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## **CRITIQUE OF THE APPROPRIATION OF BLACK CULTURE BY WHITE SUBURBAN YOUTH**

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This critique is an examination of the appropriation of black culture by white suburban youth as being not only racist, but sexist. The primary view of this phenomenon is through the lens of hip hop culture and its commercialization by patriarchally dominated white corporations to increase profit by targeting the music to white suburban youth. This creates a distinct change within the critical content of the culture as an original context by replacing it with a focus that objectifies women, encourages violence and glamorizes the consumption of drugs and alcohol. In addition, there exists an intentional promotion of luxury consumerism that is far removed from the predominant realities within urban black experience.

This phenomenon is definitely racist and simultaneously sexist. It creates a need for competition between the two races to maintain a hypermasculinity that is damaging not only to males, but females as well, on the basis of degradation of women by men that is further promoted in a manner in which females become willing participants in their own objectification and denigration. A metamorphosis is then created whereby white supremacist assumptions about black culture are perpetuated and masculinity, as a performance, further marginalizes women and creates a movement of regression in response to advancements achieved by feminism.

Critique of the Appropriation of Black Culture by White Suburban Youth

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In the United States, there is a phenomenon of cultural appropriation expressed in the white emulation of black culture. Although many different cultures are represented and exist within the United States, this particular phenomenon operates differently than does assimilation or acculturation. Assimilation and acculturation are terms often used interchangeably, and are relatively close in meaning; however, they both primarily operate with someone from another culture being forced to adapt to a new culture or becoming accustomed to a new culture under the influence of a dominant culture, as in instances of colonization and immigration.

Appropriation operates differently, and in this instance, the dominant culture is adopting cultural behaviors and using them as if the cultural behaviors were their own. Although there is a female dimension to this phenomenon, the research focuses specifically on the male appropriation of black, urban culture. Furthermore, it is my argument (which I develop here at length) that the cultural appropriation is essentially gendered and male driven. Specifically; white, male, suburban youth are emulating their black, predominately male, urban counterparts in dress, manner and language as those dress, manners and language are performed in hip hop music.

These emulative youth are often identified as “wiggers” or “whiggers” (white niggers) although the terminology is no longer in fashion. The emulative behavior extends beyond an affinity for black, urban, hip hop music, encompassing the performance of the black, urban male in absence of the factors that contribute to the creation of this persona for blacks in their urban communities. An important consideration within this appropriated behavior is the lack of experiences within white, suburban culture that are original cultural components of black culture. White, urban males do not typically experience the

anger and frustration that results from the economic, racial and educational marginalization, or the communities saturated with drugs, and the violence that accompanies them. These cultural components become distanced, if not removed, from their original cultural contexts, potentially constructing diverse meaning(s) that differ from the original intent or minimalization of meaning in contrast to the original intent within the culture being appropriated from.

The effort in which I engage here is a critique grounded in McKerrow's (1989) theory of critical rhetoric. The object of this critical rhetoric is the appropriation of black culture by white, suburban youth which, I argue, is the product of both a racist and sexist mindset. The racist and sexist appropriation of black, urban culture is driven, moreover, by the commercialization of that culture by predominately white, supremacist, patriarchal (which is to refer to power that comes from the dominant white, male, ethnocentric power structures) corporations seeking to increase profits by targeting the music to white, suburban youth, which is addressed more specifically later in this research. This creates a distinct change within the critical content of the culture as an original context by replacing it with a focus that objectifies women, encourages violence and glamorizes the consumption of drugs and alcohol. Additionally, there is the promotion of unbridled consumerism that is far removed from the normative predominant realities within black urban existence.

### Critical Rhetoric

Raymie McKerrow (1989) describes critical rhetoric as a practice which serves to demystify and connect, through engaged and subjective critique, seemingly unrelated forces of knowledge/power in society in order to recognize how they can create

conditions of oppression and marginalization. McKerrow asserted, “In practice, critical rhetoric seeks to demystify the discourse of power and to comprehend the integration of power/knowledge in society – what possibilities or changes the integration invites or inhibits” (p. 91).

