace the criminality and hedonism of hip-hop, Kendrick Lamar addresses these issues, but “not [as] a supercriminal but a boy out to impress his friends,” Coates writes (Coates).

Kendrick's music, with its unmatched and unflinching honesty, "is not the hip-hop that allows white guys to breathe," as Carvell Wallace wrote in *Pitchfork*. "He does not break off pieces of blackness as a hood souvenir that you can post on your wall or bump in your car in order to feel like it's all good. He doesn't even mention you at all. It is not about you." Wallace wrote, "It is about him and his complete humanity. It is about the humanity of every other black person whose face is painted on the mural of this wall of sound. The question then becomes how hard and for how long will America continue to fight, deny, or ignore this humanity" (Wallace).

To go back to Dyson's quote, "The white media have largely ignored black resistance to rap's rhetorical malevolence," Kendrick Lamar and the way some members of the white media have reacted to his art further exposes the ignorance masquerading concern that so often comes from anti-hip-hop pundits. In 2015 at the BET Awards, Kendrick Lamar performed his song "Alright," a song which has been called "The New Black National Anthem" for its use by #BlackLivesMatter protesters and the way it addresses issues like racism, violence, and police brutality (Harris). Regarding police brutality, Kendrick Lamar raps in the song that "we hate po-po [police] / wanna kill us dead in the street fo' sho" – a theme which has been common throughout rap music, especially with 1988's "Fuck the Police" by N.W.A. But for Fox News' Geraldo Rivera, the song is inflammatory and "anti-police" (Kirrell). Rivera ridiculously claimed: "Hip-hop has done more damage to black and brown people than racism in the last 10 years" (Kirrell). But the targeting of Kendrick Lamar isn't unusual – Carvell Wallace wrote in *Pitchfork*, "To be honest and black is, by nature, to be a threat. To be honest and black and poor is to know deeply and personally how racism and capitalism works" (Wallace). In response to Rivera's comment, Russell Simmons, a businessman and legend in the hip-hop community, wrote that "the prison industrial complex got people [like Rivera] so twisted" (Grow). He

continued, “For 40 years, they've been locking up diseased drug addicts, educating them on criminal behavior and dumping them back in the hood. The poetry and the reflection [in hip-hop] are what come from that jail culture; that's obvious” (Grow). As I wrote in *The Dallas Morning News*, often the reason that these rappers discuss these subjects is because they've lived that life. Drugs, guns, violence, gangs, crime, poverty — those are the problems; rapping about them is not (McCann). While it should be obvious (though it's clearly not, as Rivera's ignorance reveals), Kendrick Lamar's response is especially insightful:

“How can you take a song that's about hope and turn it into hatred? ... The overall message is, “we gon' be alright.” It's not the message of “I want to kill people.” [...] Hip-hop is not the problem. Our reality is the problem of this situation. This is our music. This is us expressing ourselves. Rather [than] going out here and doing the murders myself, I want to express myself in a positive light the same way other artists are doing. Not going out in the streets, go in the booth and talking about the situation, and hoping these kids can find some type of influence on it in a positive manner. Coming from these streets and coming from these neighborhoods, we're taking our talents and putting them inside the studio.” (Kirrell)

Back in 2012, author Touré wrote for *The Washington Post*, “If you're wondering why hip-hop has often been angry, sneering, nihilistic and dystopic, you can blame the war on drugs, and how it feels to be on the wrong side of it” (Touré). Starting with Nixon then expanding under Reagan, the War on Drugs, he writes, “would not only shape the black community but also mold hip-hop, a music and culture whose undercurrent remains black male anger at a nation that declared young black men monsters and abandoned them, killing any chance they had at the American Dream.”

7. Hip-Hop and Religion

“Whether it's God almighty, or the almighty dollar, we follow the prophets [profits]”

– Talib Kweli, “Just Begun”

