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### How Has Hip-Hop Influenced White American Culture?

We are currently living in a hip-hop nation. “Hip-Hop Nation is a place as real as America on a Pre-Columbus atlas,” asserts Toure, contributing editor at *Rolling Stone* and the host of MTV 2’s “Spoke N’ Heard” (Toure 272). Young Americans, black and white alike comprise the hip-hop generation, a viable culture. Culture creates identity, and white America is identifying with and embracing hip-hop culture, which has created a nation ripe with “wiggers,” “wankstas” and “wannabes.” A wigger is a young white who identifies himself more with black culture than white culture. A wanksta is a wannabe gangster. A wannabe is someone who is uncomfortable being himself and is frantically trying to be someone else (Kitwana 113). Yet another cultural phenomena are “wiggas,” who are “fascinated wannabes who play it safe and get jiggy in the safety of their own cul-de-sac” (Aaron 230-31). Hip-hop has given rise to cultural miscegenation, a figurative inter-coupling of races in America; the reality of such racial symbiosis may shock and appall some, but others applaud this intermingling of the races. While hip-hop has frightened conservative white America and has prompted the call for censorship, it has also improved race relations more than any other social development since the civil rights movement.

Hip-hop is a relatively new form of music that originated in the South Bronx of New York in the mid-1970’s. It began as a mix of black and Afro-Caribbean cultures (Rose 2). Hip-hop is a derivation of rap (words spoken rhythmically) that contains breaks, beats, and scratches. Rap and hip-hop voice the critical social and political concerns of black America and originated as a “form of ‘testimony’ for the underclass” (hooks “Postmodern Blackness”). It has been called the “soul of young black America” (Morgan 1) due to its urban roots and ghetto beat. However, today’s mainstream hip-hop emerged around the late 1980s and early 1990s due to the commercialization of the music (Kitwana xii). In 1989, MTV discovered that black artists in many different genres were marketable to white suburban teenagers and thus dramatically reformatted their programming

(Rose 216). A major reason for the widespread success of hip-hop is due to the media and to global technology's ability to spread and make the music more accessible to extents that other popular genres of the past didn't have (Kitwana ix). Thus, while jazz drew whites to speakeasies in the 1920s, videos and the Internet brought hip-hop out of the inner-cities and into white suburban America. According to a study conducted by Soundscan, 71 percent of rap music is purchased by whites (Aaron 216). Purchase sales show that whites have embraced hip-hop, and that while it originated as the "soul of young black America," it is now, according to its immense following, the soul of an entire cross-cultural generation: the hip-hop generation.

The obsession with black culture is not a new thing; jazz, rock n' roll, blues, soul and rhythm & blues all have an extremely large white fan base and all originated as "black music" (Rose 8). Whites have always had a fascination with black culture, and this is often manifested within the entertainment industry. In regard to white fascination with black culture, scholar bell hooks comments that black culture adds "spice" to make white culture more exciting (hooks "Misogyny, Gangsta Rap, and the Piano"). White people are trying to take on another consciousness by loving black music and by claiming to have an understanding of black people through lyrics (Aaron 232). According to a 33-year-old, stay-at-home, white mom living in Cleveland, "We spend our entire day trying to fit into a perfect little bubble, the perfect \$500,000 houses, the perfect over-scheduled kids, the perfect husband. We love life, but we hate our lives. And so I think we identify more with hip-hop's passion, anger and frustration than we do with this dreamworld" (Kitwana 5). Since the white speaker emphasizes that she and her peers "hate [their] lives" and relate to hip-hop's "passion," social critic bell hook's notion that black culture spices up the blandness of white culture is applicable. In 2002, a market research company in Philadelphia, MEE Productions, Motivated Education Entertainment, released a study titled "The National Lifestyle Survey of African American Inner City Youth" and proclaimed black youth to be "the most influential and trend setting youth market in the world" (Kitwana 95). And, an MTV host recently stated, "When they write the history of popular culture in the 20th century, they can sum it up with one sentence which is, 'White kids wanting to be as cool as Black kids'" (Yousman 367). Even in areas where the population is predominantly white and the exposure to black culture is minimal, the fascination still exists: Oregon's population is 90% white, yet Eugene, a city with a black population of 1,800 out of 140,000, has a credible hip-hop scene; rappers sell out arenas in white Eugene (Kitwana 7). Wigger, wankstas, and wannabes have sprouted in the unlikeliest of