While this critique is examining the phenomenon of appropriation in this instance, it must infiltrate deeper into the systems of power and domination that support its existence by examining the societal structures that motivate white, suburban youth to emulate their black, urban counterparts while looking simultaneously at the sexist and racist implications. Particular to the appropriation evidenced in the world of hip-hop, critical rhetoric becomes a lens used to view how systems of power and domination are created, realized, and maintained in this performance of emulation.

The object of this critical rhetoric is the appropriation of black, urban culture by white, usually middle or upper middle class, suburban youth and this exercise is warranted, in part, by the extent of the cultural appropriation which is taking place on an unprecedented scale. This is not to claim there has never been an exchange of musical contexts between cultures or races before. Jazz, ragtime, be-bop, rhythm and blues, and other musical genres whose roots reach back into primarily African cultures have influenced music in the United States long before now.

Anderson (2002) noted that many of the musical migrations occurring after the onset of World War II were a direct result of changes in socio-economic status within black communities due to population shifts and technological advances which initiated black pride and black purchasing power never before experienced in the United States (p. 13). The changes in socio-economic status would precipitate the aforementioned forms of

music migrating to the masses in the United States, making their way into the range of white listeners and expanding the popularity and profitability of these musical genres.

Best and Kellner (1999) asserted that, like many of the various genres before, “it is hip hop culture and its distinctive sound of rap music that is becoming an important form of music and cultural style throughout the globe” (The Moment of Hip Hop section, ¶ 1) as it migrates to the masses to reach populations outside predominately black communities.

Best and Kellner (1999) further described hip hop:

Hip hop culture is intense body culture; it finds its expression in dance and gesture. Expressive, dynamic, and energetic, hip hop gave rise to new forms of dance like break-dancing, as gesture, movement, and bodily rhythm are key aspects of its cultural style as well as musical performance. Hip hop is a highly vocal culture and rap music provides its voice and its sound. Drawing on the sonorities and inflections of the rhythms of everyday vernacular discourse, as well as the sounds of traditional music, creative use of previous musical technology, and appropriation of new musical technologies, hip hop is noisy, oral, and rhythmic, providing a soundtrack for life in a high-tech world of rapid transformation and turbulent change. Hip hop is also highly visual, creating its distinctive art form of graffiti and urban art, as well as fashion (B Boy, wild style, and ghetto street couture) that provides extremely strong visual imagery, which also serve as models of fashion and badges of cultural identity and belonging. Together, these forms provide a vivid hip hop spectacle, providing style, identity, politics, and a way of life for individuals throughout the world. Rap is thus the voice and sound of hip hop culture while dance and bodily movement enact its rhythms and moves; graffiti inscribes spatial identity and presence and fashion provides subcultural style; music videos present a compendia of hip hop's sounds and images; and digitized multimedia furnish a sign of its migration into new cultural terrains and the next millennium. Encompassing style, fashion, and attitude, hip hop culture thus becomes a way of

living, a genuine subculture and way of life, appropriate for the postmodern adventure. (The Moment of Hip Hip section ¶ 2).

What is unique about this particular instance in history, as well as music history, is that the current musical focus, while ostensibly paying homage to black, urban culture, proceeds from both racist and sexist assumptions and thus not only capitalizes upon those assumptions but perpetuates them. While the focus of this music did not begin in the way it is seen, heard and experienced now, it has progressed to where it now is, and is further complicated by the commercialization of hip hop music by predominately white, patriarchally dominated corporations seeking increased profits. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to challenge those assumptions and expose the heretofore unseen hand of white, supremacist, patriarchal power, and that it is power that can be challenged.

### Historical Context

World War II was a major turning point for women in the United States. Many women had worked in the factories and had, in spite of the concerted effort to get women out of the factory and back into the home, the possibility of economic – and thus social and political power – which could not be erased from the feminine imagination. Soon thereafter, the birth control pill provided women with safe and effective control of their bodies and Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* became a voice for the needs and wants of women that was in contrast to the ideals of the domestic goddess that preceded it. This singular book was the spark that lit the fire to expose the limited opportunities and inequality of laws that existed in relation to women. It should be noted that Friedan's perspective was an upper middle-class, white perspective, which did not necessarily address the concerns of women also marginalized by race, socio-economic status or sexual orientation. The main importance was that this response was specifically aimed to



illuminate the possibilities for potential of those who were not male.