Hip-hop, admittedly, doesn't fit very neatly as a religion, especially in the traditional sense. However, it could be argued that the culture of hip-hop relates to Dr. George E. Vaillant's idea of spirituality, which "is more likely to be democratic and arise from within," in contrast with cults and religions, which "tend to be authoritarian and imposed from without" (Vaillant, 189). Using Dr. Monica R. Miller and Dr. Anthony B. Pinn's *Religion in Hip-Hop*, religion can be defined as "a conceptual and taxonomical 'place holder' of sorts, a way by means of which humans parse out and explore the social world, the self, and human experience in relationship to a desire for a wide variety of things from 'unity' of experience, framework of meaning, or strategic acts of identification" (Miller, 3). Put even more simply, one could argue, as KRS-One does in his *Gospel of Hip-Hop*, that "OUR CULTURE IS OUR RELIGION AND OUR RELIGION IS OUR CULTURE!" (KRS-ONE 29). On this point, Smitherman notes the cultural importance of hip-hop: "This music has become a—or, perhaps the—principal medium for Black youth to express their views of the world and to create a sense of order out of the turbulence and chaos of their own, and our, lives" ("Rise"). In his song "Gorgeous," Kanye West asks, "Is hip-hop just a euphemism for a new religion? The soul music of the slaves that the youth is missing?" In fact, KRS-One explicitly presents hip-hop as a religion in his *Gospel of Hip-Hop*, which is written in chapters and verses, reflecting the Bible. Implying that the hip-hop community is, in a sense, a people chosen by God, KRS-One writes, "When GOD raises up a *people* it has historically been the most downtrodden, impoverished, powerless group of people that GOD chooses to restore and raise up" (KRS-ONE 19). Describing hip-hop as "a saving force," KRS-One writes, "Hip Hop is GOD's response to our suffering" (KRS-ONE 8). Similarly, in his introduction to Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, the "father of hip-hop" DJ Kool Herc argued that hip-hop is "about you and me, connecting to one to one. That's why it has

universal appeal. It has given young people a way to understand their world, whether they are from the suburbs or the city or whatever” (Chang, XI).

While hip-hop and religion are often compatible, Dyson has argued that, in certain ways, hip-hop and its “pavement prophets” have replaced the church:

“Where young black Americans once turned primarily to the church – and to the civil rights leaders that the church produced – to articulate their hopes, frustrations, and daily tribulations, it is fast becoming men like Jay-Z and Nas, and women like Missy Elliot and Lauryn Hill, who best vocalize the struggle of growing up black and poor in this country.” (Dyson, XX)

One such example of a “pavement prophet” in hip-hop is Kendrick Lamar, who told *The New York Times*, “I’m the closest thing to a preacher that they [many of his fans] have” (Coscarelli). Like so many pastors, Kendrick credits and glorifies God for his success, saying, “It’s bigger than a responsibility, it’s a calling,” and adding, “My word will never be as strong as God’s Word. All I am is just a vessel, doing His work” (Coscarelli).

On the other hand, rather than seeing hip-hop fulfilling a role no longer being fulfilled by the church, Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly thinks that hip-hop is at least partially to blame for the declining role of Christianity in America (Walsh). He said in 2015, “People of faith are being marginalized by a secular media and pernicious entertainment. The rap industry, for example, often glorifies depraved behavior, and that sinks into the minds of some young people—the group that is most likely to reject religion” (Walsh). Similarly, former presidential candidate Ben Carson has said, “When I talk about the Hip Hop community, I’m talking about the aspect of modern society that pretty much dismisses anything that has to do with Jesus Christ. That’s what I’m talking about” (BKollie). (In response, Bun B, a famous rapper who also works with Rice University’s Anthony Pinn on religion and hip-hop, tweeted that Ben Carson “doesn’t speak for Jesus Christ.”)

I'd argue that consumerism has generally taken over the role of religion in society – and the values of hip-hop, rather than replacing religion, are reflecting the values established by rampant consumerism at our economic base. In many ways, rappers – either as a religion itself or as a replacement for religion – worship at what activist Casey Gerald has described as “the altar of the American Dream, praying to the gods of my time: success, and money, and power” (Gerald). Similar changes can be seen in other art forms as well. In an article on “The Rise of Consumer Comedy,” Devin Blake writes that, in today’s society:

“We’ve shifted from seeing ourselves primarily as makers of things, craftspeople of one variety or another, to seeing ourselves primarily as consumers of things. As the legal scholar Harry Arthurs puts it, people ‘now seem to prefer alternative identities: as consumers and investors rather than as producers.’ In other words, we take pride in what we take in rather than what we know how to do.” (Blake)

Even within religion, we’ve seen a rise of the “Prosperity Gospel” of Joel Osteen and others, which promotes wealth and success and health in contrast to denouncing worldly pleasures, as many Christians have advocated throughout history.

