Transforming “Blackness”: “Post-Black” and Contemporary Hip-Hop in Visual Culture

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Abstract

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Transforming “Blackness”: “Post-Black” and Contemporary Hip-Hop in Visual Culture

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The global phenomenon of hip-hop emerged as a small scale community oriented culture developed primarily by African-American youth in the blighted ghetto of the South Bronx. Within the larger American culture, the primary associations of hip-hop are rooted in conceptions of black culture and identity, which may also be defined as “blackness.” Despite hip-hop’s synonymous relationship to “blackness,” mainstream American culture and almost every nation on earth have appropriated its visual and aural codes. Interestingly, the adoption of hip-hop culture out of its original context lends to new conceptions of “blackness,” that ultimately complicate the centrality of racial significance. In a similar manner, the term “post-black” has been used within visual arts to describe the work of black artists who problematize past conceptions of “blackness.” The main goal of this thesis is to argue that the transformation of “blackness” in hip-hop is directly applicable to the idea of “post-black.”

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Introduction

In 2006, acclaimed rap-recording artist Nas released his eighth album. The album cover [figure1] features Nas dressed in black, crouching near a hole intended to signify an unfilled gravesite. The viewer is positioned in the grave, looking up to be presented by Nas with a single rose. In the background is an ominous dark sky with the black silhouettes of crows flying overhead. The text consists of a bold Gothic script with Nas’s name prominently over the title of the album, “Hip Hop is Dead.” The funerary connotations of the text and image are quite clear, yet the overall meaning raises several questions. What does it mean when a rapper releases a rap album, and proclaims that the larger culture that created rap is dead? Rap music and hip-hop culture in general have certainly changed within its 30 year existence. Whether intentional or not Nas’s album title perhaps is a commentary of how hip-hop culture has evolved from its obscure genesis as an African-American aesthetic system of production to a mainstream form of expression and entertainment. Furthermore, the proclamation of hip-hop’s demise may really be implicative of the history of racial dynamics between white consumers and black cultural producers in which “blackness” is figured as a commodity and the original context of black aesthetic and cultural creations becomes obsolete.

The global phenomenon of hip-hop emerged as a small scale community oriented culture developed primarily by African-American youth in the blighted ghetto of the South Bronx. In the midst of racial tensions and economic disparity in the post civil rights era, hip-hop became the authoritative voice of sub-cultural resistance. Within the larger American culture, the primary associations of hip-hop are rooted in conceptions of black culture and identity, which may also be defined as “blackness.” Despite hip-hop’s synonymous relationship to “blackness,” mainstream American culture and almost every nation on earth
have appropriated its visual and aural codes. Interestingly, the adoption of hip-hop culture out of its original context lends to new conceptions of “blackness,” that ultimately complicate the centrality of racial significance. In a similar manner, the term “post-black” has been used within visual arts to describe the work of black artists who problematize past conceptions of “blackness.” To expand upon the interpretation of this term “post-black” defines a new consciousness that is increasingly disengaged with traditional cultural codes of “blackness” and interested in expressing the individual experience versus the collective black experience. No longer referencing Africa for cultural validation or dredging up memories of slavery, “post-black” describes the subtext of race within the work of black artists who are not primarily concerned with race. The concept of “post-black” can thus be used as the basis of a theory that responds to the impossibility of a concrete definition of “blackness.” A “post-black” aesthetic is one that embodies contradictions between perceived notions of “blackness” by rejecting, embracing, parodying, amplifying, and ultimately transforming cultural codes of race. Thus conceived, “post-black” transcends the narrow boundaries of the art world and permeates popular culture at large. The contemporary cultural phenomenon of hip-hop serves as a useful vehicle for an examination of the concept of “post-black” since it both constructs a social identity for African-American youth, and simultaneously serves as the ultimate symbol of “blackness” in the larger American culture.

The goal of this thesis is to argue that the transformation of “blackness” in hip-hop culture is directly applicable to the idea of “post-black.” The investigation of the interrelatedness of “post-black” and contemporary hip-hop culture is threefold: The first chapter will foreground the concept of “post-black” by examining the genealogy of “blackness” and its visual manifestations within art and hip-hop culture. In hip-hop and also throughout the course of black expressive culture in America, both black cultural producers
and participants within mainstream culture have had a direct influence on the ways in which “blackness” is imagined or re-imagined. This chapter will first investigate how “blackness” was a state of being constructed at the hands of whites and later how the designation of “blackness” was shaped by blacks themselves. The second chapter consists of a discussion of the significative purpose of “post-black” and its contingent relationship to the realms of public and private cultural space. Within this section, the widely perceived idea of “blackness” existing within a private cultural realm, as opposed to the public sphere of mainstream American culture is questioned. Alternately, it will be argued that the various conceptions of “blackness” (and ultimately the transformations of “blackness” as defined by “post-black”) are reified through the exchanges between private and public cultural space. The final chapter will present an extensive visual analysis of “post-black” represented in hip-hop culture, through fashion advertisements, album covers, music videos, and graphic art.
Figure 1: Nas, *Hip Hop is Dead* Album Cover, 2006
Chapter I: A Brief Genealogy of “Blackness”

“What makes you a Negro is having grown up under certain cultural conditions, of having undergone an experience that shapes your culture. There is a body of folklore, a certain sense of American history. There is our psychology and the peculiar circumstances under which we have lived. There is our cuisine, though we don’t admit it, and our forms of expression. I speak certain idioms; this is also part of the concord that makes me a Negro.” – Ralph Ellison¹

In considering the correlation between “post-black” and contemporary hip-hop culture it is beneficial to understand the historical context of “blackness.” The first part of this chapter will examine modern conceptions of race and how the term “blackness” was constructed as a racial characterization. The second part of this chapter investigates how “blackness” is represented in the visual arts and expressive culture. The representations of “blackness” are mainly plotted along the trajectories of three major artistic and cultural “movements”: the Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts Movement, and hip-hop. In the discussion of these “movements” it is also important to note the role of both blacks and whites in constructing the idea of “blackness.” The final part of this chapter will discuss the idea of “blackness” as a spatial construct, especially in hip-hop culture. The locality of “blackness” is especially important in the visual iconography of hip-hop culture, but has also served as a consistent theme throughout the history of representations of “blackness” in American culture.

The infective racism that prevailed during the European enlightenment was a dominant source of the current conceptions of “blackness.” Coinciding with pervasive schools of

thought such as Rationalism and Empiricism, the idea of ‘race’ was held to account for the cultural and physical differences among various populations. The conception of ‘race’ easily mutated into racism when characteristics of a ‘race’ were accorded a value judgment.

Nineteenth century French biologist and philologist William Edwards created a pseudo-scientific basis for racism by describing race as an “all pervasive natural phenomenon that determines physiology, culture and history.”

This line of thinking included such perceived characteristics as intelligence, morality, beauty and civility; and consequently led to the Eurocentric construction of a racial hierarchy in which black Africans were relegated to the lower echelons. It is interesting to note however that these early categorizations of race (regardless of their claimed scientific roots) were not in any way static or concrete. The term race was often conveniently used to differentiate class and nationality between whites and ultimately served the purpose of justifying the hegemonic power of the white middle and upper classes.

Addressing the fluid usage of race, art historian Stephan F. Eisenman writes:

If certain indigenous communities—such as the Tahitians and Marquesans—were dying from the effects of European contact, the cause was not colonial aggression or imported disease, but racial feebleness. If generation after generation of French urban workers was poor, sick, and imprisoned, the cause was not economic exploitation but the racial impoverishment of the laboring and criminal classes. If a small number of European artists and writers found themselves to be outcasts from dominant institutions, it was because of their own moral and racial degeneracy.

To further underscore the fluid designation of race, Frank Dikotter in an essay on perceptions of race in Chinese society writes: “narratives of ‘race’ attempt to root culture in

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3 David Roediger, *In Working Towards Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005). Roediger examines how various working class European immigrants (Irish, Slavic, Italian, Grecian, etc.) were considered to be of a non-white race by many historical accounts. Roediger argues that in the 1920s-30s European immigrants became recognized as white through the reforms of labor movements and the rise of home ownership.
nature, to equate social groups with biological units, to primordialize the imagined or real congenital endowments of people.”

Even though racial distinctions were sometimes applied to peoples of similar nationalities, the allure of classifying the anthroposcopic traits of non-European people as racial difference made that practice nearly ineluctable in the climate of the 18th and 19th centuries. It was this, combined with the system of slavery practiced in the New World, that crystallized the idea of race as embodied within skin color. In an essay tracing the historical trajectory of the pimp as a popular culture icon, Beth Coleman notes “the fundamental shift between American slavery and the history of world slavery is that in the New World slavery was not just a caste but a race.” So not only were enslaved Africans in the Americas forced to become part of the lowest social class, but this was done so on the basis of visual difference. After slave ships landed on American soil the variegated shades of brown flesh that represented Akan, Mandinka, Ashanti, Yoruba, Wolof, Ibo, Fulani, Senufo, Bambara, and many other ethnic groupings were reduced to the single homogenous designation of “black.” The symbolization of “black” as the color of negative qualities such as mystery, hopelessness, fear, evil, anger and impurity was thus cathected into the skins and bodies of African slaves. These concepts of “blackness” from the 18th and 19th centuries ultimately remain throughout the 20th and even the 21st centuries in America.

Within this paper the word “blackness” is used to describe the significations attributed to African-American culture. “Blackness” is the result of being “black” and most directly refers to the dark skin pigmentation of Africans and people of African descent;

however “blackness” is not simply limited to mere visual difference. To expand our
definition of “blackness” it is crucial to acknowledge that it was a term developed to reflect
the “otherness” of Africans/African-Americans in relation to the dominant white social
order. In this manner, we may locate “blackness” as the defined opposite to “whiteness,”
and thus the carrier of copious connotations of inferiority. According to cultural historian
Scott Malcomson the modern conception of “blackness” was produced as a result of
combining “black skin with pagan faith into the bodies of Africans in Portuguese
possession.” Stigmatized with the disdainful label of “blackness,” African-Americans
either rejected or embraced this brand, but in either case resisted perceptions of their
inferiority to create a unique and influential cultural space maintained and perpetuated
through codes.

The cultural codes of “blackness” are signified visually and aurally through physical
appearance, adornment, language, and movement. Much to the chagrin of cultural
essentialists, the codes of “blackness” are flexible, impure, transferable, and above all
socially constructed. As stated before the most immediate signifier of “blackness” is dark
skin pigmentation. Even though this skin color is a fact of visual difference, the means in
which society identifies it with “blackness” is a socially determined. For instance, in the
eyear antebellum south, people of mixed race were entitled to certain privileges and social
status based on the degree of mixed blood they contained. Categories such as octoroon,
quadroon, and mulatto were standard classifications for children of interracial unions. The
image *Las Castas* illustrates the exhaustive cataloguing of various racial mixtures as created

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7 Black is also used to describe the indigenous people of Australia by the British colonizers.
9 Scott Malcomson, *One Drop of Blood: American Misadventures of Race* (New York:
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).
by Spanish colonialists [figure2]. Due to the growing number of interracial children these categories were dismantled, and the “one-drop” rule was enacted to maintain white power within the institution of slavery. Thereafter anyone with African-American ancestry, without regard to skin color, was relegated to the realm of “blackness.” In the case of racial ambiguity other visual signifiers had to be identified. Thus hair texture, clothing, adornments, and movement may also be argued as signs of visual codes of “blackness.”