The general impact of these and other social and political changes throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s was a slow, but noticeable advance in the status of women unequalled in any period of prior history. While inequalities still exist, some women have garnered upper level positions within the working world and gained entry into domains that were formerly controlled by men and have been very successful at a variety of endeavors. Laws have been enacted to prevent discrimination and to empower women, helping them to reach their true potential and to have opportunities to realize financial independence as never before; although admittedly, the current economic climate makes working more of a necessity for masses of women than at any time in previous history. The way women viewed themselves and were viewed by others began to change and women were finally becoming people in their own right, as opposed to the domestic or sex goddesses that men had been comfortable with. Women were making considerable contributions to society everyday in a variety of ways and realizing unprecedented autonomy. However, some patriarchal viewpoints saw these gains not as a complement to their efforts, but as a threat to their masculinity, as men no longer had the level of control over women they had been accustomed to.

Concurrent with the feminist movement, there was also an effort on the part of gay, lesbian and later, the transgendered, to bring about similar changes on behalf of nonheterosexuals. Although not yet as successful and slower in coming, homosexual advocates succeeded in bringing about changes in rights for homosexuals. Burgdorf (n.d.) wrote that many states removed sodomy from their criminal codes, with Illinois being the first state in the United States to do so. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association

removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses and a National Gay Task Force was created. In 1975, the federal Gay Rights Bill was proposed in Congress. Following a few years later, Anita Bryant was waging a campaign against homosexual rights while Disneyland would host its first Gay Day, later adopting employment policies that did not discriminate against homosexuals. The rainbow flag became a symbol of homosexual pride before the first national Homosexual Rights March in Washington, D.C. Just three years later, in 1982, the first Gay Games were held in San Francisco; a city noted for a significant homosexual population. All of these events served to promote the rights of homosexuals while being perceived by heterosexual men as another, but more direct, threat to masculinity, as it affected not only women, but men as well (1862 – 1969; 1969-1980; 1980-1995).

Of course, a proper perspective would not be complete without mention of the Civil Rights Movement. This movement had further reaching effects than feminist movements or homosexual movements; although it should be noted that black men were granted the right to vote before women. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, whites and blacks could not occupy the same public space simultaneously without fear of consequences for the black members of society, in particular. Prior to the movement, blacks were often unjustly treated in the judicial system and were sought out to become recipients of various forms of abuse by those whose ignorance created an unnatural state of fear among white communities. Although the changes resulting from the Civil Rights Movement were not instantaneous, they progressively provided more rights of equality for blacks that were finally able to be claimed by blacks. Though as recently as 1992, race riots erupted in south-central Los Angeles, California, following the decision of a

jury to acquit four white police officers for beating a black man, Rodney King, which was caught on videotape. Even with the Civil Rights Movement, blacks have been racially profiled by law enforcement and still suffer discrimination, though to a much lesser degree, as society still has room for improvement in this regard.

Many of the gains of feminist, homosexual and civil rights movements would collectively serve as a threat to the previous systems of patriarchy, though predominately white, and their associative masculinity. The white, middle class, heterosexual male who had to this point been secure before this multidimensional assault on his privilege, began to feel encroachment into his exclusive territory that had existed with minimal alteration prior to these movements. The lessened power and perceived threat to masculinity produced a disturbing sense of discontentment that white males had no previous experience dealing with.

Whenever considerable progress is made in terms of equality for women, backlash movements against feminism are virtually guaranteed to occur. In regards to backlash, Susan Faludi (1991) stated,

...its rhetoric charges feminists with all the crimes it perpetuates. The backlash line blames the women's movement for the "feminization of poverty" – while the backlash's own instigators in Washington pushed through the budget cuts that helped impoverish millions of women, fought pay equality proposals, and undermined equal opportunity laws (xxii).

