

# REPRESENTING

hip hop culture and the production of black cinema

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## Black Youth and the Ironies of Capitalism

*[I]n the struggles of urban youths for survival and pleasure inside of capitalism, capitalism has become their greatest friend and greatest foe. It has the capacity to create spaces for their entrepreneurial imaginations and their "symbolic work," to turn something of a profit for some, for them to hone their skills and imagine getting paid. At the same time, it is also responsible for a shrinking labor market, the militarization of urban space, and the circulation of the very representations of race that generate terror in all of us at the sight of young black men and yet compels most of America to want to wear their shoes.*

ROBIN D. G. KELLEY<sup>1</sup>

Although African American filmmaking is the primary locus of inquiry, the scope of my analysis is considerably broader. It is difficult to understand the significance of filmmakers like Spike Lee and the Hughes brothers in American cinema without situating their arrival on the cultural stage in relation to the social transformations that reorganize the material and symbolic worlds inhabited by black youth. The creative labor of African American filmmakers takes place upon a complicated sphere from which the production of blackness, a historically situated racial signifier, proliferates across many sites.<sup>2</sup> But before discussing African American filmmaking practices specifically, it is important to consider the historical formations and decisive shifts that transform the social landscapes, everyday experiences, and cultural productions of black youth more generally.

According to sociologist David Brain, cultural production is the "collective production of skills and practices which enable social actors to make sense of their lives, articulate an identity, and resist with creative energy the apparent dictates of structural conditions they none-

theless reproduce."<sup>3</sup> The cultivation of skills that allow them to participate in a rapidly expanding and global communications media culture enables black youth to produce a broad range of cultural products. The most arresting features of black youth popular cultural productions represent distinct forms of agency, struggle, and social critique. But the vigorous commodification of African American cultural productions also develops complicated features, as I will discuss in the following chapters.

The study of popular media culture generally oscillates between two opposing poles: containment or resistance. Whereas the former maintains that the ideas, values, and representations that shape popular media discourses are determined by the dominant classes, the latter argues, alternatively, that popular cultures have the capacity to subvert dominant ideologies and regimes of representation.<sup>4</sup> Yet popular media culture is remarkably more complex than the containment/resistance binary opposition implies. Similar to the social world from which it is produced, popular media cultures are marked by instability and change. It is, in fact, one of the main locations where the struggle for ideological hegemony is waged. But as Stuart Hall explains, this "struggle for [ideological dominance] is never about pure victory or pure domination[;] it is always about shifting the balance of power in relations of culture."<sup>5</sup> From this view, then, popular media culture is perhaps best understood as a perpetual theater of struggle in which the forces of containment and resistance remain in a constant state of negotiation, never completely negating each other's presence or vigor.

While the different spheres of commercial media culture—television, film, music, video, and the Internet—function as sources of pleasure and entertainment, they also perform a pivotal role in patterning the cultural and ideological landscape. The popular media productions created by black youth represent a distinct sphere of cultural production. Any serious consideration of black cultural productions must examine the relationship between several interlocking factors: the specific culture industries within which these productions are organized; the changing landscape of communications media technologies; emergent mood shifts and sensibilities that lead to the creation of new collective identities; and finally, the unsettled social world within which black youth cultural practices take shape. Sociologist Herman Gray argues that commercial media culture is an essential location to think and theorize about African American culture, representation, and politics.

Gray reminds us that “commercial culture serves as both a *resource* and a *site* in which blackness as a cultural sign is produced, circulated, and enacted.”<sup>6</sup>

Commercial forms of popular culture are a rapidly growing field of study. Scholars and social historians are beginning to understand it as a plentiful and remarkably revealing reservoir of practices and formations that are inextricably linked to the changing contours of American life: urbanization/suburbanization, technological innovation, and shifting conceptions of racial, gender, class, and sexual identities. Commercial forms of popular media culture, for example, are central to how we (re)produce and experience socially constructed formations like race.

More precisely, my aim is to more fully explain the increasingly complex ways in which young African Americans have mobilized around a changing racial and popular media landscape. Moreover, it is a story about how the pulsing gestures, performances, and representations practiced by black youth are structured, in large part, by the profound ways in which they experience the changing contours of American life. The focus on the production of black youth cultural styles and popular movements also recognizes that a notable feature of the late twentieth century, as Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques write, “is the proliferation of sites of antagonism and resistance, and the appearance of new [actors], new social movements, new collective identities—an enlarged sphere for the operation of politics, and new constituencies for change.”<sup>7</sup>

This book pivots around a particular site of antagonism and resistance—the sphere of popular media culture—and more precisely, the ferment and creative energy that drive the cultural innovations of African American youth and their strategic participation on this terrain. The buoyant surge in black youth popular cultural production raises important questions about the evolving disposition of cultural and representational politics in a media-saturated universe. Early critics of “mass culture” demonstrated concern that popular media culture was controlled by and for the dominant classes. But this view fails to consider how popular media culture functions as a site of intense ideological struggle. Quite simply, can the commercial media, long regarded by many critical theorists as the modern-day “opium of the masses,” function as a location of counterideological struggle? Similar to other institutional milieus, commercial media also develop specific antagonisms. So as new subjects gain access to the most prominent sites of media and representation, the possibilities for new collective identities, social movements, and distinct modes of struggle are also established.

To contend that cultural innovation and production among black youth have flourished and achieved a discernible niche in the arena of popular media culture is certainly a tenable position. This is not to imply that African American youth have only recently begun to cultivate spaces for producing cultural objects and expressing themselves but rather that the symbolic practices created by the post-civil rights generation have achieved greater visibility and resonance in the global popular culture economy. But before discussing some of the specific attributes of black youth agency, I would like to consider an initial question first: Why have cultural innovation and production among black youth exploded or, as they might boast, “blown up”? Even more to the point, how has the social, political, and historical terrain on which black youth cultural productions do their work enabled them to intervene in the remaking of society in ways that are more visible, invigorating, and problematic?