“Blackness” in Visual Arts and Culture

The idea of “blackness” as represented through black expressive culture does deserve some foregrounding here, since “post-black” can only be understood within the framework of “black” and “blackness.” As stated earlier, the socio-discursive conceptions of “blackness” were created in tension between the imaginations of mainstream America and the self-conceptions of African Americans themselves. Through examining representations of “blackness” through the Harlem Renaissance to hip-hop we can gain an understanding of the concept of “post black,” and its manifestations within contemporary hip-hop. As the major movements within black cultural production, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement are the crucial foundations through which hip-hop culture and “blackness” was conceived.

The white-created paradigm of black artists as primitive, anonymous craftsmen persisted until the time of the Harlem Renaissance, which introduced a whole cadre of visual artists, writers, and intellectuals who deliberately sought to create more sophisticated

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representations of black life than those imagined within white/mainstream popular culture. Philosopher Alain Locke was the central force in promoting the idea of the “New Negro” as the essential representative of the new black intelligentsia, capable of eliciting humanizing portrayals of African-Americans without pandering to the expectations of whites. The “New Negro” was chiefly an effort to refine popular notions of “blackness.” Art historian Richard Powell notes, “One could argue that the concept of the ‘New Negro’ was meaningful only in relationship to the ‘Old Negro’ or to an eternal, primordial ‘blackness.’” In other words re-imagining of the “New Negro” is still rooted in historical conceptions of “Negroness,” through a deliberate resistance to this past. Harlem became the hub for the “New Negro” since it boasted the largest urban population of blacks and possessed an established jazz scene.

The visual arts of the Harlem Renaissance lacked a cohesive stylistic tendency, yet the theme of black life remained constant whether the visual model was historical or contemporary. In the general spirit of modernism some black artists rejected the Western models of ancient Greece and Rome, but adopted Africa as their source of classicism. In the painting titled Les Fetiches, artist Lois Mailou Jones utilized the contrary mix of bold geometry, and organic forms characteristic of many African masks [fig 3]. In many of her other paintings Jones appropriated general motifs in African sculpture as a metaphorical link between her identity as an American Negro and her distant ancestral roots. Painter Aaron Douglas was mostly noted for his monumental murals executed using flat geometric silhouettes, but like Jones, Douglas also incorporated general African motifs as a means of

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13 One could argue that the concept of “post-black” bears some parallels to the idea of the “New Negro” as an attempt to redefine and transform traditional perceptions of “blackness.” However the “New Negro” artists of the Harlem Renaissance largely emphasized their “blackness” as a hallmark of their work, whereas artists working in the “post-black” idiom abandon essential representations of race.
reclaiming an unremembered heritage. Other well-known artists of the Harlem Renaissance such as Jacob Lawrence, Palmer Hayden, and William H. Johnson explored both fearsome and halyconic narratives of the black experience in the urban north and the rural south. It could be argued, however that Alain Locke’s conception of “New Negro” artist as the illustrator of “realistic” black life without sentiment did not truly materialize. The images of famed black photographer James Van Der Zee serve as a fitting case in point. Despite the realities of poverty in Harlem, the majority of Van Der Zee’s subjects were affluent blacks. Both Couple in Raccoon Coats and Lady at the Piano (insert figure) served to promote Harlem as the mythic space of black paradise (at least in comparison to the segregated south) [fig 4 & 5]. In addition, the “New Negro” artists were often unsuccessful in achieving Locke’s ideal of rejecting the expectations of whites, perhaps because many black artists accepted the financial assistance of wealthy whites.

In the imagination of mainstream America jazz became the central metaphor for black life during the Harlem Renaissance, so it comes as no surprise that many whites were eager consumers and participants within this new current of black cultural production. Throughout the 1920’s and ‘30’s it was in vogue for white Manhattanites to “adventurously” enter the black realm of Harlem to frequent various nightclubs. In addition to consuming black culture, many whites were key figures in supporting the artistic climate through advancing the celebrity of black artists, musicians and writers in the American mainstream. Such wealthy white patrons also played an arguably less benign role in the artistic process, through influencing the aesthetic of the “New Negro” artists to fit their specific conceptions of “blackness.” The wealthy widow Charlotte Mason was critical to advancing the careers of such writers as Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes; however, all of the artists under her patronage were expected to adhere to Mason’s strict criteria. Under her advocacy artists
were mandated to live in Harlem, avoid any themes of social protest in their work, and to conform to the essentialist ideal of “primitivism” which was most closely associated with African art. 14 The constricting and matronizing relationship between Mason and her beneficiaries was epitomized by the semi-derisive honorific of “grandmother” bestowed on her by those she customarily referred to as “my children.” In a similar vein German born artist Winold Reiss encouraged his black protégé Aaron Douglass “to explore that inner thing of blackness” in his paintings, as if his individual agency as an artist was secondary to his ethnicity.15

Perhaps the most contentious white figure involved in the Harlem Renaissance was music critic Carl Van Vetchen. While Van Vetchen was a fervent supporter of black cultural expression, some would describe his devotion as having a less than admirable underside. He brought hoards of white New Yorkers (and their money) to Harlem, wrote passionately in support of black artists, and hosted numerous racially integrated parties. Certainly Van Vetchen’s intentions were to market the “blackness” embodied in the Harlem Renaissance to a general white audience, but it could be argued that his attempts were perhaps exploitative if not misguided. In 1926 Van Vetchen’s unhappily titled novel Nigger Heaven earned him the status of persona non grata within black intellectual circles, despite the support of several prominent blacks within the Harlem Renaissance. Van Vetchen and others defended his book as a complex presentation of black life in which he declared that “Negroes are treated the same by me exactly as if I were depicting white characters, for the very excellent reason that

I do not believe there is much psychological difference to the races.”\textsuperscript{16} However, as Bruce Kellner notes, the content of the book is overshadowed by its contentious title. As the case of Van Vetchen illustrates, though many whites enthusiastically championed black arts and letters many did so under the pretense of exoticism or orientalism.

Subsequent to the apex of the Harlem Renaissance, the idea of the “New Negro” continued, yet black artists still found themselves with marginal amounts of fame as compared with their white counterparts. Despite the lack of mainstream acknowledgement, black artists persisted in their aesthetic and intellectual pursuits. From the 1940’s to the early 1960’s the concept of racial pride coexisted with that of assimilation as a means of attaining equality, and both ultimately materialized within the black artistic production.\textsuperscript{17} In parallel with the mainstream artistic currents of the time (such as abstract expressionism) many black artists explored non-representational art forms, however many of these works continued to reference the black subject or experience.

The mid to late 1960’s represent a crucial turning point in the popular representations of “blackness” in general. With racial tensions coming to a peak in the Civil Rights’ Movement, many African-Americans fell within one of two camps. The racially inclusive and non-violent civil rights activists, as exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr., espoused a “love thy enemy” and “turn the other cheek” philosophy. Meanwhile Black Nationalist organizations such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers adopted more aggressive tactics toward the struggle for racial equality. Perhaps one of the most significant cultural contributions of the nationalists was the reclamation of the word “black” as a collective self-

\textsuperscript{17} Richard J. Powell, \textit{Black Art and Culture in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century}. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 87-108.
identification. Poet and writer LeRoi Jones (now known as Amiri Baraka) once stated that “there are some of us who will not be Negroes, who know that indeed we are something else, something stronger….” For some, the term “Negro” carried too much connotational baggage and by rejecting this old identification blacks finally felt the powerful sense of agency that society never offered. Art historian Richard Powell also notes that amongst the younger and more outspoken blacks the reclamation of “black” was “not only symbolic but an emphatic proclamation of an oppressed people’s psychological reorientation.”

During this time the Black Arts Movement emerged as a second conscious effort on the part of artists to create a new and uniquely black aesthetic, this time linked to Black separatists, and the militant attitudes promulgated by the Black Panther Party. Much like the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement valorized artists working on behalf of the black community. Yet the Black Arts Movement also believed in making art for the community rather than as a representation of the community for outsiders. In regards to the insular and community oriented attributes of the Black Arts Movement, scholar Larry Neal argues “the motive behind the black aesthetic [was] the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and ways of looking at the world.” Unlike predecessors to the Black Arts Movement who believed in assimilation as a means of gaining racial equality, these new visual artists moved through ideological rejection of the white hegemonic order on the way to redefining black subjectivity on their terms. For example, in Negro es Bello [fig 6], sculptress and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett inverts the negative meanings in phenotypical black facial features. Catlett renders the mask like faces with emphasis on full lips and broad noses while providing a symmetrical beauty and normalcy. The faces display no personality or sense of individuality, yet they serve as a generic symbol of the inherent beauty of people
of African descent. The image also links itself with the nationalist agenda of the Black Panthers through the repetitive use of yellow seals which include the panther insignia.

In the realm of fashion, styles also reflected the reinvention of “black” as beautiful through the popularity of the Afro hairstyle. The Afro signified a rejection of white standards of beauty like straight hair, and the embracing of the physical difference of black hair. In the portraiture of Barkley Hendricks his subjects flaunt the philosophy of black pride. *Lawdy Mama* [fig 7] illustrates the black female subject with her head crowned in a halo of hair whilst engaging the viewer in a seemingly unapologetic stare. The abstracted gold background situates the figure in a time and space void of social context. Yet the American contemporary viewer knows that she serves as both an individual subject and emblematic object of the revolution of black thought in the 1960’s and 70’s.

