



Counterknowledge, racial paranoia, and the cultic milieu: Decoding hip hop conspiracy theory

Travis L. Gosa

Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University, 310 Triphammer Road, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA

Abstract

This article contributes to existing research on knowledge production and popular racial discourse. Specifically, it explores the production and circulation of conspiracy theories and other stigmatized knowledge in popular culture. The article investigates how hip hop culture uses conspiratorial ideas to challenge racial inequality. The analysis draws on rap lyrics, news articles, and Internet websites to understand better the role of this prominent sub-theme within the contexts of entertainment and calculated identity politics. Hip hop culture is theorized as “counterknowledge,” an alternative knowledge system intended to challenge mainstream knowledge producers such as news media and academia. Building on John Jackson’s notion of “racial paranoia,” I show how hip hop’s alarmist and conspiratorial claims are meant to explain continued race-class disadvantage in an era of supposed colorblindness. This article traces the discourses that shape and influence hip hop including popular culture, prison culture, Black Muslim (“Five Percenter”) religion, and black books subculture. It reveals how hip hop resembles the “cultic milieu,” a space where disparate countercultural ideas propagate and create unlikely political alliances. Overall, the article seeks to demonstrate that conspiratorial thinking serves multiple purposes, including addressing legitimate but complex political grievances in contemporary society.

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1. Introduction

Race-talk and the exchange of non-expert knowledge are essential for challenging racial stratification (Hill-Collins, 2000; Jackson, 2008; Pollock, 2004). In the post-Civil Rights Era of alleged colorblindness, it is acceptable to emphasize “sameness” while ignoring or denying the reality of racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Gallagher, 2003). In the absence of explicit conversations about racism and privilege, hip hop has become a proxy for public discussions

E-mail address: tlg72@cornell.edu.

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about race (Rose, 2008).¹ Rap music provides discursive resources and space for individuals to deconstruct popular understandings of social identity and to create new narratives about inequality (Perry, 2004; Rose, 1994). This article builds on existing research on racial discourse by analyzing how music and Internet media are used to talk about and challenge racial inequality.

Hip hop's rise over the last two decades corresponds with the decentralization of knowledge production and distribution. New media technologies and Internet communications make it possible for meaningful interpersonal contact to occur digitally (Conley, 2009). The greater democratization of public discourse has caused concerns that misinformation, conspiracy theory, and the "politics of fear" are replacing rationality (Gore, 2007; Keen, 2007; Thompson, 2008). Public fears about New World Order secret societies, space aliens, or apocalyptic prophecy have been well-documented (Fenster, 2008; Melley, 1999; Parish and Parker, 2001). While often dismissed as crackpot speculation, recent works in cultural sociology examine how technological advance and globalization have left many Americans susceptible to rumors and conspiracy theories (Fine and Ellis, 2010; Wuthnow, 2010). These scholars note that the popularization of conspiracy theory in American culture represents a response to increased anxiety and public fear in an interconnected world.

Following this line of inquiry, this article explores how rumors of invisible threats and misinformation circulate in the particular case of hip hop culture. Conspiracy theories, whether "true" or not, are also important to consider because the politically and economically disaffected, especially African Americans, may subscribe to conspiratorial and alarmist beliefs (Simmons and Parsons, 2005; Thorburn and Bogart, 2005). Hip hop likely plays a role in propagating conspiracy theory (Jackson, 2008; Keyes, 2002; McWhorter, 2008), but how this occurs is not well understood. What types of conspiracy theories circulate in hip hop culture? Furthermore, what purposes do these theories serve? What other discourses shape and influence hip hop conspiracy theory? These are the questions my research seeks to explain.

In this article, I argue for wider recognition of the political impetus of conspiracy theory. Hip hop conspiracy theory resembles what Jackson (2008) deems "racial paranoia," a hyperbolic yet deliberate discursive framework used to challenge race-class disadvantage in a colorblind society. Through the analysis of rap lyrics, online videos, and interactions taking place on the Internet, I show how conspiracy theory appears in the form of "counterknowledge," a subversive racial reframing of social problems that is also meant to entertain. The conspiracy theories discussed in this article may be empirically inaccurate, but they are important because they are rooted in an attempt to articulate inequality in an age of supposed colorblindness. Hip hop conspiracy theorists attempt to give voice to racial inequality, but often point consumers away from the structural sources of oppression by focusing on fanciful explanations. The misdirection of conspiracy theory may hinder hip hop's ability to be a cultural force for racial justice.

The examination also explores how hip hop resembles what British sociologist Campbell ([1972] 2002) refers to as the "cultic milieu": a space where conspiracy theories, apocalyptic prophecy, numerology, and unrelated countercultural practices propagate. The eccentric fusion of stigmatized knowledge, I argue, helps preserve hip hop's deviant status and adds intrigue to familiar stories of urban dislocation and racial oppression. My research builds on previous work

¹ The author acknowledges the poignant debates over the terminology of "rap" and "hip hop." In this article, I follow Keyes's (2002) and Kitwana's (2002) approach by using rap to refer to music and artistic aesthetics, while hip hop is meant to describe a broader identity, culture, or worldview. The boundaries of rap music genre are notably permeable. The word rap is not intended to suggest a subgenre of music that is more intense or controversial than hip hop.

on hip hop culture, racial ideology, and new media technology by analyzing how these resources are used to talk about and challenge racial inequality.