### The New World Order: Black Youth and the Racialization of Crisis

*Oh you know what else they trying to do, make a curfew especially for me and you. The traces of the new world order, time is gettin' shorter if we don't get prepared people its gone be a slaughter. My mind won't allow me to not be curious. My folks don't understand, so they don't take it serious. But every now and then, I wonder if that gate was put up to keep crime out, or our ass in?*

GOODIE MOB<sup>8</sup>

A cursory glance at the cultural landscape—music, video, film, television, advertising, and sports—reveals that the expressive cultures created by African Americans play a lively role in patterning the racial and gender identities of youth as well as the general popular culture scene. The precarious relationship between youth subcultures, media technology, and commercial culture has been the subject of numerous inquiries.<sup>9</sup> Still, despite the fact that we can speak broadly of youth cultural practices, it is essential to appreciate the historical specificities that enable distinct formations of youth culture to take shape. Historian Robin D. G. Kelley reminds us that, “unlike more mature adults, young people are in the process of discovering the world as they negotiate it.

They are creating new cultures, strategies of resistance, identities, sexualities, and in the process generating a wider range of problems for authorities whose job it is to keep them in check.”<sup>10</sup>

Admittedly, it is difficult to pinpoint with precision when and why a distinctive mood shift or transition in youth cultural production originates. However, it is possible to identify those factors that work, more or less, to establish the circumstances from which youth popular culture formations emerge. Certainly, any discussion of late twentieth-century black youth cultural practices that does not consider the social context that situates their agency would be severely impaired.

So why have cultural innovation and production among black youth exploded? One approach might look solely at the innovators of the new symbolic practices that lead to the creation of new popular culture products. This can be called the genius view of cultural innovation because it presupposes that certain periods of cultural production are the result of talented individuals.<sup>11</sup> However, a more discerning approach would seek to understand the historical particularities that produce the resources and opportunities that unleash and enable the creative energies of cultural producers. Moreover, this view understands that the creative labor of cultural producers does not take place in a vacuum. Innovators of new symbolic practices and cultural products do their work in relation to other cultural producers and within specific social historical contexts. Like all historical actors, then, black youth operate within the context of structural and historical constraints not of their own making.

Consequently, any serious interrogation of the symbolic efficacy of black youth cultural practices must understand their social, economic, and political milieu. Sociologist Ann Swidler states that “unsettled times”—that is, periods of great disorder and transition: population shifts; wars; social, economic, or moral crisis—tend to create moments of fierce struggle, instability, and social action.<sup>12</sup> New ideas, social movements, and ideological strategies are mobilized to make sense of societal flux and instability. In the process, the ideas, belief systems, and symbolic terrain of a given period become more fragile and increasingly vulnerable to competing ideological worldviews. Similarly, dominant cultures produce “emergent” social formations that cultivate alternative/oppositional practices and ideologies that modify hegemonic practices and cultural discourses.<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, the presumed “dominant ideologies” of any given period do not always penetrate and shape the consciousness, ideas, and practices of aggrieved populations.<sup>14</sup> In fact, dominant economic and polit-

ical classes do not consistently fashion consensus in ways that legitimate their authority. This view of culture and society seems especially plausible when thinking about the United States in the late twentieth century, a period of tremendous political agitation and social discord.

As I discussed in chapter 1, the ideological and political formations of the postindustrial United States are marked by profound social, economic, and cultural transition. Moreover, this period of transition has established the conditions for the construction of different crisis scenarios, both real and imagined. In the process, crisis-tinted discourses are mobilized to make sense of and effectively manage the flux and uncertainty that abound. Even in cases where crises may in fact be real, they are typically *made* intelligible and, as a result, are defined, shaped, interpreted, and explained. For instance, a complex assemblage of crisis discourses revolves around the postindustrial ghetto. The ghetto has become an intensely charged symbol, particularly as it patterns discourses about crime and personal safety, welfare, familial organization, and the disintegration of American society.

African American (and Latino) youths are prominently figured in the crisis scenarios that stage some of the more contentious social and political episodes of the late twentieth century. Some researchers contend that increases in violent crimes, teen pregnancy, female-headed households, and welfare dependency can be *partially* explained by the sheer growth in the number of young people, particularly black and Latino, residing in many cities across the United States.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the concentration of black and Latino youth in postindustrial cities corresponds with structural changes in the postindustrial economy, especially the movement of industry and meaningful employment opportunities away from the communities in which they are most likely to live.<sup>16</sup>

One of the peculiar developments of postwar economic transformations is what economist Juliet Schor describes as an increase in work hours for some segments of the population and the overproduction of idleness for others.<sup>17</sup> Schor argues that, as the U.S. economy and the labor market continue to undergo substantive reorganization, they are increasingly unable to provide work for some segments of the population. One of the persistent tensions in the postindustrial economy is the widespread erosion of meaningful employment opportunities for poor, inner-city youth. As the labor-force participation of black youth hovers around chronically low levels, both their real and perceived prospects for upward mobility become more grim. Indeed, a tenacious set of fac-

tors restricts the social and economic mobility of poor youth: inadequate schools, lower levels of educational attainment, low self-esteem and personal confidence, discriminatory hiring practices, and racially inflected tensions on the job site.<sup>18</sup>

As the face of urban poverty in the United States continues to evolve, one of the distinguishing features is the growing number of youth who now live in poverty-stricken households, a trend not replicated across other industrialized nations.<sup>19</sup> Cultural critic Mike Davis writes: “[C]orrelated to the economic peripheralization of working-class blacks has been the dramatic *juvenation of poverty* amongst all inner-city ethnic groups.”<sup>20</sup> By the end of the 1980s, roughly 20 percent of America’s youth were poor. And while youth and single-parent mothers represent a disproportionate share of the poor, the probability of being a poor child is not equal across racial/ethnic groups. In fact, research consistently indicates that African American children are significantly more likely to grow up in impoverished households and neighborhoods than their white counterparts.<sup>21</sup> By the end of the eighties, an astonishing 44 percent of African American youth were living in poverty. In contrast, 38 percent of Latino and 11 percent of white youth lived in similar conditions.

The incorporation of African American youth into a broad complex of crisis scenarios develops specific social and political dimensions. Black youth tend to be concentrated in poor communities that have been the primary targets of the post-1960s conservative social and political backlash packaged in numerous movements: antigovernment, antitaxes, antiwelfare, and anticrime. The drive to correct the perceived excesses of “big government” has ignited a broad-based movement of disinvestment in inner-city job training, social, education, and crime-prevention programs. Ghetto youth are prominent icons in the seemingly indefatigable efforts of an emboldened conservatism committed to the enforcement of “traditional values,” law and order, and personal responsibility. But the association of black youth with social instability is indelibly marked by the production and popular dissemination of the “underclass” label.