Also apart from art and fashion the Black Art Movement also influenced the pervasive cultural medium of film. The same era also saw the birth of a new and influential sub-genre of cinema known as blaxploitation. Borrowing from the serious and militant demeanor of the Black Panthers, and the raw and poignant work of writers and visual artists of the Black Arts Movement, the blaxploitation film genre created a new representation of “blackness” epitomized through the “hyper-masculine” black male. According to Thelma Golden, the blaxploitation image of black men, typically clad in dark clothing, leather jackets, and sunglasses, was derived from the serious no- nonsense comportment of the Black Panthers.18 This new image of black manhood signified deliberate resistance to the then-pervasive Hollywood tropes of servile African-Americans. In the documentary *Classified X* (1998), Melvin Van Peebles recalls viewing the belittling depictions of African-Americans in

the films he saw as a youth. According to Van Peebles, the “weak” and “impotent” black people in Hollywood movies did not resemble the regal women and cool guys he saw strutting down the streets of the south side of Chicago.\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Sweet Sweetback’s Baadassss Song} (1971) was Van Peebles’ militant reaction to Hollywood cinema, with a black lead character that was intelligently subversive, sexually potent, and defiant—the polar opposite to previous representations of the black male. In accordance with the “anti-white” sentiment embraced by some artists of the Black Arts Movement, the taglines “the film THE MAN does not want you to see” and “dedicated to the brothers and sisters who have had enough of THE MAN” signify the film’s intention to craft an image for black consumption only. The success of \textit{Sweet Sweetback’s Baadassss Song} spawned a plethora of subsequent Hollywood films following Van Peebles filmic prototype of low-budget action narratives centered on black characters.\textsuperscript{20}

It is important, however, to also consider mainstream America’s role in the creation of the blaxploitation genre and the promulgation of the a new and sensationalized “racial imaginary.” Hollywood’s fiscal crisis in the late 60’s- early 70’s lead studio executives to recognize the economic potential of black consumers. As stated earlier, Van Peebles’ \textit{Sweet Sweetback Baadassssss Song} was a model for cheaply produced, formulaic films that could be marketed successfully to black audiences.\textsuperscript{21} As a result over sixty films that fall under the

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Classified X}, directed by Mark Daniels, Winstar Studios, 1998.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Classified X}, directed by Mark Daniels, Winstar Studios, 1998. This point is also stated in Ed Guerrero’s \textit{Framing Blackness: the African American Image in Film} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993): 91.
category of blaxploitation were released within the short time frame of 1969-1974, before the genre collapsed under the weight of criticism from black intellectuals.22

The advent of hip-hop in the mid 1970’s represents the next major movement in black aesthetic production. Hip-hop was born amidst gang violence, poor housing conditions, and hardship in the economically disadvantaged and predominantly black populated South Bronx. The environment of poverty was conducive to the development of hip-hop culture. Early hip-hop may be described as a community oriented form of artistic expression synthesizing aural (rap music, DJing), physical (break dancing), and visual elements (graffiti writing, fashion). Spray paint was cheap and so were barren surfaces, thus graffiti writers were able to transform vandalism into art. DJ’s began to throw parties in local parks and community centers, while emcees (MC’s) helped to host the parties, thus facilitating the development of rap music. Dancers would often use discarded squares of cardboard to demonstrate fancy acrobatic moves that would later be known as break dancing. By mastering hip-hop’s expressive art forms (graffiti, rapping, break dancing, etc.) youth were able to acquire respect and status within an economically disadvantaged environment. Furthermore, hip-hop served as the vehicle to render those deemed invisible by mainstream America visible, and provided a “voice to the voiceless.”23

Unlike previous “movements” in black art and culture, early hip-hop did not emphasize its racial roots or attempt to construct an “authentically black” identity, but it did promote individual and collective status based on skill and innovation. In fact hip-hop culture from the very beginning was racially inclusive due to the other ethnicities that lived within

22 Ibid.
23 Bakari Kitwana, Why White Kids Love Hip Hop (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), xiii. This is an interesting theory in considering the context of the global expansion of hip-hop.
the South Bronx. As a result many Puerto-Rican youths, and some whites had significant involvement in break dancing, and graffiti writing. Nonetheless, hip-hop has come to be viewed as metonymic for the black experience in contemporary culture.

The 1979 release of Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” marked the early commercialization of hip-hop. Through this first record release hip-hop as rap music was introduced to the mainstream, and began to spread from the South Bronx to black populated urban centers throughout the nation.

The black male is the central signifier of “blackness” within hip-hop culture. Thelma Golden’s essay “My Brother” traces the contemporary conception of black masculinity to the Black Panther Party of the 1960’s. As stated earlier, the blaxploitation filmmakers appropriated the Panther’s serious demeanor and militant “by any means necessary” attitude to create callous tough guy personas with insatiable sexual appetites. The codes of black “hyper-masculinity” valorized in the environment of the Black Arts Movement are later reflected in the visual iconography of hip-hop culture. For instance, the fashions popularized in blaxploitation films may also be seen in hip-hop fashion. In one of the most emblematic blaxploitation films Shaft, the protagonist donned a dark leather coat, turtleneck and sunglasses, which directly referenced the popularized imagery of the prominent Black Panther Party members (i.e. Huey Newton) [figure 8]. The dark vestments popularized by the Black Panthers were a deliberate attempt to signify the ideals of black revolution and liberation by abandoning business suits which were imbued with meanings of assimilation and the old paradigms of racial politics.

26 Ibid.
In hip-hop, the fashion of the Black Arts Movement and the blaxploitation era bore new significations apart from the ideals of black militancy, while still suggesting the idea of blatant black masculinity. In hip-hop culture black leather jackets represent the proper business attire of the streets. The leather jacket came to bear opposite significations to the business suit. Buttoned down business suits connoted a certain level of power, prestige and social mobility within the confines of mainstream institutions such as government, and corporate America. Reinforced through representations in popular culture, business suits marked the white male dominated arena of mainstream society. In a place such as the South Bronx, power, prestige and social mobility could not be attained in the mainstream but only within the margins of society, and the leather jacket served as a fitting expression of this. Interestingly, black leather jackets were first popularized as a fashion in the 1950s and 60’s as apart of the rebellious “greaser” subculture consisting of white working class youth. Thus, the leather jacket held associations of mainstream resistance, long before the cultural participants in the Black Arts Movement and hip-hop appropriated the fashion. Coupled with the “greaser” culture connections to lawbreaking and troublemaking with the black male as represented in hip-hop, the leather jacket serves as a potent symbol of unconventional living [figure 9]. In addition to leather jackets, sunglasses in hip-hop culture derives their meaning from previous sources. “Coolness” and impassivity were ideals throughout the course of black culture.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, sunglasses served as the desired vehicle to mask the eyes, which are perhaps the most emotionally revealing part of the human body. To this day dark leather jackets and sunglasses in contemporary popular culture are fashion symbols that signify criminality, toughness, and romantic notions of “otherness.”

In addition to the masculine coded leather and sunglasses, other hip-hop fashions became representative of “blackness.” In early hip-hop culture, the disenfranchised youth of the Bronx wore their possessions on their back. Despite being unable to afford upscale clothing the emphasis has always been on clean and neat appearances. As hip-hop artists began to make money and build careers from their work, they would exhibit their success on their bodies. Thick rope chain necklaces, personalized medallions, gold teeth, and expensive clothing brands all became markers of individuals’ reputation and ascendancy. Triumphed by Run D.M.C.’s song “My Adidas,” sneakers were essential attire for break dancers and this also served as the ultimate symbol of the casual, youth oriented nature of hip-hop.

“Blackness” as a spatial construct in hip-hop culture

In the discourse of “blackness” and its representations within hip-hop it is necessary to consider the socio-geographical bounds in which black representational space and “blackness” are imagined. “Blackness” as perceived and conceived within hip-hop culture is highly contingent upon the boundaries of physical and cultural space. Throughout American history there have been physical social spaces that define “blackness” as existing within a private realm. In the antebellum southern United States the Christian church was the symbolic center of the African-American social space. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the “juke joint” took over the central place in African-American society, as epitomized by Harlem with its jazz clubs and bars. In addition to specific institutions, entire geographic entities such as regions, cities, and neighborhoods have also characterized “blackness” within their own private spatial realms. The artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance were perhaps most apt at making this distinction, as Harlem for them was a place that also served
as a racial motif. However, few spaces within the canon of black literature could be clearly
demarcated as either a utopia or dystopia of black life. Despite the promise of economic
mobility and opportunity found in northern urban areas, the dark underbelly of black city life
was just as oppressive as the conditions of the rural south. In either case the black experience
did not exist solely within the isolated confines of a defined geographical location, but rather
its perceived character relied on the interaction of various spatial constructs.

Today, the ghetto (also known as “the hood”) is the psychological locus of African-
American culture, and hip-hop is the aesthetic localized within these topographical bounds.
Representations of “blackness” maintain a historical reliance on hip-hop’s origins in the
South Bronx. According to hip-hop historian Jeff Chang, hip-hop emerged within a seven
mile radius of streets within the South Bronx, affectionately referred to as the “seven mile
world.” By the early 1980’s the imagery of the Bronx in popular culture became
representative of a dystopic world of urban America, and the spatial realm inhabited by lower
class African Americans. Ironically, this dismal landscape of “benign neglect” became fertile
ground for the creative cultural phenomenon of hip-hop. As terms such as “urban,”
“ghetto,” “inner-city,” and “hood” became euphemisms for “blackness,” “urban culture”
became synonymous with hip-hop culture.

Music critic George Nelson states that the movie industry capitalized on the “Bronx
as hell image” through films such as *Bonfire of the Vanities* and *Warriors*. In *Warriors*, the
South Bronx serves as the designated hub for the myriad of New York’s violent and criminal

1997), 53.
Martin’s Press, 2005), 110.
30 Ibid. Chang refers to Daniel Patrick Mohiyan’s memo to President Richard Nixon which
stated that “the issue of race could benefit from a period of benign neglect”.
gangs. The filmic portrayal of the ghetto in *Bonfire of the Vanities* features a white Manhattanite (Sherman) and his mistress who mistakenly take the highway exit to the South Bronx. Upon first exiting the highway ramp the couple see a block of burnt-out and abandoned buildings, and on another block they find a mass of brightly dressed pimps, prostitutes, winos, and other “menacing” characters crowding the streets. Immediately the mistress gives a puzzled look to her lover and asks “Sherman where are all the white people?” These films along with other popular representations of the Bronx not only reflected white mainstream society’s internalized anxieties of urban areas, but also served to contrast and perpetuate the boundaries between the white dominated social space of privilege and safety, and the shadowy chaos and pathos of the black-inhabited inner city. Through these representations the South Bronx became the archetypal image for all of America’s black populated urban spaces.

The South Bronx, the prototypical black ghetto, was once home to the working-middle class Jewish and Irish immigrants. Though most housing was modest, for many the Bronx was a more desirable locale than the crowded tenements of Manhattan. In the 1950’s construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway displaced a number of families in the Bronx while succeeding in its goal of becoming a major infrastructural artery for Manhattan. By the end of the 1960’s nearly half of the white population had moved from the Bronx to sprawling suburban developments outside of New York City’s main metropolitan areas, to be replaced by an influx of African-American and Latino families. In addition to the mass exodus of white residents, the South Bronx lost the bulk of its manufacturing jobs, that led to a devastatingly high unemployment rate which most strongly affected African-American and

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Latino communities. As this process took place, landlords turned into slumlords by refusing to pay property taxes and provide basic necessities such as heat and water within apartment buildings. It was these conditions that created the disadvantaged space in which hip-hop emerged and “blackness” was imagined.