places nationwide, such as Eugene, Oregon, which illustrates that whites are drawn to black culture and will seek it out even when direct connections to the black community are limited. Furthermore, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the black population of the entire state of Wyoming is 0.8 percent (<http://www.quickfacts.census.gov>), yet there are wiggers in Sheridan, Wyoming. Brian and Laramie are 16-year-old wiggers who claim that “rap is the style in [their] school.” Laramie asserts that “it’s [rap is] our favorite kind of music... we buy the clothes we see in videos... we use words like ‘mackadocious’ [rap lingo]” (Wimsatt 24). Even in Sheridan, Wyoming, wiggers are blossoming, which shows whites’ fascination with black culture.

However, controversy surrounds rap and hip-hop because it can be argued that the lyrics perpetuate negative stereotypes of blacks, which serve to promote white superiority. Most hip-hop and rap songs contain lyrics that pertain to subjects such as drug/alcohol use, poverty, ghetto life, gangs, and misogyny. Many hip-hop artists use misogynistic lyrics, referring to women as “bitches” and “hoes,” which stereotypes blacks negatively as sexist. Many a rap video features “rap stars flashing jewelry, driving souped-up cars, sporting weapons, angrily gesticulating at the camera, and cavorting with interchangeable, mindlessly gyrating, scantily clad women” (McWhorten); such images can be deemed to reflect poorly upon blacks. Hip-hop essayist and cultural critic Stanley Crouch says that the idea of blacks having a brain is a foreign idea to many and that rappers aren’t helping the stereotype because lyrics often create thug-like images of blacks (Kitwana 108). It is certain that hip-hop as a pop culture phenomenon does indeed invoke old stereotypes about blacks, in that it often portrays blacks as criminals and as over-sexed individuals. According to John H. McWhorten, a black scholar and author who writes and comments extensively on race, ethnicity and other cultural issues:

Many writers and thinkers see a kind of informed political engagement, even a revolutionary potential, in rap and hip-hop. They couldn’t be more wrong. By reinforcing the stereotypes that long hindered blacks, and by teaching young blacks that a thuggish adversarial stance is the properly ‘authentic’ response to a presumptively racist society, rap retards black success (McWhorten).

If whites wrongly associate negative black stereotypes as the reality of black culture, such a misperception can lead to whites feeling socially superior to blacks. While this is not hip-hop’s

intent, this effect is worthy of concern. Moreover, Bill Yousman, doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and author of “Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music and White, Supremacy” believes that hip-hop artists, through lyrics, are perpetuating images of criminality and inferiority, and white kids are buying them to reenforce their superiority (Kitwana 103). Yousman contends that white fascination with hip-hop and black culture is not much different than the historical white love of minstrel shows, wherein white performers donned blackface “to contain and soothe their unrelenting fears of black males through ridicule” while “simultaneously acting out their fascination with blackness” (Yousman 369). Minstrel shows, which originated in the 1840s and remained popular entertainment into the early 1900s, sentimentalized slavery and depicted blacks as buffoons ([www.musicals101.com/minstrel.htm](http://www.musicals101.com/minstrel.htm)). As rap and hip-hop are ripe with negative depictions of blacks, Yousman’s correlation may have credence. According to Yousman:

White youth adoption of Black cultural forms in the 21st century is a performance, one that allows Whites to contain their fears and animosities toward Blacks through rituals not of ridicule, as in previous eras, but of adoration. Thus, although the motives behind the performance may initially appear to be different, the act is still a manifestation of White supremacy (369).