Perhaps one could even argue that hip-hop’s role as a religion and its embrace of material wealth is a response to a Christianity that didn’t properly help Black Americans. For example, in his autobiography, Malcolm X. argued that the white man’s religion of Christianity brainwashed Black Americans into thinking that they should “always turn the other cheek, and grin, and scrape, and bow, and be humble, and to sing, and to pray, and to take whatever was dished out by the devilish white man; and to look for his pie in the sky, and for his heaven in the hereafter, while right here on earth the slave-master white man enjoyed his heaven.” (X, 188). Perhaps hip-hop’s focus on wealth and success is a rejection of Christianity’s “pie in the sky” – swapping out the false promise of eternal heaven for the possibility of immediate consumption.

Connected to religion, Kanye West rapped in “Never Let Me Down” that “in the land where niggas praise Yukons and getting paid / It’s gonna take a lot more than coupons to get us saved.” In a less poetic way, professors Jean and John Comaroff have written that, “In social theory, as well, consumption has become a prime mover. Increasingly, it is the factor, the principle, held to determine definitions of value, the construction of identities, and even the shape of the global ecumene” (Comaroff, 294). Throughout his career, Kanye West has both glorified and struggled with consumerism and materialism. Arguably his best line on the topic is from “Can’t Tell Me Nothing” – “I had a dream I could buy my way to heaven / When I awoke, I spent that on a necklace.”

Considering that the “social change that has accompanied the decline of the black church has to do with the demands that such utilitarian capitalism places on black Americans in their daily life, Bailey argues, “hip hop is an existential route that enables individuals to construct a viable community, even as they understand their way of life as individualistic at its core” (Miller, 49).

The complexities, as well as the contradictions, of Kanye cover an incredibly wide range of emotions and topics, ranging from the sacred to the profane. In 2004, Kanye West released the Grammy-winning song “Jesus Walks,” in which he raps that “radio needs this / They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus / That means guns, sex, lies, videotapes / But if I talk about God my record won’t get played, huh?” The rapper, who often wears a blinged-out ‘Jesus piece’ necklace, openly discussed Christianity, “the last real taboo in rap music” since “depravity had become so synonymous with rap that bad behavior got boring,” as *Complex* put it (Sweet). With that said, “Jesus Walks,” while a success on its own, had a limited impact on the genre as a whole. The song, journalist Shea Serrano wrote in *The Rap Year Book*, “was the best song of

2004 but it wasn't the most important, because it didn't (really) accomplish anything outside of its own success." In other words, there was not a huge surge in Christian-focused rap hits. In 2013, Kanye's album *Yeezus* included the song "I Am A God"; here's how Kanye responded when asked about it in an interview, according to Ralph Bristout of Revolt.tv:

Kanye West is talking about fighting the state of classism. . . . Yeezy touched on the matter of class-related disparity and used the controversial track "I Am a God" as an example. "When someone comes up and says, 'I am a God,' everybody says, 'Who does he think he is?' I just told you who I thought I was. A god!" he exclaimed. "Would it have been better if I had a song that said, 'I'm a Gangster' or if I had a song that said, 'I'm A Pimp,' all those colors fit better on a person like me, right?" "But to say you are a god, especially when you got shipped over to the country that you're in and your last name is a slave owner's. How could you say that, how could you have that mentality?" West pondered." (Bristout).

Admittedly, there are many possible reasons to not take Kanye's declaration seriously, but he does have a point that we live in a society that largely views gods as white males and that views thugs and pimps as black males. But in a world that doesn't give young Black men much of a chance, Kanye, as he spit in "Last Call" has used his "arrogance as the steam to power my dreams" instead of letting "these dream killers kill my self-esteem." Julius D. Bailey argues in *Religion in Hip Hop* that rappers like Kanye West and Jay Z preach "a philosophy of self-empowerment and entitlement that refuses the idea of mediation between the self and whatever higher power one may feel close to" (Miller, 45). Writing for *Vulture*, Rembert Browne acknowledges that the majority of the world sees Kanye West as "crazy." But Browne also notes, "Kanye was raised to believe that his destiny was not just that of a world-renowned black man but the saint of his time, and possibly even a martyr," with his mother, Donda, telling a friend that "What people don't understand is that Kanye is the Martin Luther King of his generation" (Browne). Browne describes West as "probably our foremost case study in the contemporary

American male ego” with his “many rhetorical gestures, a truly messianic sense of purpose, and an amazing conviction that one’s ego is itself a kind of messianic purpose” (Browne).