Since the Bronx is a borough of America’s largest city, and the expansion of hip-hop took place in urban centers, city imagery is a dominant visual code. In addition to city skylines, imagery of the broken and chaotic environment of the ghetto is also central to representations of hip-hop. Graffiti on abandoned buildings, broken glass, discarded furniture, raggedy playgrounds and concrete are a few of the visual signs to promote idea of the ghetto. Moreover, chain link fences, police tape, and brick walls are prevalent in hip-hop imagery, and contribute to the idea of the ghetto as a social space with set boundaries [figure 10].
Figure 2: Unknown Author, *Las Castas*, Lithograph, 18th century
Figure 3: Lois Maillou Jones, *Les Fetiches*, oil on canvas, 1938
Figure 4: James Van Der Zee, *Couple with Raccoon Coats*, photograph, 1932
Figure 5: James Van Der Zee, *Lady at Piano*, photograph, c. 1930
Figure 6: Elizabeth Catlett, *Negro es Bello*, Lithograph, 1970

Figure 7: Barkley Hendricks, *Lawdy Mama*, oil on canvas, 1969
Figure 8: *Huey P. Newton*, photograph, c. 1960

Figure 9: Still from the film *Shaft*, 1971
Figure 10: Photograph of rapper Spoonie G standing on 125th street, 1980, courtesy of Charlie Ahern
Chapter II: “Post Black”

Despite the fact that hip-hop is firmly rooted in African and African-American traditions and boasts itself as an “authentic” black culture, it could be argued that hip-hop is currently “post-black.” The goal of this chapter is to attempt to provide some understanding to the questions: What does “post-black” mean, and how is “post-black” applicable to hip-hop? “Post-black” is a relatively new discursive inquiry into the understanding and significance of race in an era filled with an overabundance of “posts.” Inevitably the age of post-modernism brought on the proliferation of “posts” (i.e. post-irony, post-religion, post-feminism, post-colonialism, and even post-post modernism) all of which assume that one ideological state or another has been replaced with a new form, or has diminished altogether by taking into account the current conditions of globalization, commoditization, and changes in communication. “Post-black” also considers the effects of post-modernity on the historical and cultural conceptions of “blackness” to the extent that it transforms once seemingly fixed understandings and representations of race.

Within this paper the term “post-black” is used to describe artists and other cultural producers who transform and create new codes of “blackness.” This includes both black cultural producers who refuse to become entangled within a synecdochic relationship to “blackness,” and non-black cultural producers who appropriate “blackness” to create new meanings. In rejection of the historical model of undifferentiated “black artists” creating “black art,” the central metaphor in “post-black” is individuated experience within a collective experience. Even though there is no defined origin to “post-black” we can associate this paradigm shift with the time extending from the mid- 1990s to the present.
In the realm of the visual arts the term “post black” was first used by Thelma Golden in describing the work she curated within the exhibition *Freestyle* at Harlem’s Studio Museum of Art (2001). The exhibition marked the emergence of a new aesthetic in black art as displayed in the work of twenty-eight emerging black artists, all working in different mediums, and addressing various themes. There were few commonalities that connected the artists beyond a shared racial/ethnic identity and an average age of 32. While some of the featured artists directly confronted racial motifs, others explored universal themes beyond “blackness.” Thelma Golden characterized the work in the show as “post-black,” a term she elaborated as follows:

> It was a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as “black” artists, though interested in redefining complex notions of blackness.

Golden’s commentary on the artists also reflects their position in the generation in which hip-hop was the pervasive culture. Even the title of the exhibition, *Freestyle*, suggests a direct link between hip-hop culture and the art featured, and by extension to the idea of “post-black.”

The central question raised by the *Freestyle* show is “what becomes of black art when black artists stop making it?” “Post-black” is reminiscent of art historian Darby English’s idea of black representational space as the only available context in which black art is conceived and received. English asserts that the same attempts to upend black representational space through claims of “transcending race” or advancing positive racial portrayals also serve to reinforce it. In the black artistic production of the past the emphasis

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33 In hip-hop culture the term “freestyle” refers to the improvised manner of rapping opposed to pre-meditated and written lyrics.

on making art to reify racial ideals was the basis on which black representational space was constructed, prime examples of which are the work of the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Arts Movement. “Post-Black,” on the other hand, may be considered a conceptual framework that problematizes the existence of black representational space. Artists working within the “post-black” idiom are not simply attempting to create “positive” racial images or transcend race, but rather to transform it. Transforming race, however, does not eliminate the context of black representational space. The inherent paradox of “post-black” is that even when “blackness” is recognized as a social practice and construct, it still remains the underlying subtext of many cultural objects.

The parallel cultural discourse of “post-feminism” serves as another useful lens to examine "post-black" and its implications in the visual arts and hip-hop culture. “Post-feminism” is often linked with Third Wave feminism, which examines the social complexities of sex and gender beyond the political scope of inequality and rights (which was much of the focus in Second Wave feminism). Much like “post-black” there is no clear consensus as to what “post-feminism” means other than that it signals the inadequacy of the term feminism as a complete perspective for contemplating sex and gender within the current cultural and mental environment. Feminist scholars such as Susan Faludi associate “post-feminism” with the attitude that feminism is no longer relevant and its primary political goals have already been met.  

35 This definition equates “post-feminism” with an “anti-feminism” tantamount to a veritable “wolf in sheep’s clothing.” In other terms “post-feminism” is lauded as the new frontier in feminism that renders oppressive codes of femininity empowering. For example in hip-hop, female rapper Lil’ Kim has cultivated an exorbitant

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sexual persona in which she embraces the denigrating titles of “bitch” and “whore” as a sign of her agency in constructing her own image. Lil’ Kim’s reclamation of these terms may be read as an act of “post-feminist” resistance to the male dominated arena of hip-hop. Conversely, Lil’ Kim’s reclamation of “bitch” and “whore” may also be understood not as a reclamation but instead as a counter-productive “anti-feminist” acceptance of these titles which ultimately does nothing to advance the status and welfare of womankind. On the other end of the theoretical spectrum some scholars understand “post-feminism” as not as “anti-feminism” but rather as a critical engagement with feminism that regards the diverse experiences of women in terms of race, class, sexual orientation, career choices, motherhood, age, etc. This perspective may also be read as a means in which the individual experience of womanhood is not narrowly defined by a particular code of conduct, and valued over collective feminist agendas. In the article “Third Way/ve: The Politics of Post Feminism” feminist Stephanie Genz analyzes “post feminism” through the lens of consumerism in which women are the entrepreneurs of their own images “buying into standardized femininities while also seeking to resignify their meanings.” Genz’s concept of “post-feminism” is in many ways analogous to the means by which Lil’ Kim asserts her agency by subverting derogatory terms for women through the process of resignification.

“Post-black” bears similarities to “post-feminism” through the resignification of codes of race instead of those of gender. Similarly to the way Lil’ Kim re-appropriated the labels of “bitch” and “whore,” hip-hop artists working within a “post-black” aesthetic have done the same in reframing the historically deprecatory word “nigga” as a term of endearment. However, "post-black" is not perceived as an antithesis to the promotion and

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36 Ibid., 115.
study of black art and culture in to the same way as "post-feminism" is perceived as “anti-feminism.” Most black artists recognize that race is not obsolete and that racial disparities still exist, yet those working within the “post-black” idiom also realize that racial identity is becoming increasingly fluid. Cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal describes a similar cultural phenomenon to “post-black” titled “post-soul.” According to Neal “post-soul” refers to the generation after the civil rights movement (namely the hip-hop generation), who have appropriated old codes of “blackness” to produce new meanings. Neal states that “post-soul” is the result of the disintegration of black communal networks and the increasing pervasiveness of mass media influence which together reframed black experience within the larger American post-modern experience. In defining “post-soul” as an aesthetic Neal states:

I am surmising that there is an aesthetic center within contemporary black popular culture that at various moments considers issues like deindustrialization, desegregation, the corporate annexation of black popular expression, cybernization in the workforce, the globalization of finance and communication, the general commodification of black life and culture, and the proliferation of black “meta-identities,” while continuously collapsing on modeler concepts of blackness and reanimating “pre-modern” (African?) concepts of blackness.

By analogy to Neal’s analysis of “post-soul,” “post-black” may be further elaborated as the appropriation of “blackness” to create representations of individual selves deracinated from historical models of “blackness.” Within this theoretical framework “post-black” may also be considered the consequence of one of the main ambitions of the Civil Rights Era, the

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39 Ibid., 21.
40 Ibid., 2-3.
devaluation of external signifiers of race. In the same token many artists and cultural producers working within the “post-black” model are also detached from the ideologies of the Civil Rights era. This detachment is for instance, represented in current references to prominent figures in the civil rights movement. The commercial success of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* was easily overshadowed by the popularity of X brand clothing. Baseball caps, leather jackets, t-shirts and jeans embroidered with the X simplified the complex life and legacy of Malcolm X down to an easily identified symbol. Much like the image of Che Guevara emblazoned on a t-shirt, the X signifying Malcolm X came to represent a fashion statement instead of an ideological revolution.

Even though no other recent black leader’s name and legacy have been as heavily merchandised as those of Malcolm X, the iconic status of Martin Luther King is perhaps the best representation of the "post-black" tendency of historical detachment. The name of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has been abbreviated to MLK and become a catch-all term to describe streets, buildings, parks, racial unity, and a national holiday, as well as a slain civil rights leader. Meanwhile, film scholar and cultural critic Todd Boyd claims that hip-hop lyrics are more politically relevant now than Martin Luther King speeches. Boyd's assertions are a direct example of the hip-hop generation's ideological separation from the civil rights movement. It can be inferred that "post-soul" and "post-black" are analogous concepts that refer to the establishment of a new "blackness" not concerned with historicity or even skin tone, but shaped by the postmodern conditions of commoditization, globalization, and the gains achieved through the Civil Rights Movement.

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Class and socio-economic status may also be added as elements of an additional discursive layer in the theoretical framework of "post-black." Despite longstanding inequities in income, housing, and standards of living, the late 1980’s through the 1990's marked the emergence of a growing African American middle class. The ascendency of the black middle class into mainstream American culture is another significant factor leading into the nascency of "post-black." In “The New Black Aesthetic” Trey Ellis describes the non-black cultural literacy of a rising black bourgeois population. Ellis also portrays this generation as “cultural mulattos- educated by a multiracial mix of cultures that can easily navigate the white world.” In a humorous tone Ellis adds that members of this same group “either imagine themselves the children of William F. Buckley or affect a ‘superblackness’.”

Despite the long existence of a black middle class, “blackness” has historically been associated with the bottom rungs of the social strata; however the new generation of the black middle class complicates the seemingly equivalent categories of class and race. Furthermore the new black aesthetics’ commingling of American mainstream culture and black culture inevitably creates new codes of "blackness," and therefore aligns itself with “post-black.”

The fusion of class and racial boundaries is an idea that is expressed in the work of several artists in Golden’s Freestyle exhibition. Small World, a video installation by artists Sanford Biggers and Jennifer Zackin clearly reflects the black middle class embrace of American cultural assimilation and subsequent postmodern reworking of race [figure 11]. The video installation features both artists’ family videos and pictures juxtaposed against one another. Both artists are middle class minorities (Biggers is African-American and Zackin is Jewish-American) and are shown engaging in the same childhood activities that reflect the

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standard American upbringing (i.e. birthday parties, playing the piano, family vacations, etc).