Thus, when white youth consume images of black violence such as in hip-hop artist Warren G’s “Regulators” where the lyrics chime, “Sixteen in the clip and one in the hole/ Nate dog is about to make some bodies turn cold/ now they droppin’ and yellin’/ it’s a tad bit late/ Nate dog and Warren G had to regulate,” (Warren G) and images of misogyny and rape in DMX’s lyrics, whites may be asserting their superiority as they may be titillated by “ghetto” images yet are worlds away from these stereotypes of black culture. In direct correlation, bell hooks argues that through rap’s stereotypical images of black culture, whites “achieve vicarious thrills, excitements, and sexual pleasures through their ‘transgression’ into a strange and uncharted world” (Yousman 378).

Beyond the perversion of black racial stereotyping leading to white superiority, another less than positive white association with hip-hop is the theory that white youth are attracted to hip-hop because it is a form of rebellion. Explains Patricia Rose, “Like generations of white teenagers

before them, white teenage rap fans are listening in on black culture, fascinated by its differences, drawn in by mainstream social construction of black culture as a forbidden narrative, as a symbol of rebellion” (Rose 5). Fredrick Braithwaite AKA Fab 5 Freddy, an original host of “Yo! MTV Raps” states, “If you’re a white kid, it’s hard to get your parents riled up these days playing rock n’ roll, but if you get some Tupac blasting in your room, your mother’s gonna be mad at you, and that’s cool.” Freddy went on to say, “These kids are rebelling against a society that says they shouldn’t have anything to do with black people. So they’re like ‘yo, I’m gonna get down with the illest niggas I can find’” (Aaron 224). “Getting down” with blacks as a form of rebellion suggests a mere superficial connection between whites and hip-hop. Can the white connection to hip-hop be dismissed as nothing more than a dysfunctional teen phase? For many whites, this may be the case. Embracing hip-hop and black culture may be cool for a while; but, of course, whites may lose their black effect when coolness and rebellion are no longer driving personality forces. Yet, it must be noted that even when whites who were drawn to hip-hop out of rebellion disassociate themselves from their wigger, wanksta and wannabe lifestyles, it is not because the music has waned in popularity. Hip-hop is entrenched within American culture, and whites will continue to be indoctrinated into hip-hop culture even as some whites eventually move away. Contends professor Henry Grioux, author of Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today’s Youth:

This music has had a grip on white kids for fifteen or twenty years and everybody calls it pathology and that’s that. Are all these white kids just idiots who are being duped and manipulated by the record industry? Who is cynical and detached enough to believe that? Sure, some kids are just latching onto the moronic gangsta elements, but the vast majority are caught in some middle space where they’re trying to figure themselves out (Aaron 224).

Rebellion is a process wherein people “figure themselves out,” and while rebelling through immersion in hip-hop culture will be a temporary phase for some, it will serve to indoctrinate others who will become full-fledged wiggers committed to hip-hop culture.

In addition to the controversy surrounding the potential for whites to further white superiority through hip-hop’s racial stereotypes and the theory that whites may be embracing hip-

hop simply as rebellion, further controversy arises from the fact that rap and hip-hop are the scapegoats for the declining values in America (Kitwana 19). Rap music is very vulnerable to censorship efforts even though it is now mainstream in commercial culture. There are more attacks against black rap lyrics than white rock lyrics (Rose 3). Critics have said that hip-hop is a form of vulgar self-degradation that is corrupting young white Americans (Kitwana 18-19). Bill O'Reilly, a white conservative, stated on "The O'Reilly Factor" on May 30, 2001, that the lyrics in rap music have a destructive influence on children (Kitwana 23). Dan Quayle, former Republican vice president under George Bush, made public that, "This music has no place in our society" (Kitwana 20). Former Secretary of Education, Bill Bennet, blamed the problems of the youth of America on rap artists Tupac, Dr. Dre, and Snoop Dog, declaring in Newsweek:

If you look at some rap videos, they're barbarous. We know what happens to children with a steady diet of this sort of thing, particularly when they aren't offered-- as an alternative-- things good, positive and uplifting. We've seen a phenomenal increase in social pathologies, crime, broken families and so on. There are a lot of things going on here, but to me one of them is a culture that's become increasingly trashy (Kitwana 20-21).