8. Commodification of Hip-Hop

By 2001, rap music was generating over \$1.8 billion in sales, making up 12.9% of all music purchases – the second most popular genre, behind rock and roll and ahead of country (Sanneh). In that same year, Kelefa Sanneh wrote for *The New Yorker* that, “Like rock and roll in the nineteen-sixties, hip-hop is both a movement and a marketing ploy, and the word is used to describe almost anything that’s supposed to appeal to young people” (Sanneh). Money is so central to the identity of some rappers that, for example, 50 Cent’s lawyer had to defend 50 Cent (Curtis Jackson) for posting pictures on the social media platform Instagram in which he flaunts his cash – while he’s also dealing with a bankruptcy case (Rathon). Jackson’s lawyers argued that the money in the posted pictures isn’t real – it’s just to keep up Jackson’s persona of a wealthy rapper. Jackson’s lawyers told the judge, “if you look at Mr. Jackson or other Hip Hop artists, they’re aspirational. They come from poverty. Many of their fans are poor. They want their favorite rapper to be rich. Money is important to them. You look at his pre-bankruptcy persona, look at some of the videos, money is important” (Rathon). Despite facing bankruptcy, Jackson kept up a false appearance of wealth, which, according to a court filing, is simply part of Jackson’s “routine social media marketing activities.”

Of course, it’s not just hip-hop that is almost religiously devoted to materialism. A paper in 2014 by Keisha M. Cutright at Wharton, Tülin Erdem at Stern, Gavan J. Fitzsimons at Fuqua, and Ron Shachar at Arison found that when people are using brands to say something about their identity, they then tell us that they are less religious, and argued that “branding is overriding people’s religious beliefs” (Dodd). As a 2010 study in the journal *Marketing Science* puts it,

“brands allow people to express that they are meaningful, worthwhile beings, and deserving of good things in their lives” (Dodd). Some social psychologists refer to this personalization of consumerism as “brand anthropomorphism,” the “practice of projecting human qualities onto the things we buy,” according to the *New York Times* (Barro). Buying and displaying brands often provides the consumer with greater self-esteem, a great sense of self worth. In his song “Dead Prez,” rapper Capital Steez wonders, “So what I’m grindin’ for? To put these new Nikes on? Or to hide the scars from the eyes of God?” (Genius). For Steez, it would seem, he’s motivated to rap partly for a higher purpose, to mask his failures from the Almighty, but also for the materialism of it – the fly shoes. Macklemore tackles the issues of consumerism in his song “Wings,” rapping:

*I’m an individual, yeah
But I’m part of a movement
My movement told me be a consumer and I consumed it
They told me to just do it
I listened to what that swoosh said
Look at what that swoosh did
See, it consumed my thoughts*

The shoes, the brands – Macklemore wanted to be cool, and, in our capitalist culture, that meant having the latest and greatest stuff to wear. He continues in the song, saying that he’s attempting to change his consumerist tendencies:

*We are what we wear
We wear what we are
But see I look inside the mirror and think Phil Knight [the co-founder of Nike]
tricked us all
Will I stand for change?
Or stay in my box?
These Nikes help me define me
But I’m trying to take mine off*

This “Second Coming of Capitalism,” as dubbed by the Comaroffs, “appears both to include and to marginalize in unanticipated ways; to produce desire and expectation on a global scale yet to decrease the certainty of work or the security of persons; to magnify class differences but to undercut class consciousness” (Comaroff, 298). To put it another way, “The rising disparity in income and opportunity generated by a market economy that is paradoxically more open than ever before to talent regardless of race, gender, or creed poses an obvious social and ideological contradiction that American politicians of both parties have struggled to resolve,” according to *The Atlantic* (Samuels, David). In the song “Brand New,” Kanye West illustrates these points, rapping:

*I state the stats to stunt, I don't need to front
Make black history every day, I don't need a month
The survey says, by the streets according
Kanye's just important as Michael Jordan
Was to the NBA when he was scorin'
Ralph Lauren was borin' before I wore him and
I don't like it unless it's brand new.*

Kanye West is so talented that he makes history daily all on his own, so who needs Black History Month? The line could arguably be interpreted as Kanye West suggesting that his individual achievements overshadow the rest of black history – perhaps, to use the Comaroffs’ phrase, undercutting class (or racial) consciousness. Kanye West then brags that, according to the streets – hip-hop’s original audience – he’s just as important as legendary basketball star Michael Jordan. Of course, we shouldn’t make the mistake of taking Kanye’s lyrics too literally, but I would argue that the braggadocio of Kanye and other rappers is simply a blunt, if exaggerated, expression of the widespread, pre-existing, and entrenched individualism of America. In “All Falls Down,” Kanye West discusses his desire for the American Dream:

*Man I promise, I'm so self conscious
That's why you always see me with at least one of my watches
Rollies and Pasha's they done drove me crazy
I can't even pronounce nothing, pass that ver-say-see (Versace)!
Then I spent 400 bucks on this
Just to be like, 'Nigga, you ain't up on this!' ...
It seems we living the American Dream
But the people highest up got the lowest self esteem...
We shine because they hate us, floss cause they degrade us
We trying to buy back our 40 acres*

Like Kanye's line about Ralph Lauren, this verse takes us back to the way that brands help us construct our identities, and how, according to the Comaroffs, "[C]lass comes to be understood, in both popular and scholarly discourse, as yet another personal trait or lifestyle choice" (Comaroff, 306). Kanye West masks his insecurities by buying expensive brands that he can't even pronounce. But here, unlike how he distanced himself from class struggle in his previously mentioned line about Black History Month, Kanye sees himself within a social context. Despite the fact that African-Americans have been historically excluded from the "American Dream" – or perhaps *because* of that fact – Kanye West aspires to "shine" and "floss" because White America hates African-Americans and degrades African-Americans; Kanye West wants to "buy back our 40 acres" that freed slaves were promised (then mostly denied) after the Civil War. Kanye West has made songs about he and other Black rappers are the "New Slaves" of today's world. Discussing his ventures into designing clothes – an industry in which he consistently claims to have been difficult to get connections as a Black man – he refers to himself as a "Rich slave in the fabric store picking cotton." Of course, a wealthy entrepreneur like Kanye West in a store choosing which materials to use for his clothes is significantly different than actual slaves who were forced to pick cotton – but perhaps that's also Kanye's point. Kanye has also said in his music that "Doin' clothes, you would have thought I had help

[from other designers or companies] but they wasn't satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself," noting that, while he's not legally discriminated against today, he, especially as a Black man, still can't avoid facing discrimination, though a discrimination not as overtly hateful as the previous treatment of African Americans. Kanye West presents himself as a sort of paradox both embracing and denouncing consumerism. Eddie Stats of OkayPlayer.com beautifully explains:

“That Kanye has always been hyper-aware of commodity fetishization—even as he dives into it headfirst—is almost undeniable to someone who knows his whole catalogue from the days of “All Falls Down” to *Yeezus*. . . . That he has parlayed that hyper-awareness of the magic that certain objects create in us—the spell that commodities put us under, totally separate from their functional use-value as tools or objects—into a crazy program of self-empowerment is equally beyond question. Uniquely self-reflective, Ye's artistic career has by turn hypnotized us and then demystified the process of hypnotism—only to hypnotize us again.” (Stats)

Going back to “All Falls Down,” Kanye discusses a “single black female addicted to retail” who's “dealin' with some issues that you can't believe,” who desires wealth to the point where she “couldn't afford a car so she named her daughter Alexis [A Lexus].” He goes on to regret that “I got a couple past-due bills, I won't get specific / I got a problem with spendin' before I get it.”

At the very least, Kanye seems acutely aware, if not generally disapproving, of consumerism. Recognizing this, it was surprising for many when, in 2013, Kanye West collaborated with clothing brand A.P.C. to sell a \$120 plain white, cotton t-shirt. The blatantly over-priced generic shirt quickly sold out. Perhaps Kanye West actually thinks his shirt was a special product worth \$120 (he does, after all, consider himself a God), but perhaps Kanye West recognized the power of commodity fetishization and used it to his advantage (Stats). I would argue that Kanye West is and has been, in many ways, commodified, but that he's skillfully empowered himself by doing so. In the previously mentioned interview, Kanye described himself: “I am [Andy] Warhol. I am the number one most impactful artist of our generation. I am

Shakespeare in the flesh. Walt Disney.” But immediately after comparing himself to *people*, he then compares himself to *brands* like Nike and Google; he sees himself as a commodity as well. As Jay Z famously spit in “Diamonds From Sierra Leone (Remix),” “I’m not a businessman. I’m a business, man!” In some ways Kanye, the son of a former Black Panther, comes off as a rhyming Marxist, yet in other ways he’s an unapologetic capitalist. J. Cole has also noted that it’s “funny how money, chains, and whips make me feel free” (‘chains’ here as slang for jewelry/bling as well as literally, and ‘whips’ as slang for fancy cars as well as literally) in his song “Blow Up.”