As a commentary about *Small World* Biggers states:

> The middle class Jewish and African-American families act as metaphors for the ongoing emergence of the next America, a society delineated more on the lines of economics than ethnicity. This vision of an American culture of class makes us all more interchangeable that we are willing to admit, leaving our individual cultural heritage the only truly distinctive aspect of our identities. 43

Biggers and Zackin’s installation transparently demonstrates the American mainstream cultural absorption of “blackness” (and also the Jewish-American experience).

Jennie Jones is another artist featured in the *Freestyle* show whose work explicitly approaches the idea of “blackness” within the pervasive American class system. In *Homage to an Unknown Suburban Black Girl* [figure 12] Jennie Jones utilizes a found Polaroid of a young black woman as the central and most dominant piece in the site-specific installation. In some ways the image draws some parallels with Barkley Hendrick’s *Lawdy Mama* in terms of an anonymous subject. The subject can easily be raced, aged, gendered, classed, and dated as a young black girl, within a modest middle class interior in the 1970’s. The title of the image casts the subject as both individual and representative of an entire generation who grew up within the larger culture of middle class America.

The intersection of race and class is one useful perspective in considering the connection between “post-black” and hip-hop culture. Since early hip-hop is so strongly correlated with the deprived socio-economic space in which it was conceived, its perceived

“blackness” as a poverty aesthetic is well-established. As hip-hop spread from the South Bronx to the rest of the nation, however, it was certain that many of its new participants would be of middle class backgrounds. Even when the commercialization of hip-hop was in its infancy the most notable hip-hop artists such as Run D.M.C and the Beastie Boys infused the established codes of hip-hop with indicators of their middle class status. More specifically both groups utilized rock and roll samples in their music, and often blended middle class attire with hip-hop fashion (i.e. varsity jackets with gold chains). In later hip-hop culture the successors of Run D.M.C. and the Beastie Boys continue to complicate and transform “blackness” as it is associated with hip-hop. It might be said that current hip-hop culture has become “post-black” due to the intermixing of American mainstream culture with the perceived “blackness” of hip-hop; as combined with transformations in racial, class-oriented and historical perspectives.

*From the Ghetto to the Suburbs: The Shift of “Private” Black Social Space to the “Public” space of mainstream America*

As discussed earlier “blackness” as perceived and conceived within hip-hop culture is highly contingent upon the boundaries of physical and cultural space. It can be asserted that the link between “post-black” and hip-hop is conditioned by the merging of the perceived private and public social spaces of “blackness” and American culture at large. Throughout the historical trajectory of black social spaces, the expressive cultures that emerged from them intermingled with mainstream popular culture, thereby complicating the boundaries of public and private social space. The solidity of such concepts of private and public must be questioned in considering how hip-hop expanded outside of the South Bronx to major cities such as Houston, Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Atlanta –or at least to African-American communities within those cities. Hip-hop scholar Murray Forman
maintains that hip-hop culture from its inception has always been defined through the private and localized space of the ghetto. Despite the expansion of hip-hop to urban areas outside of the South Bronx, the culture maintained its emphasis on locality. Stylistic sub-categories such as Miami Bass, West Coast gangster rap, and Detroit House are evidence of the spatial emphasis of hip-hop culture. Forman also notes that the geographic boundaries of the ghetto are also cultural boundaries, and they are “continually open to negotiation and renegotiation by those who inhabited their terrains and who circulated throughout the city’s boroughs.”

The idea of a private, insular social space in the context of hip-hop culture is paradoxical, since it may be argued that sub-cultures are easily incorporated into and influenced by the hegemonic cultural sphere. The youths who were apart of the early hip-hop culture created their own systems of artistic production and evaluation, which later were disseminated to the public at large. In particular, the early communities of graffiti artists most closely adhere to the private cultural sphere model of the literati. In the 1970’s graffiti artists had established groups or “crews” which evolved into “a way of life with its own code of behavior, secret gathering places, art historian Richard Vinograd highlights the flexibility of the private and public cultural space in terms of the exchange of art and ideas. The literati emerged as a community of talented intellectuals, who distinguished themselves from professional artists, and established their own system of values concerning artistic production and criticism. The literati were an exclusionary group, and the information shared between them remained within their private communities. Vinograd argues that in the late Ming Dynasty the private knowledge of the art criticism and instruction produced by the literati became public, largely as a result of the developments in printing technologies. Accordingly, the dissemination of knowledge to social spheres outside of the elite camp of the literati created a new dynamic that complicated the defined spaces of the public and private. Much like hip-hop, the literati may best be understood (at least through a Western perspective) as a sub-culture, as their values and ideas were transmitted and perpetuated through codes in their art and literature.

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46 To further examine the dialectic between public and private cultural space, the Chinese Literati serves as an older but relevant and applicable parallel to hip-hop. In Private Art and Public Knowledge in Later Chinese Painting, art historian Richard Vinograd highlights the flexibility of the private and public cultural space in terms of the exchange of art and ideas. The literati emerged as a community of talented intellectuals, who distinguished themselves from professional artists, and established their own system of values concerning artistic production and criticism. The literati were an exclusionary group, and the information shared between them remained within their private communities. Vinograd argues that in the late Ming Dynasty the private knowledge of the art criticism and instruction produced by the literati became public, largely as a result of the developments in printing technologies. Accordingly, the dissemination of knowledge to social spheres outside of the elite camp of the literati created a new dynamic that complicated the defined spaces of the public and private. Much like hip-hop, the literati may best be understood (at least through a Western perspective) as a sub-culture, as their values and ideas were transmitted and perpetuated through codes in their art and literature.
slang, and aesthetic standards for hundreds of New York City youths.” 47 Several of these crews went under the names of the Ebony Dukes, Writers Corner 188, Wild Style, and the Crazy 5. In early hip-hop culture a graffiti artist’s reputation was built around personal style and proliferation of work [figure 13]. By the 1980’s graffiti had caught the attention of the hipster New York intelligentsia, thus bringing fame to graffiti artists such as Lee Quionones and Fred Brathwaite (“Fab 5 Freddy”). The art world followed shortly after, catapulting former graffiti artists Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring to international celebrity as fine artists, and thereby moving graffiti art from the private cultural space of the streets to the upscale galleries of New York. The fact that private and public spaces are never clearly delineated from each other is further demonstrated by the fact that there was a reciprocal influence of the art-world on hip-hop. Thus, for example, Fab 5 Freddy states that, along with advertisements, he was inspired by the pop art movement, which inspired his subway car mural of Warhol’s iconic Campbell Soup can [figure 14]. In this instance the social space of the gallery influences the space of the street, thereby reshaping the street (the subway car) as an exhibition space for art.

The Attraction of Black Cultural Space in Mainstream America

As discussed above, “blackness” is created by both black and white cultural producers. In the case of hip-hop and its links to a “post-black” aesthetic, mainstream America’s fascination with black culture not only reifies conceptions of “blackness” but in some cases transforms it. Since its earliest inception, the contentious social locale of “blackness” has served as a site of desire for white mainstream America, in spite of its

associations as the damned and pathological counterpoint to “whiteness.” In the concept of “consuming the other” feminist theorist bell hooks postulates that an obsessive admiration of “blackness” is a means of transforming oneself. The popularity of whites donning blackface in the minstrel shows of the early and mid 19th century is an apt example of the long history of “consuming the other.” Still many would contend that the performance of blackface is completely divorced from desire and instead is a practice with the intended effect of asserting white hegemonic power. This idea is clearly suggested by film critic Manthia Diawara’s statement:

In the blackface myth, there is a white fantasy which posits whiteness as the norm. What is absent in the blackface stereotype is as important as what is present: every blackface is a statement of social imperfection, inferiority, and mimicry that is placed in isolation with an absent whiteness as its ideal opposite.48

While this statement is certainly valid, the performance of blackface by whites also signifies resistance to white normalcy as defined through physical and cultural difference. Cultural critic John Leland observes that blackface was a means for performers (namely Jewish entertainers) to express their authentic identities outside of binary racial lines. Taking Leland’s postulations a step further it may be argued that the appropriation of black musical forms in minstrelsy shows demonstrates an underlying appreciation of black cultural production through its reception by mainstream audiences.

The white involvement in the Harlem Renaissance may also serve as historic reference of “blackness” as the subject of white desire. In the 1920’s to 30’s many whites flocked to Harlem to partake in the arts scene, and were among the most vocal advocates of the “New Negro.” In particular music critic Carl Van Vetchen described his fascination with black culture as an “addiction.” Van Vetchen’s commissioned caricature titled “A Prediction”

not only reveals his personal desire to assume the identity of “blackness,” but also the idea that one can eventually become “black” through participating in the culture [figure 15].

The same idea of “consuming the other” is echoed in contemporary hip-hop, as “blackness” may be assumed by any willing participant in the culture. According to a 2004 edition of Forbes Magazine, eighty percent of consumers of hip-hop are young and white. For a number of white suburban youth hip-hop serves as the vehicle for the assumption of the identity of the “other” as a form of resistance to mainstream society and middle class rebellion. Author and social critic Bakari Kitwana suggests that hip-hop’s attraction is due to its ability to provide a platform for youth culture in general. The premise of early hip-hop culture allowed youth to acquire respect and status within an economically disadvantaged environment through mastery of rapping, break dancing, graffiti, etc. Hip-hop was the vehicle to render visible those deemed invisible by mainstream America, and provided a “voice to the voiceless.”

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49 Bakari Kitwana Why White Kids Love Hip Hop (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 81-106. In chapter 3 titled “Erasing Blackness,” Kitwana argues against the popular notion that white kids are hip-hop’s primary audience. In this argument Kitwana claims that the means to track and measure this type of data is often faulty and inaccurate (and these stats are gathered primarily by one company, Soundscan). Kitwana states “The rarely disputed ‘fact’ that white suburban youth constitute hip-hop’s primary audience may now be as popular as hip-hop itself. But search high and low and you would be hard pressed to find a source for it. Even harder to find would be a demographic study that substantiates it. More likely such a search would reveal a nationwide game of Telephone, where one whispered thought gets twisted and exaggerated beyond recognition. How has a statistic with so little hard data to back it up become so widely referenced and accepted?” With the knowledge of Kitwana’s very compelling argument it seems a bit sophist that I would use this statistic that he would deem inaccurate. However, despite the existence of “hard data,” the widely accepted idea that whites are the primary audience for hip-hop does exist and is central to the overall argument in this paper, that hip-hop has been disconnected from its black roots.

50 John Leland, Hip, The History (New York: Harper Collins, 2004). Leland asserts that rebellion against middle class values is the main attraction of “cool.”


52 Ibid. xiii. This is an interesting theory in considering the context of the global expansion of hip-hop. In Dietmar Elflien’s article titled “Krauts with Attitudes to Turks with Attitudes: Some Aspects of Hip-Hop Culture in Germany” he notes that youth members of the cultural minority of
economically disadvantaged? According to Robin D.G. Kelley “Hip hop particularly
gangster rap, also attracts listeners for whom the ghetto is a place of adventure, unbridled
violence, erotic fantasy and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom.”53 In other
terms, “blackness” via hip-hop allowed a member of the larger American culture to resist
normalcy, and transform oneself by partaking in a private cultural space through mastering
signifying codes, without being physically present in the social space of the ghetto.