Perhaps these white conservatives just want to stifle the voices of those who are discontent with America's racial and social injustices. A theory exists that policing rap music can be correlated to the laws and regulations that were placed on slaves. These regulations were placed on slaves to try and stop them from speaking out and voicing their opinions regarding white inhumanity. According to Assistant Professor of History and African Studies at New York University Patricia Rose, "Slave masters were rightfully confident that blacks had good reason to escape, revolt, and retaliate" (Rose 144-145), and hence the masters needed to quell, through silence, any possibility of slave uprising.

In response to the call for censorship to his lyrics, Black rapper, producer and actor Ice Cube, who believes that rap is educational, says:

I do records for black kids, and white kids are basically eavesdropping on my records. But I don't change what I'm sayin'. I won't take out this word or that

word because I got white kids buying my records. White kids need to hear what we got to say about them and their forefathers and uncles and everybody that done us wrong. And the only way they are going to hear it uncut and uncensored is rap music (hooks 129).

In effect, according to Ice Cube, who has been deemed the “patron saint of a new generation” (Aaron 215), censoring rap and hip-hop lyrics is tantamount to silencing the voice of the oppressed. Moreover, it must be noted that rap/ hip-hop vocalists especially need freedom of speech through lyrics to reach their audience. Professor Tricia Rose offers the following insight:

Poor people learn from experience when and how explicitly they can express their discontent. Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion (Rose 99).

Rappers, the voices of the “poor” and “discontent,” need uncensored lyrics as a vehicle to promote social change. According to Rose then, those who lack power but desire change, seek a strategic avenue of expression. To further this contention, bell hooks, in her essay “Postmodern Blackness” argues that blacks are in need of a collective voice to articulate the issues of being “displaced, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed” (hooks):

In the wake of the black power movement, after so many rebels were slaughtered and lost, many of these voices were silenced by a repressive state and others became inarticulate; it has become necessary to find new avenues for transmitting the message of black liberation struggle, new ways to talk about racism and other politics of domination (hooks).

Censorship effectively extinguishes voices that are seeking expression. Since blacks are still engaged in a liberation struggle, rap and hip-hop articulate black oppression, and the messages reach a large-scale audience. According to hooks, “Rap projects a critical voice explaining,

demanding, urging” (“Postmodern Blackness”). Rap and hip-hop empower the oppressed and, since this nation no longer condones slavery, the oppressed are entitled to sing out.

Consider, for example, the controversial lyrics of rapper Ice T’s 1992 released song entitled “Cop Killer,” in which he raps from the point of view of a cop murderer. The lyrics, such as, “I got my twelve gauge sawed off/ I got my headlights turned off/ I’m ‘bout to bust some shots off/ I’m bout to dust some cops off,” caused a national uproar. Furthermore, the song goes on to say, “Cop killer, better you than me/ Cop killer, f\*\*k police brutality!/ Cop killer, I know your family’s grievin’/ (f\*\*k ‘em)/ Cop killer, but tonight we get even” (Ice T). Ice T uses a first person persona, but obviously Ice T has never killed a cop; rather, he is just fed up with police brutality, which targets blacks, and expresses his righteous anger through his music. The song speaks of Rodney King (“F\*\*K the police for Rodney King,”) a black motorist whose beating by white LAPD officers had been caught on videotape; however, a suburban jury acquitted the officers. Blacks are the primary victims of police brutality in this country, and clearly Ice T and blacks as a race have a right to be frustrated and fed up with such racial discrimination. In support, according to the 1991 Christopher Commission report on Los Angeles, which was conducted due to the Rodney King beating, “Within minority communities of Los Angeles, there is a widely-held view that police misconduct is commonplace. The King beating refocused public attention to long-standing complaints by African-Americans, Latinos and Asians that Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers frequently treat minorities differently from whites, more often using disrespectful and abusive language, employing unnecessarily intrusive practices such as the ‘prone-out’ [the practice of placing individuals who are being questioned on the street face down on the pavement] and engaging in use of excessive force when dealing with minorities” (<http://www.hrw.org/reports98/police/uspol7.htm>). In 1992, a similar study was conducted that examined Boston’s police department -- the St. Clair Commission report. This report had findings very similar to the Christopher Commission report. The St. Clair Commission report made reference to a survey finding that 25 percent of the 650 responding officers agreed that “racial bias (prejudice) on the part of officers toward minority citizens currently exists and contributes to a negative interaction between police and the community.... [and more than 25 percent agreed that] an officer’s prejudice towards the suspect’s race may lead to the use of excessive force” (<http://www.hrw.org/reports98/police/uspol7.htm>). Ice T’s passion for social justice must not be censored. Ice T is using his lyrics as tactics to create public awareness in the hope of promoting