The making of the “underclass” label is congruous with the general rise of social-issue conservatism in post-1960s American political culture. Social-issue conservatism is the explicitly focused debate about values, morality, behavior, two-parent households, and respect for authority. While cultural issues have historically shaped American politics, they have been elevated from a peripheral to a central role.<sup>22</sup> One

journalist goes so far as to argue that whereas politicians and political consultants operate from the assumption that economic issues drive electoral politics, “values matter most.”<sup>23</sup> However, the author’s focus on issues like crime, welfare, and affirmative action suggests that perhaps “race matters most.” The “values matter most” contention is at best disingenuous, but it nevertheless illustrates how conservatives have attempted to elevate what are increasingly racialized themes above concerns about the inherent nature and instabilities of capitalism as the central dilemma in American social and political life.

Contemporary discourses about African Americans are increasingly patterned by sensational representations of the black “underclass.” Sociologist Herbert Gans maps the evolution of the “underclass” label and its absorption into mainstream social and political discourse. Despite the newness of the label, it plays a definitive role in shaping popular discourses about race, poverty, and social change in general. According to Gans, the term has passed through three descriptive stages: economic, racial, and finally behavioral.<sup>24</sup> By the 1970s, he argues, descriptions of the term turned decisively behavioral as news journalists began to devote substantial time and coverage to the proliferation of social dislocations in poor ghetto communities.<sup>25</sup> The emphasis on the alleged deviance of the poor refashions “culture-of-poverty” explanations of poverty and strengthens the notion that misbehavior is the primary culprit in the reproduction of poor ghetto communities.<sup>26</sup>

The “underclass” is customarily portrayed as one of the most distressing social problems facing the United States. Stephen Hilgartner and Charles Bosk have proposed what they call the public arenas model for understanding the rise of social problems.<sup>27</sup> According to the model, social problems are collectively defined, selected, framed, and disseminated within a dynamic arena of public discourse. In this arena, a broad population of potential problems compete against each other for attention and notoriety. Given the vast number of potential social problems, only a few are able to capture the attention of the public and major institutions. As a result, social problems are necessarily stratified: problems considered the most urgent occupy the top of the “social problems ladder,” while those achieving little or no public cognizance are typically positioned near the bottom.

Furthermore, Hilgartner and Bosk contend that the career of a social problem variegates over time and hinges on its ability to capture the attention of the institutions that have the power and resources to effectively define the problem for broad public consumption. These insti-

tutions, in effect, *make* the social problem and render it intelligible to the broader public. The carrying institutions include, for example, the cinema, made-for-television movies, news media organizations, book publishing, and political parties. These are the major institutions that select, define, and disseminate social problems to the public. Because of the vast population of potential problems, creators of social problems must package them in dramatic terms. Once a social problem achieves prominence in one arena, it may then begin to saturate other arenas. When multiple carrying institutions devote substantial attention to a particular problem, it develops a “celebrity” status. Moreover, the problem begins to dominate public, and especially media, discourse.

### Visualizing the Underclass, Representing Danger

*Today's dangerous classes included segments of the diverse communities of racial and ethnic minorities; young people who exhibit some degree of independence from their elders' direction and values. . . . The likelihood that the identified group creates danger—crime, urban decay, challenge to authority—is an article of faith, as both the public and the policymakers point to high levels of urban disorder, family dissolution, and unwed motherhood. . . . What is needed to construct them as enemies is a bridge between group identity and an experience of social threat—a neighborhood mugging . . . or the dramatic depiction of a murder on the nightly news—that is familiar to many people.*

DIANA GORDON<sup>28</sup>

It only takes a quick glance at legislative and electoral politics, the news media, public opinion polls, or popular entertainment culture to recognize that the “underclass,” and poor youth especially, has attained the dubious distinction of being a celebrity social problem. The absorption of the “underclass” label into mainstream vocabulary corresponds with the social and economic transformations that configure postindustrial life. And even though the label circulates as if it were ideologically neutral, representations of the “underclass” are sharply coded in both racial and gender terms. Moreover, historian Michael Katz maintains that the label implies that the problem of late twentieth-century urban

poverty is profoundly novel in character and kind, and unprecedented in scope.<sup>29</sup>

Take, for example, the proliferation of news media discourses that play a leading role in framing public perceptions of postindustrial ghetto life. Perhaps even more than social scientists or politicians, the news media industry has played a crucial role in coloring the public discourses that render the “underclass” seemingly more intelligible. The television news industry is a distinct sphere of commercial media and discourse production. Unlike most of television entertainment, it is nonfictional—in other words, real. But the news media is a peculiar blend of fact and artifice. Thus, while news media journalists deal with real-world phenomena, they do so in a way that is always selective and interpretive.<sup>30</sup>

News discourse is one of the primary means by which a society comes to know itself. In their analysis of television news, Richard Campbell and Jimmie Reeves contend that it is “a spectacle of surveillance that displays a range of cultural performances—all of which articulate visions of order by representing legitimate authority, reproducing common-sense, and visualizing deviance.”<sup>31</sup> The news media are also an important site of racial discourse. In fact, part of the evolving role of the news media industry has been to determine what is most newsworthy about race, construct images and definitions of race, and pattern the range of potential connotations the idea of race produces. For example, television news discourse typically constructs African Americans as conflict-generating and problematic.<sup>32</sup> And though it would be faulty to conclude that the news media are the primary agent in the racial fissures that percolate throughout the late twentieth century, the way in which television news frames race certainly occupies a crucial position on the embattled terrain of racial conflict.