It is no secret that many of the policies affecting women are, in fact, made and decided upon, by men. As women continue to make progress, in spite of attempts to dissuade their efforts, the threat to masculinity only increases. While progress has been made since Faludi's book was published in 1991, wage gaps still exist between men and women and while women may have "access" to the same rights, privileges and opportunities as men

in many spheres, it has not yet become an actuality in all spheres. England provides an historical example of the epitome of leadership of a country in Queen Elizabeth I, yet the United States still has not seen a president who was not male. Some views discredit the gains and potential gains of women; making these accomplishments appear insignificant so as to discourage further attempts of feminism to make further claims for increased equality. Other views perceive women to be unsupportive of family values. Either way, the backlash movements are largely indicative of the perceived threat to masculinity by men as a response to the disruption of the power structures that men had previously controlled.

This experience of discontentment and encroachment for predominately white males has been reflected in society through socialization and media influence and been transferred, in osmosis-like fashion, to predominately white, male suburban youths who, as a result, perceive a need to affirm their masculinity, as well as an outlet with which to express it. Apparently unable to find “a pose,” (a manner in which to behave or assume a mental attitude intended to have others perceived them in a particular manner), to reaffirm their masculinity within white suburban culture, the primary outlet chosen for expression was derived from the hip hop culture. But why hip hop - a societal expression from oppressed black communities, as an outlet for expression among white, predominately male, suburban youth? Although hip hop began with more focus on conscious messages within its lyrics, it has been altered with time and by society to represent some common criteria for masculinity. Combine this with the fact that these youth, because they are youth, do not have any genuine power socially, politically or otherwise, and this choice begins to make sense. Hurt (2006) contended, “Even though

they don't have any legitimate power, they do have their bodies which can be utilized for posturing and displaying hypermasculine behavior" (2006). When power is conveyed through the representations of masculinity, young males will emulate it. Not only do many of the representations of masculinity within the hip hop culture convey power, they also represent a lifestyle that is seen and perceived as profitable, which makes it all the more appealing

However, there are some components within this representation of masculinity that predominately white, male suburban youths cannot comprehend or convey. There is a definitive lack of "street credibility" within this performance that reflects the lack of experience of the original context from which hip hop was created. The black, urban youth experience was originally expressed as one in which life and death is a situation that may be confronted on any given day in their lives. Very few white youth have had to be concerned about gangs, weapons or being at abnormally high risk to die early because of the color of their skin. Byron Hurt (2006) provided the following statistics:

- Homicide is the leading cause of death for black men between 15-34 years old
- Black males are 14 more times likely to be homicide victims than any other racial group
- 49% of all gunshot victims are black males between 15-24

While white, suburban, males can wear the baggy jeans with no belt that emulates prison life, wear a do-rag and wear heavy jewelry while assuming the tough posture of this representation of masculinity, they do not have the contextual basis for it that makes their appearance or their performance of this masculine representation credible. A popular hip hop icon is Eminem, and though he is in fact white, he has also been the most successful white, hip hop artist, in part, because his appropriation is perceived as

authentic. Though he is white, he has had the genuine experience of the black, urban culture and the toughness that he conveys makes his survival of it is perceived as authentic. Therein lays the magnetic quality of this culture, because white male youth perceive the ability to appear to be tough without actually having to be tough. Vanilla Ice, by contrast, saw his popularity vanish when it became known that his performance was a pose; that he was, in fact, a suburban, white kid acting 'black'.