social change. Says Charles Aaron, Music editor at *Spin* magazine and National Arts Journalism Fellow at Columbia University, that following the Los Angeles Riots "...rappers such as Ice Cube and Ice-T were transformed overnight... into social prophets and ghetto reporters (literalizing Chuck D's [Public Enemy rap star] metaphor of hip-hop as the 'black CNN')". While some may be offended by Ice T's lyrics, no call for censorship is justified because he has the First Amendment right to voice his disgust with social conditions.

According to Bakari Kitwana author, editor and visiting scholar in the political science department at Kent State University, "The fact that American youth have 'embraced hip-hop culture' shows that youth are finally embracing the founding fathers' notion that all men are created equal" (xiii). Kitwana further contends that the post baby-boom generation is forcing the nation closer to Thomas Jefferson's assertion of equality, "we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal" (xvii). For the first time in forty years, a giant step in social change is before us. The younger generation is challenging and breaking the comfort zone when it comes to racial equality. Journalist Charles Aaron asserts that the "hip-hop generation--white, black, or otherwise--is doing everything in its power to mock our culture's stuttering fear of racial progress" (Aaron 237). Danny Hoch, a Jewish actor, who was noted as being perhaps "the most race-conscious man in America" (Aaron 225) in the essay entitled "What the White Boy Means When He Says Yo" and who was the star of the one-man show "Jails, Hospitals and hip-hop," commented, "If hip-hop can be a tool for white kids to defy their racial destiny, that's amazing. They may look corny and say some really stupid things, and they may do some really stupid things, but I think they're making a genuine effort not to inherit the racism of their forefathers" (Aaron 227). Through listening to rap/hip-hop, whites absorb the story of black heritage and culture. When taught black history through textbooks, the impact is not as powerful because many youth simply tune out due to the distanced, textbook accounts, which often lack a human component (Kitwana 38). Racial equality cannot be achieved without empathy. It seems that, since the civil rights movement, America has lost the empathy needed to further racial equality. Says Henry Giroux, professor at Penn State University, "Hip-hop is the only popular culture that takes seriously the relationship between race and democracy in America" (Aaron 225). The potential for racial harmony and social change is at the forefront of hip-hop culture.

Yet certainly, there are white lovers of hip-hop who are not committed to racial harmony and social progress. bell hooks notes, “While it has become ‘cool’ for white folks to hang out with black people and express pleasure in black culture, most white people do not feel that this pleasure should be linked to unlearning racism” (Yousman 369). Many a white listener may engage with the music and culture of hip-hop yet may disengage from hip-hop’s social and political agendas. It is conceivable that through hip-hop whites may relinquish prejudices toward individual blacks with whom they interact or idolize as celebrity figures, but these same whites may hold fast to their politics of institutionalized racism. Whites may be “down” with their black compadres while still supporting, for example, segregated schools, housing and employment discrimination, and racial profiling. Yousman, in “Blackophilia and Blackophobia,” cites data polls showing “the continued reluctance of White youth to fully invest in anti-racial politics” (389). Hip-hop is not a panacea for racism. Relinquishing age-old racist ideologies requires a passionate commitment that not all white hip-hop lovers are willing to make. While many whites are voracious consumers of hip-hop, they are not necessarily willing to embrace its criticism of American social and political policy to the extent that they adopt a new mindset or engage in activism.