Despite the condemnation of hip-hop by both white and black communities alike its
seductive allure of “blackness” easily became a pervasive commodity. Social theorist
Christopher Holmes-Smith makes the observation that “the dominant hegemonic order learns
how to absorb certain aspects of cultural resistance into its own mandate for self
preservation.”54 Therefore, it is necessary for “blackness” as the antithetical cultural space to
“whiteness” to be subsumed within the larger culture of the American mainstream through
reproducing “blackness” as a commodity.

Turks in Germany readily embraced hip-hop due to the cultural affinities shared between poor
African-Americans and Turkish immigrants.
53 Robin D.G. Kelly, Yo Mama’s Dysfunktional: Fighting the Urban Culture Wars (Boston:
54 Christopher Holmes-Smith, “I Don’t Like to Dream About Getting Paid Representations of
Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul.” Social Text 77. Vol. 21, no. 4,
Figure 11: Sanford Biggers and Jennifer Zackin, *Small World*, video installation, 2001

Figure 12: Jennie Jones, *Homage to an Unknown Suburban Girl*, mixed media installation, 2001
Figure 13: Photograph of subway car by graffiti artist Flint 707, c. 1973, Courtesy of Jack Flint

Figure 14: Photograph of Warhol inspired subway car by graffiti artist Fred “Fab 5” Breathwaite, c. 1981, Courtesy of Martha Cooper
Figure 15: Miguel Covarrubias, *A Prediction: Portrait of Carl Van Vetchen*, ink and watercolor on paper, c. 1920
Chapter III: “Post-Black” in Contemporary Hip Hop Culture

“Post-black” involves the resignification of “blackness” by both black and white cultural producers, through several elements: the devaluation of external signifiers of race, a focus on the individual experience versus that of the collective, detachment from historical conceptions of “blackness,” and the transformation of “blackness” as a non-categorical status. These elements manifest in a contemporary hip-hop culture where “blackness” has become a commodity; yet where artists have also found new ways of resisting commercialization vis-à-vis “blackness.”

In hip-hop culture “blackness” is visually connoted in a number of ways (i.e. urban imagery, skin color, fashion, etc). This chapter will illuminate the ways the “post-black” aesthetic manifests in contemporary hip-hop culture through a reading of various visual texts. The beginning of this chapter will examine how non-black cultural producers have given new meanings to hip-hop and “blackness,” while the latter part will focus on how black hip-hop artists redefine race.

In examining how codes of hip-hop are equated with commodity, the Jeep Cherokee advertisement [figure 15] serves as a congruous text. Jammed in one corner are the archetypal signs of hip-hop culture, including, most significantly, a young African-American male photographed in the act of rapping. He holds a microphone in one hand while the other hand is gesturing. On the hand that holds the microphone his little finger is bejeweled with a thick diamond ring, and he also has a necklace with a crucifix pendant, bracelet, and earring to match. Behind the rapper are black silhouettes of figures in the act of spray painting and break dancing. Street posts and adumbrations of a city skyline signify the urban landscape. Turntables, mix tapes and speakers also loom in the background as signs of hip-hop culture.
On the opposite side of the advertisement, the Jeep Cherokee is positioned in a field of white space, as if to express the notion that this automobile is the embodiment of an entire culture. The text provides even more insight to this idea. In a stenciled font meant to imitate the look of spray paint are the words “the culture grew.” On the other side above the Jeep the sentence continues “so did we.” The seal of authenticity may be found at the bottom of the ad, as it reads “the original, certified, vehicle of hip-hop.” The advertisement demonstrates how the cultural codes of hip-hop are relocated to the public space of popular culture via commodity by the automobile industry. A similar idea operates within an advertisement for Marc Ecko shoe brand [figure 17]. The background consists of a looming urban skyline over a masked man who holds a can of spray paint in each hand as if he had just finished a graffiti tag. The shoe is positioned in the front and center of the advertisement as if it is the finished product of the graffiti artist.

The ways in which white rappers appropriate codes of “blackness” is a pivotal factor in the development of “post black” in hip-hop culture. From the genesis of hip-hop to the late 1990’s, the popularity of white rappers amongst mainstream audiences was contingent upon their reception amongst African-American youth. In the 1980’s the Beastie Boys were respected throughout the black hip-hop community for not completely yielding their middle-class backgrounds to feign “blackness.” The Beastie Boys were three Jewish New York suburbanites who were applauded for the way in which they flaunted their whiteness in the use of rock riffs and “emphasis on white nasal speech patterns.”

55 In the 1990’s at the dawn of “pop hip-hop,” the non-credibility of Vanilla Ice as an “authentic” rapper was the result of his often sloppy appropriation of African-American slang. In the song “Ice Ice Baby” he

brags about strapping on his jimmy, “thinking that jimmy means condom instead of penis.” 56 Rising to fame (or infamy) in 1998, Marshall “Eminem” Mathers relocated the locus of hip-hop from the ghetto to Detroit’s poor white trailer parks. Eminem’s popularity was a result of the combination of his street-credible background, sardonic humor, nasal rhyme delivery, and affiliations with respected hip-hop artist Dr. Dre. Following his earning of respect from black audiences, mainstream America anointed Eminem with the title of “genius” and “the greatest rapper ever.” 57 Eminem’s dominance in hip-hop cleared the barrier for a number of subsequent white rappers to be accepted within the mainstream, even without the prerequisite of validation by African American youth. Village Voice writer and hip-hop critic Greg Tate states:

Readers of Black music history are often struck by egregious turns of public relations puffery that saw Paul Whiteman crowned the King of Swing in the 1920’s, Benny Goodman anointed the King of Jazz in the 1930s, Elvis Presley propped up as the King of Rock and Roll in the 1950’s, and Eric Clapton awarded the title of the world’s greatest guitar player (ostensibly of the blues) in the 1960’s. 58

Hip Hop Goes Global

Hip-Hop has expanded from the American ghetto to almost every nation on the planet. Italy, Japan, Senegal, South Korea, Chad, Belarus, Australia, Bangladesh, England, Brazil, Tanzania, Germany, Cambodia and Armenia are just a few countries that have a significant hip-hop fan base (enough to support national hip-hop music industries). According to hip-hop commentator Greg Tate “the aura and global appeal of hip-hop lie in both its perceived Blackness (hip, stylish, youthful, alienated, rebellious, sensual) and its


perceived fast access to global markets through digital technology.” Hip-hop placed in a multitude of cultural contexts inevitably leads to the appropriation and hybridization of codes of “blackness.”

In Japan, like many other countries outside of America, hip-hop culture was first introduced through the seminal film *Wild Style* (1982). *Wild Style* represented hip-hop as a rebel culture engineered by African-American and Hispanic youth. It is interesting to note however that *Wild Style* (and many subsequent films about hip-hop) was framed through the lenses of white hip-hop enthusiasts. *Wild Style’s* director Charlie Ahern was from a middle class family in upstate New York and was the first filmmaker to give attention to the early roots of hip-hop in the Bronx. In 1983 several performers from *Wild Style* went to Japan to promote the film. According to hip-hop historian Ian Condry this moment marked Japan’s first encounter with hip-hop culture. Break dancing and hip-hop fashion were immediately and enthusiastically received among many Japanese youth; rap music was adopted later since the Japanese language was incompatible with rhythmic structure essential to rap. One of the most interesting characteristics of Japanese hip-hop is that in some cases the appropriation of “blackness” has gone beyond baggy jeans and sunglasses, but the external signifiers of dark skin and coarsely textured hair have also been adopted. The most obvious conclusion is that this interpretation of “blackness” is akin to the American practice of blackface which was so prominent in the late 19th- early 20th century. However, we may read this appropriation of “blackness” by Japanese youth beyond grotesque and parodic performance, and view it as a function of expressing an alternate identity outside of the

59Ibid., 7.
boundaries of Japanese society. One striking visual example of Japanese hip-hop may be found in Figure 18. The Nissan advertisement features a group of young people convening within the interior setting of a barbershop. The subjects are dressed within a diverse yet typical hip-hop style in which males wear baggy pants, oversized shirts, and sport backwards baseball caps. The female is attired in leather boots, fedora hat and a sweater dress which are all retro fashion throwbacks to the 1970’s (also popular fashion in the neo-soul style). None of the figures have darkened skin, however their hair resembles the tightly curled textures and styles unique to people of African descent. The stylist appears to be fashioning his client’s hair into cornrow braids, and the woman sports a short afro. Two other figures in the image have dreadlocks, meanwhile another person’s hair is concealed by his hat. In the background Japanese characters are abundantly placed in the background to signify the foreign setting that has incorporated hip-hop into their culture. The setting of the barbershop is a prototypical black communal space, where in this case it is the social setting for cultural producers of the unique brand of Japanese hip-hop. On the left side of the image the location is identified as Shimokitazawa, Tokyo, and the right side of the image states “the black experience is everywhere.” This image is intended to be an advertisement for Nissan which primarily manufactures automobiles, yet the form of a car is absent. In this case “blackness” or the Japanese interpretation of “blackness” does not supercede the Nissan car, but embodies it.

For many Americans it seems Japan’s acceptance of hip-hop is a contradictory cultural phenomenon since the nation is among the wealthiest and most racially homogenous in the world. In response to this view of Japan, writer and cultural commentator Vanessa

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Altman-Siegel asks “how does the chaos of black life in the ghettos translate in a highly regulated society where racial conflict and urban poverty barely exist?” It may be argued that it doesn’t. Altman-Seigel posits that marginalization and oppression expressed by the cultural producers of hip-hop has been not simply been diluted into a trendy and marketable commodity in Japan. Rather hip-hop’s popularity among Japanese youth is a means of resistance from the rigid conformity of Japanese society.

In Germany hip-hop also serves as a form of “sub-cultural dissidence.” Deitmar Elflien’s study of hip-hop culture in pre-unified Germany examines the social dynamics of the Turkish immigrants within the larger German country. As the largest ethnic minority group within Germany, Turkish rap groups are prevalent within the German hip-hop music industry. Elflien argues that hip-hop within the Turkish-German community functions in the same way that did for African-Americans. As a marginalized social group, hip-hop provides immigrants a means of gaining status and recognition within a larger culture that renders them invisible.63

Reconfigurations of “Blackness” by Black Cultural Producers

A pivotal factor in the development of “post-black” in hip-hop culture is the tendency of black expressive culture to morph whenever it becomes an object of mainstream popular culture. This shift manifests itself in a reclamation of private social space, or artists conform to the cultural hegemony and abandon the desire for a separate social sphere. The latter case may be seen in contemporary hip-hop in which rappers themselves have embraced the commodification of the culture. New representations of hip-hop appeared along with the rise

63 Elflien also argues that the Turkish culture possessed some characteristics that were conducive to the status driven culture of hip-hop. Concepts such as male honor and recognition through humor and verbal wordplay are valorized in traditional Turkish culture much in the same way that it is in hip-hop.
of the hip-hop mogul in which codes of wealth and upper class elitism that represent “whiteness” were combined with traditional codes of hip-hop.