Michael Eric Dyson mentions the general fact that “the masses seem to be attracted to producers of the lowest-quality entertainment while the makers of superior art suffer by comparison” (Dyson, 149). Chang writes that hip-hop’s break into the mainstream and its corporatization, while beneficial for some, have led to “a steady narrowing of voices available through the majors’ channels, a decrease in the diversity of sounds, opinions, ideas, news, and art available to mass audiences” (Chang, 445). In “Moment of Clarity,” Jay Z, for whom Sanneh writes “sound business practice trumps artistic ambition,” admits and addresses that he dumbs down his songs in order to make more money, comparing himself to more lyrically complex MCs Talib Kweli and Common Sense (Sanneh):

*I dumbed down for my audience to double my dollars
They criticized me for it, yet they all yell “holla”
If skills sold, truth be told, I'd probably be lyrically Talib Kweli
Truthfully, I wanna rhyme like Common Sense
But I did 5 mill' - I ain't been rhyming like Common since.*

As a result of this commercialization, Dyson argues, “Great rhetoric [in hip-hop] has lost its sway as noble verbal art has been replaced by the mindless redundancy of themes we’re all too familiar with: women, weed, wine, cars, and jewelry. The thug persona has replaced skillful

exploration of the thug's predicament: hustling in a culture where crime is the only option of the economically vulnerable" (Dyson, 148). But it's not necessarily accurate to act as if hip-hop hasn't always at least had an element of the glorification of wealth and success. For example, in 1979's "Rapper's Delight," the first commercially successful rap song ever, The Sugarhill Gang rapped about having "more money than a sucker could ever spend." Obviously as a multi-billion dollar industry, hip-hop has a significant economic impact. But as J. Cole noted in his song "Miss America," hip-hop is not only "about dollars" but also "about change."

I would also argue that part of the appeal of Kanye West is his ability to bounce back and forth between, and sometimes even blend, the "conscious" and the "ign'ant," as *Complex* put it (though the idea is similar to Durkheim's idea of the sacred and the profane) (Sweet). The Conscious, defined by *Complex*, "demands that rap speak to social and political issues, and espouse a value system of self-respect, brotherhood, and collective well-being" (Sweet). The Ign'ant is about "self-gratification by any means necessary, including but not limited to the cardinal sins: gluttony, wrath, greed, lust—getting yours right now no matter what, the next fool be damned" (Sweet). Kanye can smoothly transition between lamenting how Black Americans have been "Merrill Lynched" (as he does in "Crack Music") and asking for an investor to "be the Medici family and stand up and let me create more" (as he said in the previously mentioned interview).

Dyson recognizes that "thousands of young black professionals," led by black Americans "who seized corporate America *on their own terms*" like Jay Z and Russell Simmons, "eat from hip hop's table, in the sense that it has provided spin-off spaces in corporate America for lawyers, managers, accountants, and the like, who handle a hip hop clientele" (Dyson, 54). Indeed, rappers have long empowered themselves and protested against the dominant white

culture. Dyson writes, “Hip hop seized the reins of its destiny and insisted that it make music its way, and white folk could cross over to them” (Dyson, 56). For example, Jay Z, also in “Renegade,” raps that his music can “penetrate pop culture” and “bring ‘em [mainstream audiences] a lot closer to the block.” DJ Kool Herc agrees that hip-hop has “created a lot of jobs that otherwise wouldn’t exist” (Chang, XI). Chang writes, that “some hip-hop artists – not to mention executives, entrepreneurs, promoters, managers, and others – cashed in and built bigger empires than black artists of previous generations might have ever imagined possible” (Chang, 445). Sanneh wrote that, “What’s most unexpected about this boom is the reaction of the rappers themselves, who rose to prominence as icons of rebellion and authenticity. They have not only accepted corporate rap but embraced it” (Sanneh).

Jay Z and Kanye West address their status as wealthy Black men in 2011’s “Niggas in Paris,” a four-time-platinum and two-time-Grammy-winning song which Serrano considers to be “the apotheosis of luxury rap” (Serrano, 205). While “Gangsta rap reported the street-level overt carnage that came with being an underprivileged black male in a society that seemed better equipped to destroy black men than raise them up,” Serrano argues, “Jay Z and Kanye’s luxury rap reported the mental lashing that came with being a wealthy black male in a high society that was better equipped at ignoring wealthy black men than understanding them” (Serrano, 205). The song could also arguably be seen as a superstructure resulting from the change of Jay Z and Kanye’s economic base – now that their economic situations have radically changed, so has their music.