Still, hip-hop politics is arguably one of the few political spaces to have emerged in the past three decades where any real potential exists for challenging prevailing public policy. According to Adam Howard, columnist for The Nation, “Hip-Hop culture has proved to be a very effective means of conveying political ideas to young people. Its images and lyrics speak far more clearly to many of them than the language of mainstream politicians” (Howard). One must note that hip-hop’s voting bloc “is not limited to a rap music-buying audience but is composed of young people (from 18-40 something) whose hip-hop sensibility goes beyond simply being consumers” (Kitwana 166). Hip-hop’s voting bloc can have a significant political impact because common sense dictates that, if a large demographic unites and acts, the impact can be critical. Statistics from the Census Bureau indicate that only 35 percent of Americans aged 18 to 25 voted in 2000, which was the lowest percentage ever for this group. However, according to Associated Press exit polls, more than 20 million 18 to 24 year olds voted in the 2004 presidential election (Kitwana 166-167). Kitwana, among others, credits this rise to hip-hop activism and argues that white hip-hop activists are essential cogs in hip-hop’s coalition politics (167). Twenty-five-year-old Mattie Weiss who grew up in an activist family states, “I love politics, and I love understanding the world in a political way. That’s why I love hip-hop. Artists are saying in the music what I already

believe, for me, the politics were already there. Then I found hip-hop” (Kitwana 171). According to Kitwana, for some white hip-hop activists, “It was the lyrics and the oppositional politics of hip-hop artists that were directly responsible for waking them up to American democracy’s many brutal contradictions” (Kitwana 174). For those who are not aware that “brutal contradictions” thrive within American “democracy,” consider the following statistics. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, while less than one fifth (18.2%) of white children grew up in poverty during the last decade of the 20th century, nearly half (44.6%) of black children grew up in poverty. And according to the National Center for Health Statistics, while the infant mortality rate for whites during the last few years of the century was 6.1 deaths per thousand, the infant mortality rate for blacks was more than twice as high at 14.7 deaths per thousand, indicating that blacks have unequal access to health care and nutrition (Yousman 373). Additionally, while many Americans believe that the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in public schools in *Brown v Board of Education* actually established social equality in education, it is not the case. According to Chris Mahon, a member of the Civil Rights PRP, and a study conducted at the University of Texas at Austin, de facto segregation is prevalent across the nation. Poor, minority communities have under-funded schools, which puts many blacks at a disadvantage (Scarborough). Says Mahon:

That some schools are given more money than others by virtue of wealth of the surrounding neighborhood is an obvious violation of equal opportunity in our educational system. Unfortunately, to this day, the Court holds that as long as segregation is not enforced by the state, there is no problem. Until all public schools are funded equally across the country, the Civil Rights Act and equal opportunity will continue to exist only on paper (Scarborough).

Democracy’s “brutal contradictions” adversely affect blacks from childhood to adulthood. While employment discrimination is illegal, according to University of Illinois-Chicago researcher Cedric Herring, it is “alive and well.” The Washington Fair Employment Practices Commission found that one out of every five blacks faces discrimination in job interviews (Herring). According to the Boston Federal Reserve Bank, blacks are 56% more likely to be turned down for mortgage loans than whites (Wise). And, in some even more startling statistics quoted in the New York Times, while approximately 1.6 percent of white men ages 20 to 34 are in jail or prison, the Justice

Department estimates that 12 percent of black men are in jail or prison. Moreover, The Bureau of Justice Statistics has noted that 28 percent of black men will be sent to jail or prison during their lifetime (Butterfield). According to the mass of evidence cited above, democracy is full of “brutal contradictions.” Rap and hip-hop challenge the prevailing public policy that allows such gross discrimination to exist in America.

Many white hip-hop activists see a radical analysis of race at the forefront of their engagement with other social and political issues. Consider white hip-hop activist Lynne Ballard, for example. A central and defining element of her life, hip-hop and its racial agenda, has significantly impacted her politics:

If you look at what has happened to Black people in this country you can basically learn all you need to know about the government and the way it's set up, and the inequities. It's a large part of how I see the world. Because hip-hop is a culture of resistance, it's given me the ability to think critically and I take that with me to everything I do, from my career choice over the past eight years of my life to how I look at any president's administration to how I look at any political issue. Always a part of that thought process is how anything is affecting the hip-hop generation and more specifically how it's affecting African Americans (Kitwana 68).