Beginning in the late 1990’s hip-hop artists have begun to redefine “blackness” by incorporating global influences into their appearances and adopting codes of the dominant social order. For several years now rapper, music producer, Broadway actor, marathon runner, social climber and hip-hop entrepreneur Sean “Diddy” Combs has played host to an extravagant event aptly titled “The White Party.” The annual affair is often held at an estate in the Hamptons, widely known as the exclusive vacation resort for whites in the upper echelon of Manhattan social circles. With an invite list of up to 800 guests, past attendees to “The White Party” have included such notables as Salman Rushdie, Rev. Al Sharpton, Aretha Franklin, the Princess of York, and of course famous hip-hop artists. Perhaps even more important than the guest list is how the event is coordinated to produce a specific visual effect. All decorations and furnishings are white, and a strict dress code of all-white attire is enforced. Several questions arise when considering the implications of this type of event. What does it mean when a rapper who is visibly connected to “blackness” in the imagination of the American mainstream hosts a “White Party”? Furthermore what does it mean when politicians, movie stars, literary giants, hip-hop artists, and European royalty integrate within the same social space, as baptized in the color of white? Perhaps on one discursive level “The White Party” intermixes black celebrities (namely rappers) into the upper echelons of society thereby rendering the external signifiers of “blackness” as arbitrary. Then again if “blackness” becomes arbitrary then the whole idea of race becomes obsolete as well, and certainly choosing the color white is not solely an stylistic choice, but one with social

64 Several celebrity gossip reports even well connected guests are turned away for not adhering to the strict dress code policy.
ramifications. In the conceptual structure of “post-black” the “White Party” may be read as the effort of one prominent black cultural producer to abrogate race as a determinant of social class, thereby transforming the traditional paradigms of “blackness.”

The roots of the “White Party” are in the late 1990’s, when Combs and a number of other rap artists began to appropriate the early hip-hop conception of showing mastery through signs of socio-economic mobility. This particular cadre of rap artists, however, went beyond signifying codes of mere bourgeois affluence to absorb images of extravagant aristocratic wealth into the representation of hip-hop. Thick gold necklaces and medallions were disenthroned by custom jewelry crafted of platinum and diamonds; fur coats were draped over the t-shirts and blue jeans of hip-hop’s past; and music videos and album covers began to feature luxury cars and sprawling old money estates. According to visual culture scholar Christopher Holmes-Smith, 1999 is the definitive date that marked the visible emergence of the hip-hop mogul. Rappers such as Combs, and Robert Percy “Master P” Miller became entrepreneurs to market unlimited lines of merchandise beyond music, from clothing, jewelry and colognes to sports drinks and books. New representations of hip-hop appeared simultaneously, in which codes of wealth and upper class elitism representing “whiteness” were combined with traditional codes of hip-hop signifying “blackness.”

Combs is perhaps the most significant illustration of the hip-hop mogul’s contributing role to the blurring of distinct racial codes in hip-hop. In 1998, Combs launched “Sean John,” a fashion line of men’s clothing meant to reflect a sophisticated, fashion-forward urban sensibility. The clothing line included major hip-hop fashion staples including simple t-shirts, loose-fitting denim, jackets, etc. However Combs also extended his line to classic

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65 This is stated on the Sean John website. <http://www.seanjohn.com>, [accessed May 1, 2007]
dress suits, which reflect his aspirations to reinstate the urbane in urban street culture. In a series of Sean John advertisements subtitled “young moguls,” and directed towards young males, diluted signs of hip-hop intermingle with codes of upper-class wealth. In the advertising imagery the settings and activities the models partake in are direct imitations of “whiteness” figured as the ultimate locus of privilege. Elderly white butlers, dark understated luxury automobiles, boardrooms, and teacups all signify the desire to both encompass and exceed middle class affluence.

In Figure 19, the spatial entity of the boardroom becomes a potent metaphor for power, and the primary vehicle for obtaining wealth. Traditionally a site of white male exclusivity, Sean John reconstructs the signifiers of the boardroom to depict a racially diverse environment. Perhaps more importantly the black male is imbued with the significations of power and authority within this scene. The grains within the wood table and the walls converge into a singular vantage point leading to a young black male, around the age of twelve or thirteen standing at the head of the boardroom table, a seat usually reserved for the CEO. The model in this position is Combs’ son, Christian. The significance of Combs positioning Christian in the role as a future hip-hop mogul is that it suggests the embrace of institutions such as inheritance and family lineage, which are central devices in the establishment and perpetuation of white wealth and privilege. Christian, as the boardroom executive, adheres to the casual hip-hop dress code of cotton t-shirts and denim, while the other models (who are around the same age) wear business suits. Also, Christian stands in an authoritative stance looking directly at the viewer, while the other business colleagues are seated and engaged in the act of writing, presumably taking notes for directives given by the CEO. Above Christian’s head is the elegant signature of Sean John in white script surrounded by black and encased within a brown wooden frame. Christian and the Sean Jean
signature confuse the focal emphasis and the locus of power within the image. Thus, consumers equate the black commodity of Sean Jean clothing brand with the qualities of white socio-economic privilege.

Other images from the “young moguls” advertising series further contemplate the same juxtapositions of racial and class signifiers shown in the boardroom image of Figure 19. For instance, in Figure 20 Christian serves as the stand in for the white male as in this image as he is the subject of a fine painting. Absent of visual clues of the ghetto (except for the black male figure himself), the image presents one site of privilege situated within another. In the painting, Christian stands atop a rocky outcrop within a wooded setting. The landscape setting as background is a common trope in Western portraiture and serves as a polysemous signifier situating ideals of gender, class, and status. In some readings of the Western tradition in landscape painting, nature represents an imaginary site for middle-class leisure in contrast to the dirty and corrupted life found in urban centers. The idea of the young black male dressed in hip-hop fashion within the long-established setting for middle- and upper-class exclusivity constructs a paradoxical array of signs of class and race. In addition to the significations within the imagery of the painting itself, the setting outside of the painting creates a double allusion to wealth and privilege. The painting is encased within an ornate gold gilded frame and positioned on a well lit and resplendently patterned wall, resembling the interior of a plush and fancy sitting room of a mansion. In the lower right-hand register of the image, an anonymous hand clutches a dusting implement. This hand in the act of cleaning is white, and the black and white costume that covers the arm indicates the subject’s status as maid and domestic laborer. The imagery of white domestic labor becomes a signifier that aims to exceed ideas of bourgeois American wealth, which typically depended on the
servility of blacks, through adopting the codes of the aristocratic class of Britain, long associated with overweening refinement and civility in American popular culture.

In Figure 21 the white servant is also present. In this image Christian sits within a dark and understated automobile while a white elderly man with the air of a stately butler waits for his “employer” to emerge from the vehicle with an umbrella. Perhaps the most interesting detail of this image involves the absence of a focal point, as neither Christian nor the butler occupy a central position. On the left, Christian sits in lower position as if about to emerge from the car, meanwhile the butler stands to the right. The butler’s umbrella is held above Christian’s figure and creates a pictorial balance that also serves to underscore which subject is in the position of authority.

Apart from Combs’ Sean John advertising series, another striking example of the juxtaposition of signifiers of race is expressed in the Footlocker advertisement of Figure 22. Here a young black male dressed in the common hip-hop fashion of baggy and colorful attire is surrounded by a group of white men dressed in business suits at a shoeshine station. Shoeshine stations were once a common trope for black servility, however in this image the black male is the position of advantage.

The Roots video “What They Do” serves as an apt parody of common rap video scenes representing hip-hop culture of the late 1990’s including luxury cars, an old money mansion, expensive champagne side-by-side with forty ounce bottles of malt liquor in paper bags, rooftop vistas of Brooklyn, chain-link fences, pit bulls, and swanky nightclubs. These standard visual signifiers reflect the class-conscious and socially ambitious/ambiguous hip-hop culture valorized by such artists as Combs.
Several hip-hop scholars and cultural critics (most notably Tricia Rose) argue that representations of “blackness” reify stereotypes through the internalization by black youth of constructed cultural codes presented by mainstream media. While this theory is valid, it does not consider the alternative voices in contemporary black music that problematize hip-hop’s adherence to common perceptions of “blackness.” Considering a previous statement by Greg Tate regarding white musicians being crowned as foremost masters in black music, it could be argued that historically, when white artists become preeminent in black musical genres, black artists usually develop new musical styles. I posit that hip-hop is now in a period of transition, due to the dominance of the African-American musicians who no longer follow codes of “blackness” as embodied in hip-hop culture. This sentiment is expressed in the lyrics of Outkast’s song “Hollywood Divorce.” The chorus utilizes the metaphor of divorce to allude to their separation from hip-hop due to its pervasive presence in mainstream culture:

…Starts off like a small-town marriage, lovely wife and life, baby carriage,
Now all the stars have cars, success of course,
But it ends in Hollywood divorce, Hollywood divorce…

…All the fresh styles always start off as a good lil' hood thang.
Look at Blues, Rock, Jazz, Rap.
I ain't even talkin' about music, everything else too.
By the time it reach Hollywood it's over.
But it's cool, we just keep it goin' make new shit…

…Take our game, take our name, give us a little fame,
and then they kick us to the curb that's a cold thang.
(Outkast, featuring Snoop Dogg and Li’l Wayne)

The duo Gnarls Barkley is a prime example of how African-American artists transform codes of “blackness” inherent in hip-hop culture. Gnarls Barkley consists of
rapper and vocalist Cee-Lo and music producer Danger Mouse. Both artists came together after successful careers in hip-hop. Cee-Lo was a former member of the Atlanta based rap group Goodie Mob, who were one of the first groups that popularized southern American rap. Danger Mouse gained fame after producing the *Grey Album* which combined rap vocals from *Jay Z’s Black Album* with sound samples from the Beatles *White Album*. As most hip-hop producers draw their samples from largely rhythm and blues, Danger Mouse created a musically literate soundscape from the ghetto glorifying lyrics of Jay Z to the white dominated rock-n-roll mastered by the Beatles. The *Grey Album* was certainly no coincidence, as Danger Mouse’s deliberate choice of combining the *Black* and *White Albums* was a discursive play on the interfusion of racial musical forms.