The news media serve several functions at once.<sup>33</sup> A primary purpose is to provide their mass audience with information and descriptions of events that take place in the world. However, another less obvious function is the news media’s role as a mechanism of social control. The news media, to be sure, can be viewed as a central component of the social control processes that define and produce meaning about what constitutes difference and deviance. In this particular role, as explained by Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, the news media are a kind of “deviance-defining elite” that play a key role in constituting visions of order, stability, and change and in influencing the control practices that accord with these visions.<sup>34</sup> News media organizations specialize in

visualizing—and accordingly, defining—deviant behavior for their audience. In the process, the news media also reproduce commonsense notions of civility, social order, and community consensus. Moreover, the focus on deviance develops an entertainment angle that appeases the commercial interests of news media organizations. Cognizant of its role in commercial television entertainment and the competition for ratings, the television news industry relies heavily on dramatic, sensational, and titillating images in order to attract and hold a wide viewing audience.<sup>35</sup>

The preponderance of television news stories highlighting black youth, violence, and the arrival of crack cocaine in the middle 1980s stands out as a dramatic orchestration of a “moral panic” and demonstrates how news media organizations aid in shaping the way social problems are selected, defined, packaged, and disseminated to the public.<sup>36</sup> Campbell and Reeves maintain that the news media’s construction of the cocaine crisis in the 1980s embodied the racial, gender, and class tensions that shaped the most celebrated crisis scenarios of the period.<sup>37</sup> The authors argue that, with the emergence of crack cocaine, the news media developed a “siege” narrative that replaced earlier news stories regarding cocaine use. This rewriting of the cocaine narrative shifted from *class*-coded themes focusing on recreational drug use and therapy to *race*-coded themes focusing on violence, criminality, and punishment. Using production techniques like clandestine footage, the news media began to serve as a surveillance device, built largely on visual clichés that portrayed the burgeoning crack cocaine economy in hyper-villainous terms.<sup>38</sup> The authors persuasively claim that this particular rewriting of the cocaine narrative fit the demonology of racial conservatism, stigmatized poor inner-city youth, and played a central role in legitimating, for example, the “hard” disciplinary ethos of social control initiatives like the war on drugs.<sup>39</sup>

A main set of organizing themes in the “underclass” discourse is the alleged social pathologies of ghetto youth. To be sure, the connection of black youth with illegal drugs, gangs, and violence performs a distinct role in shaping how many of the crisis scenarios of the period were understood. More crucially, inner-city youth arouse public anxiety and precipitate what Diana Gordon describes as “the return of the dangerous classes.”<sup>40</sup> Members of the dangerous classes, she argues, are believed to pose a threat to the personal safety of law-abiding citizens and, if unchecked, to the social, economic, and moral order of the larger society. Accordingly, black and Latino youth are prominently figured in

the widely shared notion that inner cities—and by association, their racially coded populations—constitute a fiscal and moral strain on national resources. Subsequently, some of the salient crisis scenarios coloring the postindustrial United States have been redefined. In the process, meanings about race, class, gender, and youth undergo substantial revisions.

In many ways, the “underclass” is as much a cultural construction as it is a sociological reality. At stake, of course, is how the widespread impoverishment of black youth is comprehended. To be sure, before any society can create new laws and mobilize punitive measures for the express purpose of controlling those portrayed as dangerous, it must conduct a sufficient amount of ideological work in order to legitimate the use of coercion. In essence, the general public must be made to feel vulnerable, to feel that the stability of the moral and social order is threatened, thus necessitating dramatic acts to preserve social order. Representing ghetto youth as dangerous is not simply a symbolic exercise; it has serious implications for social policy and also influences the social control mechanisms put in place to restore a sense of order. Indeed, initiatives like the war on drugs, school dress codes, and evening curfews achieve their popular status precisely because of the work that crisis discourses perform in the criminalization of black youth.<sup>41</sup> The perceived dangerousness of the urban poor legitimates the deployment of the coercive technologies of the state and the adoption of elaborate crime management operations.

It is within this social context that the cultural productions of black youth amass energy and ever-increasing ingenuity. The transformations of urban ghetto life situate different formations of racial discourse and enable them to take shape. One aim of black youth popular culture is to redefine the crisis scenarios that prominently figure young African Americans. The symbolic practices of black youth develop distinct styles, moods, and imaginative contours that engage a broad spectrum of cultural producers—journalists, politicians, scholars—about African American life. The explosive surge in popular cultural productions by black youth prompts a reconsideration of how unsettled times reinvigorate not only social control discourses but resistive discourses, too. This is not to suggest that social and economic dislocations are *the* determinate causes of black youth cultural productions. Instead, I am suggesting that the ways in which black youth experience a rapidly changing society and how they practice cultural politics to express these experiences correspond.

Paradoxically, the intensification of racial and economic polarization in the United States produces space for the emergence of cultural practices that derive much of their symbolic efficacy from locations of marginality. The popularization of black youth expressive cultures is an excellent case in point. Despite high rates of poverty, joblessness, and criminal arrests, black youth occupy a dynamic role in the shaping of the popular cultural landscape. Many of the major culture industries—sports, television, advertising, music, cinema—incorporate the innovative styles and expressive cultures of black youth in order to appeal to their respective markets and revitalize their own commercial viability. Ironically, social isolation and economic marginalization contribute to the energy and imaginative capacities that enable black youth to participate effectively in the ever-expanding universe of popular media culture. In the process, black youth have accumulated significant amounts of symbolic capital.<sup>42</sup>

So despite the currency of conservative discourses, black youth have mobilized their own discourses, critiques, and representations of the crisis-colored scenarios in which they are prominently figured. More important, young African Americans are acutely aware of the social world in which they live and the vast structural inequalities that impose severe restrictions on their economic mobility. All members of society exercise some measure of agency—that is, capacity to exert some degree of power over the social arrangements and institutions that situate their lives. Faced with the increasing trend toward structurally enforced idleness and state-sanctioned coercion, black youth have fought diligently to create spaces of leisure, pleasure, and opposition from the social structures and institutional arrangements that influence their life chances.

How do black youth maneuver to contest and destabilize the growing tide of racial conservatism? Ironically, at the same moment that black youth have become especially vulnerable to shifts in the postindustrial economy and the political landscape, they, too, have gained unprecedented access to the technologies of communications media. What has emerged in the process is the structuring of a historically distinct terrain upon which the varying repertoires of black youth cultural production dramatically reorganize the scope and possibilities of social and political struggle from the margins. Indeed, the popular cultures of black youth reveal that they experience, interpret, and make sense of the world in ways that are both historically specific and highly performative.