Ballard rejected her father's “xenophobic society” and admitted that “because he's [her father] been so racist, [she has] probably developed some sort of backlash to that” (Kitwana 66). Ballard and other white hip-hop activists contribute greatly to hip-hop's political agenda.

White hip-hop activist, author, and cofounder of the League of Pissed Off Voters, Billy Wimsatt, is another major player who contributes to hip-hop's political agenda. Wimsatt wants whites to be committed to coalition building and expressed:

I feel like white people are too quick to opt out. They don't put in that much effort to organize across race. They feel like they are putting in a lot, but in the grand scheme of things it's a token amount. It's not putting much on the line in

comparison to what others have on the line without a choice. The result is like anything you don't fully commit to-- a half ass relationship (Kitwana 176).

A "half ass relationship" will not bring about necessary social change; hence, Wimsatt is putting his all into The League of Pissed Off Voters, and his efforts are paying off. The League, which governs the activities of the League of Young Voters and the League of Independent Voters, works alongside local and national organizations to assist 18 to 30 year olds to get involved in the political process (Kitwana 179). This voting bloc has the potential to sway upcoming elections. To prove this, the League published a book entitled How to Get Stupid White Men Out of Office, which cited and discussed 15 elections in which the 18 to 30 year old demographic were the decisive swing vote (Kitwana 179). Whether or not this voting bloc has significantly swayed prior elections, its potential to sway future elections cannot be ruled out. Young people need to realize that their vote is potent and can bring about much-needed political reform. Just like the right wing Christian fundamentalist affected the 2004 presidential election, the hip-hop voting bloc can greatly affect upcoming local and national elections. The League believes that it can infiltrate the Democratic Party ranks to prompt future change. According to Wimsatt:

The Democratic Party is not a giant in the hillside. It can be taken over by any strong group of people. The Left has to do a lot of the things that the right has done, which is to build a left wing of the Democratic Party. That's our best shot right now: take over the Democratic Party and steer it left in a way that won't alienate people and in a way that is bold and visionary (Kitwana 183).

Wimsatt, a self-proclaimed wigger (Wimsatt 32), dedicates himself to promoting social change through hip-hop.

While some may contend that Wimsatt and his hip-hop activist compadres are idealists, consider the impact of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was influential in registering black voters in the South during the civil rights era. The SNCC was a student-run, autonomous organization. In 1964, the SNCC organized Freedom Summer, where approximately 1,000 white northern college students went to Mississippi to register black voters. These passionate youth crusaded for civil rights even in the face of gross violence. The SNCC's

efforts were instrumental in bringing about the Voting Rights Act of 1965, wherein Congress authorized the Attorney General to officially monitor areas where discrimination was suspected at the polls. The SNCC had organized a 50-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to protest discriminatory practices that excluded blacks from registering to vote in Selma. The marchers were beaten and subjected to tear gas, and three civil rights workers were killed-- one by the Klu Klux Klan-- in the days following the protest. Such gross violence finally stirred President Johnson to send a bill to Congress. Black voting registration rose dramatically due to the dedication of young people civil rights activists. Though Wimsatt and The League of Pissed Off Voters have not yet seen results comparable to those of the SNCC, Adrienne Brown, cofounder of The League declares, "Our [the League and civil rights workers] energy is similar. We're in the right place at the right time" (Howard).

Hip-hop is considered cool, and if hip-hop can manage to convince the unregistered voters of America to see voting as cool, then likely there will be a much greater number of voters in elections to come. Groups such as The League of Pissed Off Voters and Hip-Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), who amazingly managed to sign up roughly 88,000 new Democratic and 9,000 new Republican voters in a matter of weeks, have been at the front lines of political activism for hip-hop (Jones). Hip-hop is managing to convince these unregistered voters to register and vote by holding events with headliners such as Jay-Z, Eminem, Nelly, P. Diddy, Ludacris, Kanye West, Nick Cannon and LL Cool J. For example, HSAN's latest project, Get Out The Vote (GOTV) is a bus that has been on the road since October 1, 2005, traveling from city to city promoting youth to vote by hosting concerts much like the ones previously mentioned. GOTV said the bus is designed to remind people of the Freedom Riders of the 1960s. Admission to the venue requires that all fans need to register to vote before entering the concert (Berhane). Many members of HSAN have said that politicians such as Detroit's 35-year-old mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, AKA Hip-Hop mayor, portray many of the qualities that they'd like to see in politicians nationwide. Such qualities include the ability to stay connected with young people and to exhibit charisma and youthfulness (Howard). If all politicians were concerned about the ability to stay connected with the people, such as Kwame Kilpatrick, politics would actually reflect the needs and wants of the people.