The first album by Gnarls Barkeley titled *St. Elsewhere* is an allusion to their genre mixing and unclassifiable sound. On the album cover of *St. Elsewhere* [figure 23] a nuclear mushroom cloud containing images of cityscapes, palm trees, black panthers, gas masks, helicopters, spears, and fire hydrants. These image may be interpreted as the symbolic destruction of the jumble of entities that define postmodern conceptions of normalcy. In this light *St. Elsewhere* refers to a creative space void of contextual limitations, namely race. However lofty this artistic pursuit may be it is impossible to create music and perform outside of some socio-historical context. In concert performances and public appearances the group often displays thematic costumes ranging from hippies, tennis players, to characters from cult films [figure 24]. These irreverent costumes ultimately reference history and the social space of popular culture. As cultural producers Gnarls Barkeley are successful at creating new codes of “blackness” through rejecting the private cultural space and embracing references of mainstream youth culture.
The Atlanta based group Outkast is another a primary example of the embodiment of the “post black” aesthetic within popular culture. The first album released by Outkast’s “Andre 3000” and “Big Boi” in 1994 was a standard rap album with an emphasis on southern America’s hip-hop culture. However, throughout their career, these artists have reconfigured codes of “blackness” in hip-hop with each successive album. The second album, *ATLiens* (1996) revolves around the narrative of two rappers from Atlanta who battle outer-space forces. The cover of the album features a comic-book styled depiction of Andre 3000 wearing a turban and a kung fu shirt, thus invoking a globally eclectic aesthetic [figure 25]. In contrast, Big Boi serves as the member of the group who anchors traditional codes of “blackness” despite Andre 3000’s radical deviations. On the same cover, Big Boi adheres to the standard fashion codes of “blackness” via hip-hop as evidenced by his denim pants, and baseball cap (which is emblazed with the Atlanta Braves sports team insignia to indicate spatial specificity). The title *ATLiens* signifies both a resistance to the spatial boundaries of the ghetto and an interest in cultures outside of the confines of the ghetto, while simultaneously stressing the group’s incontrovertible Atlanta roots. In Figure 26 both Andre 3000 and Big Boi stand within the center of album composition surrounded by almost indecipherable figures of hands and faces, which are meant to reflect the alien forces around them. They also are positioned within archetypal fight stances appropriated from kung fu films, which are a reference to an additional cultural source outside of “blackness.”

On Outkast’s third album *Aquemini* (1998) their popular song titled “Rosa Parks” after the civil rights icon became the center of controversy. By naming the song after her
without any examination of her struggle in the lyrics, it led many critics to feel as if the group was taking the importance of the civil rights movement for granted. Mark Anthony Neal notes that by invoking Rosa Park’s name out of the context of the civil rights movement, Outkast is representative of their black generation that “willingly bastardizes ‘black history’ and culture to create alternative meanings.” On the album cover of *Aquemini*, Big Boi and Andre 3000 wear accoutrements indicative of the 1960’s, complete with pin-striped suits and bell-bottomed pants [figure 27]. In addition to the fashion signifiers of the 1960’, the background of the album cover contains semi nude women sporting Afro hairstyles, and astrological tables which are an amalgamation of signs derived from blaxploitation films and the general popular culture during the period.

With the album *Stankonia* (2000), Outkast continues to complicate the codes of “blackness” in several music videos. In the video for the song “Sorry Ms. Jackson” Andre 3000 wears a pair of leather pants adorned with a belt buckle with a confederate flag design [figure 26]. For many in the black community the confederate flag is a locus of contention that symbolizes the historical baggage associated with the “peculiar institution of slavery.” Conversely, many white southerners view the flag as an expression of southern pride and rebellion. By appropriating the confederate flag, Andre 3000 moves the concept of southern heritage into a black context. In this way the confederate flag renegotiates history and collective memory in a manner similar to the groups’ use of Rosa Parks’ name.

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66 Around 1998 Rosa Parks filed a lawsuit against Outkast, claiming that the lyrics were disrespectful and crude, however the case was dismissed and Outkast continued to air the song. Mark Anthony Neal suggests that the dismissal of the case was “emblematic of the general feeling within the traditional civil rights leadership that the post-soul generation was unappreciative of that leadership’s sacrifices.” Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post Soul Aesthetic* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 20.
In Outkast’s “So Fresh So Clean” music video, the racial subtext is present in the allusions to black social spaces, particularly the beauty parlor, the church, and the nightclub. The first scene of the video involves the rappers within the confines of a domestic interior, performing conventional roles as the male heads of the household being served by women. The second scene takes place within a beauty parlor. In the early part of the first decade of the millennium popular films such as *Barbershop* (2002), *Barbershop II* (2004), and *Beauty Shop* (2005) have recognized barbershops and beauty parlors as important black communal spaces. The beauty/barber shop is the utopian private realm in which black men and women have the freedom to express their philosophies, politics, and personal affairs. In the video the beauty shop is marked by women exchanging conversation that expresses their preparation for another event. The final scene of the video takes place within what appears to be the combination of a nightclub and church. The exterior of the building resembles a typical square brick structural design utilized in numerous American churches. There is also a line of finely dressed people outside of the building separated from the entrance by a velvet rope and a bouncer. Inside the church people sway back in forth in pews, a choir is present, and a large preacher lip-syncs the word of the chorus of the song, “so fresh and so clean.” The ambiguity of the space as sacred or secular also alludes to the interrelation of performative rituals that function in both black churches and nightclubs. The song “So Fresh and So Clean” is a reference to the paramount importance of personal appearance in black culture in both secular and sacred spaces. Moreover, the exaggeration of tropes of “blackness” within these social spaces may be read as a parody and resistance to them.

The performativity of race (especially in the arena of entertainment) is the central underlying concept in the music video for the song “Whole World.” The entire video cuts between circus imagery featuring Big Boi and Andre 3000, and a predominantly white and
emotionally unexpressive audience dressed in a homogenous uniform of dark business suits. Echoing the spectatorial imagery of the circus, the lyrics are a revealing commentary about common notions of “blackness” in the American mainstream and Outkast’s desire to transcend these conceptions:

Cause the whole world loves it when you don't get down
And the whole world loves it when you make that sound
And the whole world loves it when you're in the news
And the whole world loves it when you sing the blue, (Outkast, The Whole World)

Outkast’s fifth album Speakerboxx/The Love Below (2003) represents the group’s most musically experimental recording and perhaps the most interesting in terms of their incongruous reworking and references to race. Speakerboxx/The Love Below was conceived as a double album in which Andre 3000 and Big Boi worked on separate song projects, and even the imagery on the album pictured Big Boi and Andre 3000 separately. Throughout the history of Outkast’s career, Big Boi has always served as the typically black counterbalance to Andre 3000’s often radical, defiantly “post-black” persona. Speakerboxx was Big Boi’s contribution to the split half of the album, and utilized the standard hip-hop formula of heavy bass, guest hip-hop artists cameos, and punctilious rhyme delivery. Even the title Speakerboxx suggests hip-hop’s traditional emphasis on loud sound systems. The image on the left side of the album cover features Big Boi in a seated pose dressed in a plush fur coat worn over baggy denim jeans and simple t-shirt that recalls the fashion of extravagant wealth popularized and endorsed by Sean Combs and other hip-hop artists of the late 1990’s [figure 28]. The other album images that feature Big Boi depict popular signifiers of hip-hop since the 1990’s; pit bulls, strippers (and poles), and stereo systems. Conversely, on Andre 3000’s The Love Below he abandons rapping all together (with the exception of one song) and sings
to a fusion of funk, jazz, hip-hop, and rock-n-roll inspired arrangements. As pioneers on the next frontier of black aesthetic production, Outkast is an apt example of how hip-hop artists redefine codes of “blackness.”

One particular image from *The Love Below* seems a befitting way to conclude this examination of “post-black.” The image features Andre 3000 dressed in a tailored red vest and pants, resembling an old British dandy [figure 29]. He poses in front of a nondescript black luxury automobile framed within four steel architectural posts intended to correspond to the Eiffel Tower. From the photographs’ vantage point the top of the Eiffel Tower is excluded from the image, thus amplifying its iconic significance in that it is recognizable even in its most reduced form. This can be seen as an apt analogy to the obscuring of cultural codes characteristic of the “post-black” aesthetic in which some significations of “blackness” always remain recognizable despite the effacement of their original structure.
Conclusion

This thesis has examined “post-black” as a signal of a new consciousness and attitude towards old conceptions of race. It has argued that artists working within the “post-black” idiom are engaged not only in the deconstructive project of problematizing race, but also in the constructive project of envisioning art and society beyond the confines of racial categorizations. “Post-black” in visual culture primarily manifests itself through several means. First, the devaluation of historical conceptions of race is one main characteristic of “post-black” art and cultural imagery. Despite America’s tainted history of racial politics the “post-black” aesthetic can render the confederate flag a neutral symbol and reduce the powerful persona of Malcolm X to a fashion statement. The present and the future become definitive moments for “blackness” as opposed to the past. The substitution of social caste for race and the relocation of “blackness” is another potent feature of “post-black” representations. The photographs of James VanDerZee and the imagery produced by Sean Combs both display African-Americans in luxuriating in signs of opulent wealth. The critical difference however lies in the idea of social space. James VanDerZee captured residents of the famed black space of Harlem, whereas Sean Combs defies the boundaries of a racialized space. Combs embodies a “post-black” aesthetic through transcending black space and establishing himself not as a black artist, but as a wealthy and influential cultural producer. The de-emphasis on epidermal signifiers of “blackness” is the yet another characteristic of “post-black” expression. As evidenced by the cross cultural appropriation of hip-hop, “blackness” may be embodied without possessing a dark skin tone. The last and perhaps most salient characteristic of “post-black” is the emphasis on individuality versus collective
identity. The majority “post-black” artists featured in the Freestyle exhibition reject the homogeneity that comes with being categorized under the umbrella of “blackness.”

In this examination, “post-black” art exhibits many recognizable characteristics, however the term remains a conundrum. This thesis has raised the question of how a work of art or artifact of culture may be “post-black,” especially if “blackness” is apart of the underlying subtext. The idea of “post-black” does not eliminate the significance of “blackness” or even transcend it. Instead “post-black” redefines what we have understood to be apart of the idea of “blackness” and introduces a new paradigm in which race becomes less significant in the discourse of art and expressive culture.

This thesis has additionally considered the complexities of the relationship between a “post-black” aesthetic and the idioms of a contemporary hip-hop culture in which “blackness” has traditionally formed the most salient trait. Hip-hop, despite its roots as a small subculture within the bounds of the South Bronx, has become one of the world’s most influential youth cultures. In the process, however, the definitional “blackness” of hip-hop has been relocated, redefined, commodified and deracinated. In the end, when race is revealed as a construct, the racial significations of hip-hop are rendered superfluous. If the classic hip-hop of black America is dead, then the rebirth of hip-hop as a global culture can only be accomplished in the cultural and conceptual space of “post-black.”
Figure 16: Jeep Cherokee advertisement
Figure 17: Mark Ecko Shoe advertisement
Figure 18: Nissan advertisement : Black experience series
Figure 19: Sean Jean advertisement: Young Moguls Series
Figure 20: Sean Jean advertisement: Young Moguls Series
Figure 21: Sean Jean advertisement: Young Moguls Series
Figure 22: Footlocker advertisement
Figure 23: Gnarls Barkley, *St Elsewhere* album cover, 2006

Figure 24: Publicity photo for Gnarls Barkley album *St. Elsewhere*, 2006
Figure 25: Outkast, ATLiens album cover, 1996
Figure 26: Outkast, Photograph from the filming of the video for *Sorry Ms. Jackson*, 2000
Figure 27: Outkast, *Aquemini* album cover, 1998
Figure 28: Outkast, *Speakerboxx* album image, 2003
Figure 29: Outkast, *The Love Below* album image, 2003
Bibliography