### The Making of the Hip Hop Nation: The Social Transformation of Black Youth Culture

*It was not long before similarly marginalized black and Hispanic communities in other cities picked up on the tenor and energy in New York hip hop. Within a decade, Los Angeles County (especially Compton), Oakland, Detroit, Chicago, Houston, Atlanta, Miami, Newark, and Trenton, Roxbury, and Philadelphia, have developed local hip hop scenes that link various regional postindustrial urban experiences of alienation, unemployment, police harassment, social, and economic isolation to their local and specific experience via hip hop's language, style, and attitude. . . . In every region, hip hop articulates a sense of entitlement and takes pleasure in aggressive insubordination.*

TRICIA ROSE<sup>43</sup>

Despite the widespread popularity of black youth expressive culture and the vast amount of critical attention it currently receives, our understanding of the historical processes that situate its varied articulations remains underdeveloped. The relationship between African American youth and communications media technology is also underexamined. The histories of black youth and their relationship to commercial media culture, to be sure, remain largely unwritten. Black youth continue to create new cultural practices and products that penetrate and reconfigure the production and distribution strategies that govern the culture industry. Moreover, the collective mobilization around popular media technologies by black youth raises intriguing questions about their participation in a vast and rapidly expanding communications media and information economy.

Sociologist Claude Fischer explains that the study of technology and society is commonly informed by technological determinism.<sup>44</sup> According to Fischer, the determinism model views a technology as an autonomous or external “force” that “impacts” social life. The main assumption from this view is that technology dictates changes that are far-reaching and fundamental in scope. Further, it is assumed that a technology produces homogeneous consequences for the larger society. In other words, the impact of a technology on members of society is believed to be uniform.



Critics of technological determinism maintain that while technology can and often does lead to change, the process is socially rather than technologically determined. Moreover, Fischer argues, the determinism view fails to appreciate how specific technologies are adopted by particular members of society and used in ways that accommodate specific intentions and priorities. Fischer writes: “[O]nce we have understood the genesis of a technology, its development and promotion, we can begin looking at consequences. Here we should ask: Who adopted the device? With what intention? How did they use it? What role did it play in their lives? How did using it alter their lives?”<sup>45</sup> According to Fischer, the value of this position is that it emphasizes the agency and intentionality of those who use technology. Fischer adds, “[P]eople are neither ‘impacted’ by an external force, nor are they the unconscious pawns of a cultural Geist. Instead of being manipulated, they manipulate.”<sup>46</sup>

Technological determinism typically informs how the relationship between black youth and popular media culture is comprehended. For example, it is commonly argued that communications media exercise unrelenting power in shaping the worldviews, behavior, and lived experiences of black youth.<sup>47</sup> There are at least two immediate problems with this position. First, it does not adequately specify how media technology has entered and altered the social lives of black youth. Second, and perhaps more important, it does not address how black youth manipulate media technology and, in the process, reshape the sphere of popular media culture.

Take as an example the study of black youth by historian Carl Nightingale.<sup>48</sup> Nightingale contends that analysts of the black urban poor fail to understand the ways in which black youth are connected to the larger mainstream culture. Whereas theories about economic, spatial, and cultural alienation emphasize the exclusion of black youth from the mainstream, Nightingale seeks to understand the problematic ways in which mainstream culture penetrates the lived experiences of black youth.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, he directs his critical gaze toward popular media culture and its “impact” on the racial, gender, and economic identities of black youth. The exploration of the relationship between black youth and the commercial media is certainly an important site of study. But the framing of his inquiry presumes technological determinance. It is taken for granted that the practices of black youth are rigidly conditioned by the media and corporate strategies of consumer socialization. However, it is equally important to consider how black youth

influence the culture industry, the cultural marketplace, and consumer trends. In other words, it is important to understand that youth are not simply passive victims of commercial media culture but are actively involved in its making.

The emergence of hip hop culture illustrates black youth agency. In many ways, hip hop represents a particular species of social movement. The movement is made possible by new social and economic arrangements, technological innovations, and the global dissemination of U.S. popular media cultures. Sociologists broadly define social movements as collective efforts to produce social change.<sup>50</sup> Any attempt to discuss hip hop as a movement demands careful delineation because it is variously preoccupied with style, performance, opposition, leisure, consumption, representation, and entrepreneurship. First, this particular movement takes place on the field of popular culture, a site not immediately discerned as political, or capable of producing social change. Second, hip hop is invigorated by the creative labor of a constituency not ordinarily regarded as interested in effecting social change: youth. Third, like social movements in general, hip hop enables its participants to imagine themselves as part of a larger community; thus, it produces a sense of collective identity and agency. To be sure, this particular movement constitutes a distinct mode of intervention in the social world.

Communications media have become an especially important location for both individual and collective agency. Many black youth believe that the sphere of popular media culture is an especially important space in which to articulate many of their frustrations and grievances with their disproportionate membership in the growing ranks of the underemployed/unemployed, impoverished, and incarcerated. Ironically, and as Kelley points out, capitalism has been both a foe and a friend of black youth. Within the interstices of late twentieth-century capitalism, black youth have fought to create productive spaces to counter the dominant discourses deployed to both demonize and discipline them. The hip hop movement has developed into a fertile reservoir of youth cultural production. In fact, numerous expressive cultures have been created in the process: graffiti art, break dancing, and most notably, rap music. The origins of hip hop are difficult to record precisely.<sup>51</sup> And while my focus is on African American youth, hip hop has never been an exclusively “black thing.” Many of the creative elements of hip hop developed in correspondence with the postwar migrations and subsequent shifting racial geography of New York City. The interaction between Latino, Afro-Caribbean, and African American expressive cultures

established the conditions for the development of alternative modes of youth expression.<sup>52</sup>

The evolution and transformation of hip hop are patterned by class, generational, and gender cleavages. These three markers of differentiation within the African American community make crucial imprints on black popular culture. According to cultural critic Todd Boyd, the most recent generational shifts in black popular culture came into view with the passing of what he refers to as the ideology of the race man, animated best by Bill Cosby.<sup>53</sup> This particular period of black cultural production, Boyd contends, reflected the views and aspirations of a generation concerned with civil rights, assimilation, and the production of what are often alluded to as respectable or “positive” images of black Americans. Further, Boyd maintains that a new black popular culture sensibility—the new black aesthetic (NBA)—supplanted the race man ideology sometime during the middle to late 1980s. This particular generation of black cultural producers—he uses Spike Lee and Wynton Marsalis as illustrations—came of age after the protests of the 1960s and represented the first creative community of African Americans to benefit from the resources and networks made available because of greater access to higher education. This generation practiced a black American version of bourgeois nationalism that emphasized the infiltration of mainstream institutions. These two periods or regimes of cultural politics were informed by a middle-class sensibility that distinguishes them from the most recent generational shift in black popular culture—a shift that is related to the ascendancy of hip hop as a leading signifier of black culture.