The National Hip-Hop Political Convention which was conceived in March 2003 was created to assist hip-hop activists in networking nationally and to "transform cultural leverage into

political power” (Kitwana 177). Delegates, consisting of independent artists, hip-hop activists, political operatives, hip-hop journalists, and media personalities voted on a national hip-hop political agenda. There were more than 3,000 in attendance and approximately 400 delegates, 10 to 15 percent of whom were white (Kitwana 178). A five-point national hip-hop agenda was established which targets issues affecting young Americans of all races: education, human rights, economic justice, health care and criminal justice (Kitwana 192-193). According to Kitwana, “Those at the forefront of the hip-hop political movement must organize hip-hop politics around issues affecting all American youth-- whites, Blacks, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans. The core of the hip-hop bloc’s political concern should speak to our common sense of humanity, which hasn’t been adequately addressed by our democratic government” (193). Kitwana believes that the goal of hip-hop politics is to “correct social ills that are negatively affecting all Americans” (193). Former Atlanta congresswoman and hopeful elect Cynthia McKinney is an advocate and supporter of hip-hop politics. McKinney thinks that the hip-hop community can potentially grow to be one of the strongest movements representing social justice and community development. In June 2001, McKinney attended the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network’s conference in New York City and endorsed the Network’s 15-point national agenda. Key points in the agenda include: the want for equal justice for all without any discrimination based on race, color, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, creed or class. The agenda also calls for the highest quality of public education for all, the total elimination of racism and racial profiling, violence, hatred and bigotry. Also, this agenda calls for an end to police brutality and the unjust incarceration of people of color and all others (McKinney). The reforms highlighted, if enacted, could put an end to American democracy’s “brutal contradictions.”

Despite the fact that hip-hop has shocked conservative America, it has bettered race relations more than any other social development since the civil rights movement. Hip-hop is full of drug references, sexually explicit lyrics, and violence; however, there is no denying the fact that hip-hop speaks the truth about the disenfranchised. Since its origin, hip-hop has been demanding change by speaking the truth about ghetto life in America. Conservative America may not agree with hip-hop’s approach to reform, but conservative America must awaken to the reality that reform is needed in order to better race relations and to promote social equality. Censorship prevents hip-hop artists from speaking their minds about controversial issues and must not be accepted as protocol. One of the reasons why hip-hop has managed to capture such a large white

audience of listeners is due to the fact that the many Americans have realized that today's way of life needs a change, and they're willing to embrace whatever means works; hip-hop works. According to hip-hop activist Billy Wimsatt, "If channeled in the right way, the wigger can go a long way toward repairing the sickness of race in America" (29). It is people like Wimsatt who have the potential to engender social change, and it is through hip-hop that such voices are heard. Hip-hop crusader Bakari Kitwana goes so far as to assert that "hip-hop is the last hope for this generation and arguably the last hope for America" (209). While hip-hop is not the panacea for all of America's social ills, it is "the best remedy for leaving the old racial politics on the pages of history" (Kitwana 210). Kids today are listening to hip-hop to revolt against a close-minded society (Kitwana 65). While rebellion may be a motivating source for some rap/hip-hop listeners and may be an initiating factor, this does not de-legitimize the white connection to hip-hop music and culture. Whatever avenue it is that brings whites to hip-hop is legitimate because once entrenched in the music and culture, whites are exposed to hip-hop's social and political agenda, and this exposure, according to many who have observed and studied the hip-hop cultural phenomenon, can have a significant impact on the listener.

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