Even within this representation of masculinity that white youth perceive as “tough” and “masculine,” there is a fallacy, which is this: hip hop is not really even “black or urban” anymore, but rather a white, supremacist construction of that culture. When asking ourselves how that can be, all we have to do is look at the power structures that promote hip hop and the statistics of the commercialization of hip hop. The Public Broadcasting Service [PBS] (2007) provided the following statistics:

- The hip hop industry garners more than ten billion dollars a year
- Seventy percent of mainstream hip hop is consumed by young white men
- Four companies (Viacom, Clear Channel, ABC Radio and Entercom) command two thirds of all news radio
- Five media conglomerates control more than eighty percent of broadcast and cable television viewing (Warner Bros., Sony BMG, Universal, EMI and Vivendi)
- Clear Channel owns and operates at least one station in each of the top radio markets in the U.S.
- More than 90% of record labels, magazines, TV stations, radio stations and retailers disseminating hip hop related products are white owned (the facts - sidebar)

The productive context of hip hop and the money that perpetuates it becomes significant for the fact that “he who pays that piper calls the tune.” The reason this becomes so important is the mediated construction of blackness that is seen and heard is very controlled, which defines the limited representations of masculinity that the general public has access to.

The mediated construction perpetuates a black, masculine identity that is degrading to others, with no respect for the lives of others, and simultaneously misogynistic. As Jackson Katz pointed out in Hurt’s (2006) documentary, “... young people of color are being presented with the idea that somehow these people represent us and they’re cool and they’re going to stand in for us against the white power structure, while they are completely subservient to that white power structure.” Chuck D. said during an interview in Hurt’s (2006) documentary, of the BET (Black Entertainment Television), “BET is the cancer of black manhood in the world because they’ve one-dimensionalized us and commodified us into being a one trick image.”

The narrow lens of masculinity for black males that is mediated has an extremely perpetuating effect because of the viewpoint originating from and within primarily white corporations. These representations draw upon the deeply entrenched, white supremacist assumptions about black males as hypersexual and hyperviolent that are ingrained in historical contexts that are not always factual, but nonetheless accepted as though they are. A prime example of this was discussed in Hurt’s (2006) documentary, with the D.W. Griffith movie, *Birth of a Nation*, “which spread fear and paranoia about black masculinity with its mean spirited stereotypes of black men as lazy, untrustworthy, oversexed and dangerous – particularly to white women – and gave rise to the Ku Klux

Klan.” These assumptions are reflective of the homophobia and afrophobia witnessed in white power structures. These constructed representations contribute to the public perception of what blackness is, which serves to further marginalize black males while simultaneously oppressing them in a very abstract method whose origins are not able to be directly confronted due to the difference in resources available to blacks compared to predominately white, patriarchal, capitalistic structures that have significantly more resources at their disposal.

When a comparison between whites and blacks is made with respect to access to power and privilege, it initially seems somewhat enigmatic as to why there would be a desire for white males to emulate black males. There is commonly less access to higher positions within society, less access to higher education and less access to resources that would assist in promotion of the black community as a whole within a perception that is very narrowly defined and perpetuated. There is nothing for white males to gain materially from appropriation when viewed from this perspective. However, when viewed in terms of perceptions of masculinity, the perception of potential gain becomes clear. When, in our society, masculinity is understood as sexually dominant, as controlling, as powerful and too often, as violent, and where that ideal of masculinity is threatened, we should not be surprised to see young, white men turn to extreme examples of the hypersexual, hyperviolent images in our own consciousness – the black male.

Previously in hip hop, before the infiltration of white corporations who commodified hip hop for sale to white, suburban youth; hip hop had significantly more conscious lyrics that were anti-white supremacy and provided social and political commentary on the issues affecting black communities. These types of messages go back to rap, a precursor



to hip hop, at a time when the oppression created rap to give black communities a voice. Rap can be traced back specifically to a form of communication called “playing the dozens” in which two men would oppose each other with verbal challenges that served to defend their position to the other as to why either one is tough and worthy of respect from the other which finds its furthest historical roots in African “signifying” (Dr. G. Aloisio, personal communication, November 7, 2006). Signifying is basically a rite of passage that is strongest in West Africa and several centuries old, though not used for that purpose in the United States. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Chairman of the Black Studies Program at Harvard University, explained in Anderson’s (2002) research that rap is “a contemporary form of a four-hundred year old tradition of “signifying” – rhythmic teasing, insulting, ridiculing indirectly to send a message to those listening in, punning often in lewd and off-color rhyme pattern... a release of pent-up anguish at the helplessness of their social circumstances. It’s another survival stratagem” (p. 134).