Whereas the first two periods are shaped by middle-class priorities and notions of assimilation and respectability (the Cosby era) and new conceptions of black-style politics and upward mobility (the new black aesthetic), the succeeding shift identified by Boyd is governed by a hard-core ghetto sensibility that represents a radical break. This particular generation eschews both the comportment of social acceptability and the racial chic of neo-black nationalist politics. More specifically, Boyd argues that the emergence of hard-core ghetto iconography altered the orbit of black popular culture and is representative of working-class definitions of blackness that contest bourgeois-inflected definitions. While the transitions and breaks that distinguish one period from the other are never total, Boyd’s analysis does help to further elucidate class differentiation within the African American community and its implications for a varied terrain of cultural politics and production.

The issue of gender is equally important. While it is true that hip hop is shaped by narratives that emphasize male hegemony, pleasure, and desire, it is important to emphasize that female cultural practices also inflect this particular movement. In her analysis of black youth culture, Tricia Rose maintains that most academic and popular discourses tend to marginalize the presence and contributions of women to hip hop. The presence of females has been integral if not always adequately recognized. Although the commercial media landscape is overwhelmingly dominated by men, women continue to forge new territories for their active involvement and pleasure. The hip hop scene is no different. Indeed, as many female authors point out, women have long struggled to gain access to and control over the resources and sites that animate the production of hip hop culture.<sup>54</sup>

If hip hop is preeminently a generational discourse, it is also a historically specific formation that articulates with the shifting contours of the late twentieth century. The dominant themes expressed in hip hop develop their creative shape in relation to a social world in which new forms and sites of political antagonism proliferate. Romanticized descriptions of hip hop portray its emergence as an explicit reaction against the racially conservative policies of the Reagan presidency. However, the seeds of this movement were planted much earlier. The elaboration of hip hop preceded the Reagan years; in fact, the movement began to blossom in the mid- to late 1970s.<sup>55</sup> The creators of hip hop devoted immense energy to carving out spaces of pleasure and recreation in the face of an eroding urban infrastructure devastated by a diminishing tax base, decaying public schools and parks, drugs, and political retreat from the redistributive policies born from the civil rights era.<sup>56</sup> Hip hop began in public parks, on street corners, in subway terminals, and in apartment basements. It soon moved to community centers, dance clubs, radio airwaves, and later the visual media—music video, television, and cinema—thus accentuating what analysts claim is one of the central themes in the movement: the struggle over public space, who occupies it, and how its resources are put to use.

Yet it is the subsequent role of technology and the commodification of hip hop, more than anything else, that continues to drive and animate provocative debates about the relationship between youth, cultural production, and commercial media culture. Does the intrusion of technology and commodification—most notably, the mass production, distribution, and merchandising of rap music—conspire to dull the oppositional edges of hip hop? Moreover, is the participation of black

youth in the popular cultural economy a legitimate expression of opposition? These questions, of course, rekindle debates about the capacity of commercial culture to contain oppositional cultural practices. But rather than view technology and commercial culture as resources that prohibit creative action, I would like to invert this idea and consider an alternative proposition instead: How do technology and commercial culture enable new repertoires of black youth agency and cultural production?

The use of technology to produce media cultural products was viewed by the early critics of commercial culture as an indication that mass production would enforce standardization and stifle creativity.<sup>57</sup> But technological innovations in the production of popular music, for example, facilitate the opposite effect: creativity has flourished, and new musical styles and genres continue to thrive.<sup>58</sup> Yet technology only provides the possibility for new practices to take shape; individuals adopt a technology and use it in creative ways that lead to new cultural formations. In the case of rap music production, digital technology, sampling machines, multitrack recording devices, and video forge new creative frontiers for “fresh” innovations and formations of youth culture.<sup>59</sup> The innovation of rap music production suggests that technology does not manipulate individuals but rather that individuals adopt and manipulate technology to accommodate their intentions.

Furthermore, the intersection of hip hop and technology vividly illustrates what Michael Schudson calls the integrative effects of mass-mediated culture on modern societies.<sup>60</sup> The electronic dissemination of hip hop has proved to be powerfully integrative. By that, I mean it has established the conditions for mobilizing a youth culture that is rapidly becoming global in scope as it connects youth from disparate conditions and places. For example, it would be impossible to make reference to the “hip hop nation” without the broadcasting capabilities of media technology. One of the most impressive attributes of the electronic media is their capacity to connect people and organize collective identities despite physical distance.<sup>61</sup> The communications media enable new forms of access to and association among communities that transcend geographical boundaries. The growth and spread of hip hop culture are an illustrative example.

While its origins in the United States are typically traced back to the urban polyglot of postindustrial New York City, the hip hop movement has expanded far beyond the local youth cultures of its social and geographical base. The electronic dissemination of hip hop multiplies its

constituency, complicates its articulations, and serves as the primary circuit through which youth have been able to produce an expanding sphere of influence within the rapidly evolving global media village. To be sure, the hip hop nation is an “imagined community.”<sup>62</sup> But as Schudson points out, all communities are fictive in the sense that “personal identification with any grouping of people beyond those one encounters face to face in daily life depends on an imagined leap.”<sup>63</sup> So while black youth in New York City, Mexican American youth in East Los Angeles, and black youth in Brixton, London, do not literally know each other, the various media technologies—music, video, film, print, and cyberspace—allow them to communicate, interact, and create new collective identities. In addition, it is the increasing prowess of media technology through which youth have been able to mobilize competing discourses about the varied social, economic, and political currents that continue to alter their lives. Hip hop, then, develops both local and global particularities that build a broad terrain for youth production and discourse.<sup>64</sup>

Whereas early critics of “mass” media culture viewed technology as stifling creativity and encouraging passivity, they were even less optimistic about the effects of commodification on culture. The diffusion of hip hop throughout the different spheres of commercial culture is commonly viewed as undermining the authenticity of this youth practice. For example, it is common to see the sartorial styles made popular in hip hop merchandised and packaged in suburban shopping malls. The contention, however, that commercial culture subverts the intentions and resistive qualities of hip hop is, at best, misguided. Tricia Rose insists that this critique obscures the fact that many of the original participants in hip hop (i.e., break dancers, rappers, disc jockeys) were in fact concerned with monetary compensation for their creative labor. Further, she makes the crucial point that “the contexts for creation in hip hop were never fully outside or in opposition to commodities, they involved struggles over public spaces and access to commodified materials, equipments, and products of economic viability.”<sup>65</sup> Still, it must be acknowledged that, as the popularity and profits of hip hop soared, the rap industry has changed substantially. The major shift, according to Rose, is not that hip hop suddenly became commercial but rather that “control over the scope and direction of the profit making process”<sup>66</sup> has shifted from local black and Latino entrepreneurs to the major media and entertainment industries.