In many ways, Jay Z is the embodiment of the rags-to-riches American Dream. While not the first to tell his story, Jay Z has told his rise from the ‘hood “to a wider cross section of the population – children, rap nerds, corporate America” – than those before him, according to *GQ*

Magazine. The magazine continued: “No hip-hop artist who owes his credibility to the street has moved farther beyond it and into the rarefied air of twenty-first-century high society than Jay has” (Pappademas). The former drug dealer grew up in a single-parent home in Bedford-Stuyvesant’s Marcy City Housing Projects. According to Sanneh, Jay Z, who “has turned the project name into a hip-hop brand name,” is “the greatest of the corporate rappers,” noting that he’s owned record labels, clothing companies, production companies, and more (Sanneh). Sanneh wrote, “Many rappers have made money, and lots of it, but none have rapped so eloquently about making money, or about the lure of wealth and ambition.” With that said, presenting Jay Z as only a by-the-bootstraps story, according to *The Atlantic*, “denies both the rapper and his audience the credit that they deserve for confronting class and cultural tensions in a creative, even visionary, way” (Samuels, David). For example, in the opening lines of “Renegade,” Jay Z addresses the criticisms that he only discusses bling by pointing out that he’s influenced by an environment that was ruined by White America:

*Motherfuckers say that I'm foolish I only talk about jewels
Do you fools listen to music or do you just skim through it?
See I'm influenced by the ghetto you ruined
That same dude you gave nothing, I made something doing
What I do, through and through and
I give you the news with a twist, it's just his ghetto point-of-view*

According to *The Atlantic*, Jay Z’s ability “to present his wealth and privilege as having been fully earned, while also identifying with the streets he grew up on, makes him the most important popular artist in America today.”

But, unfortunately, it’s not always the case that Black artists are fully compensated for their contributions to the art. Especially compared to other forms of expression like preaching or writing, rap music is more accessible and catchier, which can make it more empathetic and

popular, but also easier to exploit and commodify. While African Americans still make up the majority of hip-hop artists, white-dominated corporate America is its main marketer, distributor, controller and profiteer – even in an industry with significant representation, the historically black culture of hip-hop can reinforce the racial hierarchies in society (“Rise”). As explained in *Socialism and Democracy Online*, allowing the white corporate powers to control an artist “becomes a trap we fall into because we believe money gets us power. Right now what money gets us is bought” (“Rise”). Chang writes that, instead of an integration that lifts everyone involved, corporate involvement with hip-hop threatens “to confer the trappings of integration while preserving the realities of segregation and inequality” (Chang, 421). Many rappers themselves are aware of this exploitation; in “The Greatest Story Never Told,” rapper Saigon discusses how, even after slavery and even with influence in popular culture, the black community doesn’t get a fair return: “We was brought here to pick the cotton / Now we pickin the music that massa listen to, the clothes in which he rockin’. We don't drive a hard bargain / All we want back is crack, some more gats and some more of that bullshit rap.”

9. Conclusion: Crack Music and Opiates

So, in many ways, hip-hop could be seen as a rebellion against the status quo, an attack on the dominant – and oppressive – white culture. Dyson notes the importance of hip-hop, “Words are important . . . as a means to escape suffering, especially by exposing its horrible intrusion into one’s group or neighborhood, or to grapple with a white supremacist society that refuses to acknowledge our fundamental humanity” (Dyson, 76). DJ Kool Herc has written, “Music is sometimes a medication from reality” (Chang, XII). And, going off of Marx, I would argue that merely affecting popular culture (as hip-hop does) only changes the superstructure of society, rather than its base. Therefore, similarly to how Marx viewed religion, hip-hop could

arguably be viewed as a form of escapism; Kanye West even compares music to crack cocaine in his song “Crack Music.” Hip-hop, it could be argued, is an ‘opiate of the masses,’ in response to a society that especially alienated them. Or, as Touré wrote, “Hip-hop didn’t have to become complicit in spreading the message of the criminalblackman, but the money it made from doing so was the drug it just couldn’t stop getting high on” (Touré).

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11. About the Author:

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