Anderson (2002) claimed the popularity of rap in the United States can be more specifically traced to “the 1970’s Jamaican street-pop music industry led, by and large, by the disc jockeys with their provocative “toasting” and “dubbing” (talk-overs – banter spoken during the playing of a song) performances” (p. 131). Best and Keller (1999) described the popularity of rap this way:

Rap music has emerged as one of the most distinctive and controversial music genres of the past decade. A significant part of hip hop culture, rap articulates the experiences and conditions of African-Americans living in a spectrum of marginalized situations ranging from racial stereotyping and stigmatizing to struggle for survival in violent ghetto conditions. In this cultural context, rap

provides a voice to the voiceless, a form of protest to the oppressed, and a mode of alternative cultural style and identity to the marginalized. Rap is thus not only music to dance and party to, but a potent form of cultural identity. It has become a powerful vehicle for cultural political expression, serving as the "CNN of black people" (Chuck D), or upping the high-tech ante, as their "satellite communication system" (Heavy D). It is an informational medium to tune into, one that describes the rage of African-Americans facing growing oppression, declining opportunities for advancement, changing moods on the streets, and everyday life as a matter of sheer survival. In turn, it has become a cultural virus, circulating its images, sounds, and attitude throughout the culture and body politic (¶1).

While many people outside the music industry would consider rap and hip hop to be synonymous, they are not. Rap defines the actual music, while hip hop defines the cultural accoutrements that go with it, such as the dance movements, the fashion and the graffiti that make hip hop a performance that is intricately tied to the music. Musically, the definition between the two are often used interchangeably, which is primarily due to the influence of white, capitalistic structures that don't truly understand the difference or care to examine what that difference might be.

However, most of the new musical genres to come into popularity in the past (with the exception of disco) came from the lower socio-economic classes of communities that have significant minority populations, which historically translates as black communities. Every time this occurs, the music finds its way out of these deprived neighborhoods and into mainstream music. Another event that also typically occurs in conjunction with these musical movements is the capitalization of them by white, corporate America, which

Anderson (2002) described this way, “Each time, the white community ignores the cries of anguish, cleans up what is too uncomfortable in the lyrics, whitens what is too black in the music, and turns the new musical style into a huge, new, profitable business” (p. 131). This aspect of capitalization, specifically applied to hip hop, basically strip-mines the critical content, focusing instead on the objectification of women and violence, consumption of drugs, alcohol and luxury consumerism that is far removed from the actual normative predominant realities within black urban existence.

Early on, Africka Bambaataa, who took his name from a 19<sup>th</sup> century Zulu chief, was an immensely popular disc jockey in the Bronx who Anderson (2002) said, “began to organize block parties and break dancing competitions to get the kids off the ghetto streets and into less violent and dangerous behavior” during the late seventies (p. 133). Grandmaster Flash, another popular disc jockey, took rap to a new level according to Anderson, (2002) through an “important recording, “The Message” in 1982, turning away from the party subjects of the time to focus on urban social issues – creating a new genre of rap” (p. 133). Moving toward the nineties, Brolin Winning related how N.W.A. (Niggers With an Attitude) integrated violent themes into their work:

Their deadly serious subject matter came straight from the streets of South Central Los Angeles, where rampant gang banging and crack slinging had turned the neighborhood into a virtual war zone (N.W.A. more - ¶1).

The most common complaints from white adults are the aggressive attitude, anger and vulgarity from artists such as N.W.A., which immediately draws a line of distinction between the youth and adult perceptions of the same music, making it that much more popular with white, suburban kids. These bored, white, suburbanites began to emulate their black counterparts without a true understanding of what it is like to live in an

environment where the color of your skin could be enough to be killed over; without a true understanding of what it is like to be black. This emulation was not just an affinity for black, urban, hip-hop music and culture, but a cooption of the mannerisms and vernacular that would earn the suburbanites the label “whigger” or “wigger” (white nigger).