The corporatization of hip hop is undeniable. Since its populariza-

tion in the early 1980s, the profits of hip hop–related products have increased exponentially. As a result, the linkage of corporate strategies and marketing techniques with the expressive cultures of black youth undeniably alters the trajectory of hip hop. But the corporatization of hip hop reflects a more general trend toward the global spread of consumer culture made possible by new media technologies, marketing techniques, distribution patterns, and a wider conception of consumer markets as well as potential profits. It is indeed difficult to imagine any aspect of cultural life that has not been influenced by corporate culture.<sup>67</sup> In the case of hip hop, then, what has taken place is the joining of an urban street and youth aesthetic with the technological resources and distribution muscle of corporate organizations.

But the corporatization of hip hop seems only to enliven rather than to stifle the struggle to control its commercial vigor. Similar to other subcultural practices, hip hop creates its own symbolic universe and commodities. Furthermore, hip hop has made more explicit the political nature of popular culture. When emergent cultural practices disrupt the social equilibrium, they usually provoke the dominant culture to take some kind of action as a means of maintaining order.<sup>68</sup> Dick Hebdige argues that the process of recuperation typically comes in the form of co-optation and commodification or labeling. I would like to discuss the former.

The commodification of rap produces paradoxical results. For instance, recognition by the music industry—the Grammy and American Music Awards—validates its place as an “official” genre of popular music and therefore stimulates production. But commodification also domesticates and defuses rap of some of its subversive energy. Once distributed on a mass scale, rap is packaged and made more palatable, rendered at once a consumable good and profitable merchandise. But is commodification simply a form of containment? In other words, does the packaging of hip hop erode its oppositional possibilities? While it is true that the transformation of hip hop into a vast assortment of commodities alters its course, it is presumptuous to view commodification as the utter erasure of black youth agency and cultural politics. For as Hebdige points out:

[T]he relationship between the spectacular subculture and the various industries which service and exploit it is notoriously ambiguous. After all, such a subculture is concerned first and foremost with consumption. . . .

It communicates through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown. It is therefore difficult in this case to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures.<sup>69</sup>

It would be a mistake to assume that black youth have been idle in, or even resistant to, efforts to merchandise hip hop. For as historian Robin D. G. Kelley reminds us, black youth meticulously hone their expressive cultures and forms of play and leisure into income-generating practices.<sup>70</sup> Few today understand the exuberant and sometimes subtle ways in which black youth maneuver to exploit a cultural marketplace that generates a seemingly endless flow of commodities produced to satisfy changing consumer desires and tastes. One of the most striking ironies of late twentieth-century capitalism is the simultaneous structural and economic displacement of black youth along with the emergence of a voracious appetite for the cultural performances and products created by them. In the process, some black youth have been able to translate their creative labor into social and economic mobility as they carve out small entrepreneurial enclaves while still practicing, in their unique way, “small acts” of opposition.

Dipannita Basu sharply illuminates this point in her observation of Los Angeles’s hip hop community.<sup>71</sup> Basu asserts that participation in commercial culture by black youth is *not* a sign of surrender to the recuperative powers of capitalism but is instead a crucial element in their attempt to counter some of its most crippling effects. In fact, many youth do not view association with the popular culture industry as a form of “selling out.” In her discussion of the burgeoning rap industry in Los Angeles, Basu writes: “[R]ap music has given a substantial number of black youth a world view, a political philosophy, a language, and lifestyles that have in turn become the articulating principles for economic activity, from creativity to business, from music to films, magazines, clothing, and a whole host of auxiliary positions.”<sup>72</sup>

Admittedly, it is difficult to imagine that striving for and achieving economic success in a capitalist society are oppositional. Such practices are typically viewed as complying with rather than subverting the dominant priorities of capital accumulation. But as Basu claims, black

youth do not see a contradiction in their efforts to “get paid” and simultaneously contest the institutional practices that severely limit their prospects for social and economic mobility. No action or gesture is inherently oppositional. Social context determines the extent to which practices develop oppositional characteristics. The potential economic benefits and prestige associated with rap music production are viewed as a direct challenge to a social and economic structure that is becoming increasingly impenetrable for a number of black youth. From the perspectives of black youth, then, the production of popular commodities and economic success belie the widespread belief that they are criminal-minded and lack industriousness, intelligence, and a commitment to work.<sup>73</sup> So even though black youth turn their symbolic practices and creative skills into work that reproduces the master ideal of capital accumulation (a principle that historically works to their disadvantage), it is work that enables some to escape the serial employment and menial labor widely regarded as humiliating, stigmatizing, and oppressive.<sup>74</sup>

Angela McRobbie has described youth subcultures as practices that are both productive and empowering. According to McRobbie, the styles and commodities created by youth do more than just publicize subcultures. These practices also provide opportunity for cultivating skills that can be utilized to provide access to substantive employment or even self-employment. She writes: “[T]his involvement can be an empowering experience, particularly for young people with no access to the skills and qualifications acquired as a matter of course by those other young people destined for university and for the professions. Subcultures are often ways of creating job opportunities as more traditional careers disappear. In this undocumented, unrecorded and largely ‘hidden economy’ sector, subcultures stand at one end of the culture industry spectrum and the glamorous world of the star system and the entertainment business at the other.”<sup>75</sup> To the degree that hip hop has produced an alternative economy that provides the resources and opportunities for black youth to exert their own creative energies and also realize their entrepreneurial ambitions, it can be viewed as a formation that enlivens rather than subverts the ability of youth to more effectively negotiate social and economic deprivation.

Consequently, rather than challenge the legitimacy of capitalism, black youth confront a more immediate problem—how to turn the contradictory contours of capitalism to their advantage. The strategic movement of black youth into commercial culture does not intend to destroy

a flourishing information and entertainment economy. On the contrary, their skillful interventions drive the production and commodification of cultural products. Still, while it is true that they do not seek to subvert the notion of capital accumulation, black youth do seek to play a more substantial role in the rapidly expanding frontier of communications media and information technology. Describing this distinctive generational ethos, journalist Kevin Powell writes: “[T]he hip hop nation is no different than any other segment of this society in its desire to live the American dream. Hip hop, for better or for worse, has been this generation’s most prominent means for making good on the long promises of the civil rights movement.”<sup>76</sup> Black youth maneuver to exploit those emergent spaces that are opening up in the new information economy. And in the process of struggling for that space, black youth continue to shape the popular cultural world in which we all live.

It should also be noted that while some hip hop purists claim that commodification erodes the subversive demeanor and style of hip hop, the youth culture did not develop explicitly political expressions until after the road to commercial success had been paved. In truth, the earliest rap recordings were mostly first-person narratives that boasted about the acquisition of status-conferring objects: jewelry, designer clothing, and women. And though narratives that portrayed women as sources of heterosexual male pleasure were certainly political, they did not embody the counterideological themes that would later be labeled “message rap.”<sup>77</sup> The production of message rap developed as the rap genre was becoming commercial. Indeed, the arrival of rap groups like Public Enemy in the late 1980s signaled a decisive turn in the politicization of rap lyrics. Thus, it is quite possible to argue that by enlarging the creative terrain of rap production, commodification, ironically, forged open spaces that now include styles and performances that nourish rather than impoverish resistive discourses.

Yet we must also bear in mind that black youth are operating on historical terrain clearly not of their own making. Moreover, the sphere of popular media culture is only one of numerous sites where the struggle for hegemony is waged. Additionally, the transformative powers of each site differ. For example, the symbolic efficacy of holding a political office (Newt Gingrich) versus occupying a niche in the arena of popular music production (Ice Cube) differs in kind and extent. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that the potency of black youth intervention on the field of popular culture has serious limitations for effecting social

change. Still, it must also be noted that oppositional practices come in different guises and are governed by different intentions. Black youth are acutely aware of the social world they inhabit and that current structural arrangements produce limited opportunities for their generation. This particular formation of black youth culture is, then, a strategic attempt to make use of the fissures produced by social, economic, and technological change.

So while it is true that hip hop did not originate as an explicit critique of the rising tide of racial conservatism, its growth, evolution, and multiple deployments illustrate how the cultural politics, moods, energies, and lived experiences of everyday life provide black youth with the resources and imaginative capacities to respond creatively to material and symbolic domination. The evolution of hip hop teaches us, as cultural critic Michael Dyson writes, "that history is made in unexpected ways, by unexpected people with unexpected results."<sup>78</sup> As youth continue to recreate hip hop, they also continue to penetrate and shape the popular media cultures, which are becoming global in scope. In fact, hip hop has generated a broad range of cultural products that enlarge its creative community and sphere of influence. The diffusion of hip hop throughout mainstream culture has led to the creation of new independent record labels, magazines, television programs, and advertising campaigns.<sup>79</sup> More important, the success and spread of hip hop culture have forged open productive spaces for young cultural producers beyond the field of popular music. In the following chapters, I consider a distinct sphere of cultural production that has been significantly altered by hip hop: black American filmmaking.

Like their contemporaries in the production of rap music, black filmmakers attempt to exercise similar modes of agency and intervention in the intensely mobile world of information technology. Whereas the producers of rap attempt to manipulate the new technologies and distribution systems that govern popular music production, filmmakers, in like fashion, attempt to manipulate the new technologies and distribution systems that govern popular film production. But because commercial film is a more expensive arena of production, breaking through industry barriers is a far more formidable task. Besides, the commercial film industry is extremely insular, and practices of nepotism and cronyism are customary. The producers of commercial film tend to constitute a closed inner circle whose members are constantly recycled within the industry. Commercial film is a profession that requires specialized train-

ing, large sums of capital, and expensive equipment. Discussing the costs involved in film production, Robert Withers writes: "Perhaps only architecture can begin to rival it in the amount of capital required for production, and in the potential demand for laborers. The high cost of filmmaking has always placed limitations on the kind of work filmmakers could do, and the financial risk involved has consistently affected the relationship between producers and audiences. . . . Because of its high cost, film production is generally controlled or influenced by those powers in a society that command financial resources and determine how products are distributed."<sup>80</sup>

It is perhaps the high cost of film production that, historically, has limited the effective participation of African American filmmakers. However, for a select group of African American filmmakers, the transformation of the popular cultural landscape and the popularization of black youth expressive cultures changed the prospects for their own filmmaking careers.

Also, the production of black cinema is driven by the constant search for new consumer markets and expressive cultures to exploit. Historically conditioned opportunities in the production of popular film create productive spaces for the post-civil rights generation of African Americans that did not exist for previous generations. This is not to suggest that African Americans have never participated in the production of film but rather that the combination of a new film industry landscape, a changing cultural marketplace, and a more vibrant black culture industry establishes a creative environment in which the film narratives created by African American filmmakers attain greater commercial value. These particular arrangements work to give a small group of African American filmmakers a precarious niche along the production hierarchy of commercial film.<sup>81</sup>

The creation of popular cultural movements like hip hop suggests that black youth struggle to mobilize their own meanings about and representations of societal change. George Lipsitz argues that the emergence of new cultural producers and popular movements is made possible by the very economic shifts that also produce historically distinct forms of social and economic inequality: flexible accumulation.<sup>82</sup> It is crucial to point out, however, that the new formations in capitalism and the global spread of communications media do not intentionally produce new popular movements or expressive cultures. Rather, the new economic regimes, media technologies, and popular culture economy

provide the resources and opportunities that make it possible for new symbolic practices to be created by historically situated cultural producers. The immediate challenge, then, is to further examine how the new mediascape enables black youth to creatively intervene in the making of the larger popular cultural universe.