The aggression and violence portrayed in most of the music videos for hip hop we now see represent the extreme examples of hypermasculinity and hypersexuality. When Byron Hurt was compiling his documentary and visited Daytona, Florida, he interviewed many young, black men who want to break into hip hop. A recurrent theme of lyrics replayed itself many times. Hurt (2006) stated, “All they seemed to rhyme about was gunplay, killing other men, being tough, invulnerable, feminizing other men and putting fear into another man’s heart.” The lyrics and the videos simultaneously portray this violence against others but do so in a way that becomes glamorized. A major icon in hip hop is 50 Cent, who in real life, survived being shot nine times and in one of his videos, “Many Men”, this event is re-enacted, making 50 Cent the epitome of toughness and masculinity. It’s difficult to top the toughness of being shot *nine* times and surviving it. Videos often show street scenes of black men running around with guns, trying to kill other black men while trying not to get killed themselves. Even the young men Hurt (2006) interviewed within his documentary conveyed how limited the view of media is, as one young man said, “they [record labels] think that we [blacks] don’t want to hear anything but lyrics about killing, raping, etc.”

Obviously, no one really gets hurt or actually dies in a music video, which becomes dangerous, as it removes the consequences from its associated action and takes away the

realistic impact of the event that it would otherwise have, but it still looks tough and it is being emulated in reality where someone can, and will, die. These are the representations of masculinity that young men see everyday through videos or listen to everyday through various electronic media. The lack of diversity within these representations should be a concern to our society, because if these are the primary representations of masculinity that permeates our society, these will also be the representation of masculinity that will become more and more of a reality. As Oscar Wilde once said, “Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.”

Another considerably disturbing representation within these videos is the manner in which women are represented. Women are continually objectified and degraded in music videos with misogynistic and vulgar lyrics while being portrayed as hypersexual objects in a way that is counter to many of the achievements made through feminism in terms of the way women are treated. Women are often referred to with derogatory labels, such as “bitch” and “ho” and their clothing is typically minimal (and at times this is a generous understatement) with hypersexualized body movements. Again, the problematic focus is on the limited representations of primarily black women that we are seeing and the fact that young people seeing these representations of masculinity in relation to black women and the control being exercised over these women sends a message that over time, with the level of repetition that is typical of music, can become internalized.

It becomes a process of socialization that can have generational effects as well, as most children are largely a product of their environment. As Sut Jhally commented in Hurt’s (2006) documentary, “”The really negative thing about all of this is that’s the only way in which women are presented and the only way in which men are allowed to make a

connection in the popular culture with women is through sexuality and it is only through their own desires.” Sadly, this statement contains a lot of truth. Is this the way we want future generations to think men and women interact? Michael Dyson brings a very interesting view to the argument in Hurt’s (2006) documentary, and stated, “If we have a glorified sense of our own victimization as black and brown men, what we must not miss and what we often do, is to understand that black and brown women themselves are so victimized, not only by a white patriarchy, but by black male supremacy and by the violence of masculinity that's directed toward them.”

One singular moment in one of Nelly’s videos, “Tip Drill” has done a lot toward emphasizing this argument more than any other when in the video, Nelly swipes a credit card down a woman’s backside. Sut Jhally (2007) explained “...the term “tip drill” signifies a woman who will allow man after man to have sex with her for money” (2007 documentary). There is also a Snoop Dogg video that shows a similar scene, so a repeat of this type of scene gives an indication of its acceptability. Dr. Jelani Cobb of Spelman College addressed images such as these within videos in Hurt’s (2006) documentary and said, “They have taken a view of women of color that is not radically different from the views of nineteenth century, white slaveholders.” Specifically in relation to black women, this further marginalizes them and continues to perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical images that do not just demoralize them within the context of a video, but also in society through a sense of entitlement by men. Sut Jhally (2007) related an incident in his documentary, *Dreamworlds 3*;

During the 2000 Puerto Rican Day Pride Parade in New York City, the public space of Central Park turned into a literal war zone for scores of women who were doused, sexually

assaulted and stripped of their clothes by groups of men who felt they had an entitlement to enact their desires on any female body. This footage, used by the police to identify and prosecute the assailants, shocked and outraged the country when it was broadcast. But when virtually identical images have been played out over and over again on our television screens with virtually no comment, why should we be shocked? In fact, what was most striking about those images was how familiar they were... While there are chilling similarities between the popular culture images and the real-life attacks in Central Park, there is a major difference. The women in the real world were not enjoying it. They weren't smiling. This wasn't their Dreamworld. It was someone else's, which had turned into their nightmare.

While this was one of a few isolated incidents, it is a warning to our society about the representations of women. They portray women in a context in which they can be controlled by men instead of controlling their own lives. Therefore, in addition to being denigrated and sexually commodified, they become willing participants in their own oppression in this regard. What also becomes of concern are the female consumers of these videos seeing women represented in this manner and internalizing these messages to mean that this is how women should act and should be treated, when they deserve to be treated with much more respect than what is witnessed in the context of these videos.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect that is out of its comparative context to the realities within black urban communities is the exaggerated perspective of what black urban communities are. Drug and various forms of chemical abuse are evident in society and they do not discriminate on the basis of race, gender or socio-economic status. The realistic views of chemical dependency within society, and particularly black communities, are that of the associated complexities that often accompany chemical dependency; lack of stable employment, criminal behavior, prostitution, homelessness,

sexually transmitted disease and child abuse and neglect; yet these are not the images that are seen in association with the consumption of drugs and alcohol evidenced within the hip hop videos.

Unfortunately, this aspect too, is glamorized, making it seem much less harmless than what it actually is – and this is an extremely dangerous message that our youth are receiving. These representations show no negative consequences for the most part and this is problematic, even though our youth are educated about drug use within our schools. They will remember the video images better and for much longer than the time they spend in a health class on the dangers of drug and chemical usage. In essence, they are receiving mixed messages, and navigating adolescence is difficult enough on its own. The messages we provide to our young people are one area in particular that we need to be clear and emphatic about with our youth, but the concern is that the glamorization will have more impact than we do. This sense of glamorization also extends to very upscale lifestyles that a rapper who is successful might be able to indulge in, but that is in conflict with the realities within the typical, black urban experience. What should be an important concern for all members of society is the manner in which this party-type culture is portrayed in such unrealistic terms toward the average youth in society.

While violence, objectification of women, and hypermasculinization do exist within society, it is the extreme misrepresentations that are glamorized and reflected within the hip hop culture that are cause for concern. The appropriation is therefore undoubtedly racist, both arising out of white, supremacist assumptions about black masculinity and the perpetuation of them while simultaneously being sexist, as it functions in such a manner that provides suburban, white youth with a refuge within which they can maintain their



masculine pose. However, the black communities are not necessarily viewing the potential for harm in many of these videos, as Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall conveyed in Hurt's (2006) documentary, "Generally speaking, black people do not believe that misogyny, sexism and violence against women are urgent issues. We still think that racism, police brutality and black male incarceration are the issues we should be concerned about."

This phenomenon is definitely racist and simultaneously sexist. It creates a need for competition between the two races to maintain a hypermasculinity that is damaging not only to males, but females as well on the basis of degradation of women by men that is further promoted in a manner in which females become willing participants in their own objectification and denigration. A condition is then created whereby white, supremacist assumptions about black culture are perpetuated and masculinity, as a performance, further marginalizes women and creates a movement of regression in response to advancements achieved by feminism. How to change these limited views becomes problematic, but as Talib Kweli said in Hurt's (2006) documentary, "We have never let the media define us, so why are we doing that now?"

The media will likely continue to define us, with or without our permission. Inaccurate representation by the media is not what we should allow to rule our perceptions of ourselves or others. While we may never be able to prevent the media from defining us, it does not mean that we are without power against the media. Our power against the media then, has to come from our ability to think critically about media representations; to question their perceptions and not allow them to define who we are. Moreover, we need

to become an active voice for media literacy in relation to our young people, because we are the only voice to counter the loudspeaker of the media.

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