The article identifies four potential sources of conspiracy theory that facilitate hip hop's cultic construction—including popular culture, prison culture, Black Muslim (“Five Percenter”) ideology, and “black books” or street literature. These four areas of cultural production are not exhaustive, but are exemplarily of how hip hop borrows from multiple knowledge sources. My research extends our understanding of how countercultural ideas circulate and at times, create unlikely political alliances. Furthermore, it builds on existing scholarship on racial discourse by analyzing how hip hop borrows conspiratorial thinking to voice legitimate but complex political grievances in contemporary society.

2. Hip hop culture and racial discourse

With humble beginnings in the impoverished boroughs of New York in the late 1970s (Fricke and Ahearn, 2002), hip hop has since become an important aspect of American culture, including in professional sports, celebrity, and cinema (Boyd, 2008; Kitwana, 2002; Watkins, 2005). One of the prominent themes in the genre is the battle over racial authenticity and “the truth” (McLeod, 1999).² Hip hop represents a meaningful space in which cultural understandings about racial identity and inequality circulate (Dimitriadis, 2001; Rodriguez, 2006; Rose, 1994, 2008; Perry, 2004). It reproduces, and at times, challenges notions of “authentic” performances of race, sexuality and gender, and social class (Forman, 2002; Keyes, 2002; Kitwana, 2002).

The willingness of many rappers to invoke explicit racially coded politics contradicts the increasingly colorblind or “colormute” discursive and interpretative frames (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Gallagher, 2003; Pollock, 2004).³ As previous research on racial discourse notes, popular race-talk seeks to minimize the significance of race in structuring opportunities. The veil of colorblind logic makes individual deficiencies the starting point of conversations about social problems, ensuring that talk about unearned white advantage and historical racial oppression is minimized. Rodriguez (2006) finds that some white concertgoers use the colorblind frame to justify their participation in black hip hop scenes and to downplay the messages of black emancipation in the music. Rap music, according to Rose (1994: 99), has provided spaces where “oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion” and “pleasurable places where oppositional transcripts, or the ‘unofficial truths’ are developed, refined, and rehearsed.” The “new” racism, or post-racial discourse, can result in the destruction of discursive resources for individuals to understand, vocalize, and challenge racial inequality.

Hip hop produces and circulates racial ideology through at least three inter-related spheres of social interaction. In what Androutsopoulos (2009) calls the “vertical intertextuality” of hip hop, cultural understandings are created in “primary,” “secondary,” and “tertiary” levels of racial performance. First, these primary texts include the poetics of rap lyrics, including symbolic

² Hip hop has created a diverse eco-culture of musical and linguistic modes, which have changed over geography and time (Krims, 2000). For example, so-called “conscious rap” might seek to develop an explicit socio-political discourse with Black Nationalist edges (Harris, 2005), while “southern rap” might emphasize sexual dances or street lifestyle (Miller, 2004). The various styles and identities attached to different rap spaces make any generalizations problematic, and are the basis of heated debates among fans and detractors alike (Rose, 2008).

³ A rapper or “emcee” contributes spoken, chanted, or rhymed lyrics to the music. Over time, the influence of rappers has moved beyond music to include public speaking and activism.

language or explicit political messages that reflect power relations and hidden assumptions of society (Dimitriadis, 2001). Beyond the music, hip hop influences public discourse through television and radio interviews with artists, magazine articles, and academic books (Watkins, 2005). As Binder (1993) recounts, rap music has historically been used to mask fears about black and poor people through coded debates about “declining morality” and “American values.” Recently, public intellectuals have used hip hop as evidence of deviance among black youth (McWhorter, 2003, 2008). Conversely, some critics applaud the music for aesthetic innovation and authentic political expression from “the ghetto” (see Cheyne and Binder, 2010).

Last, the “tertiary” sphere of hip hop deals with the interactions between and among artists and fans. Previous research highlights how hip hop has flattened geographical and ideological difference around the globe, especially throughout the African Diaspora (Gilroy, 1987). How racial understandings get enacted through physical concert spaces has received some attention (Rodriguez, 2006), but the distribution of ideas now involves “new” or “social media.” Hip hop provides a case study of how instant communication through technology may blur the traditional lines between media producer and consumer/audience. Interactions among hip hop fans now take place on Internet chat rooms and “blogs” (self-published news websites). Rappers communicate directly with fans through Twitter, while MySpace and Facebook serve as virtual backstage hangouts. My research builds on previous work on hip hop culture, racial ideology, and new media technology by analyzing how these resources are used to talk about and challenge racial inequality.

3. Racial paranoia, counterknowledge, and the cultic milieu

New media and Internet technology are increasing the quantity of information readily available, but it may also contribute to the spread of conspiracy theory in mass culture (Fenster, 2008; Melley, 1999; Parish and Parker, 2001). According to some, always-on television and the blogosphere have flooded the marketplace of ideas with misinformation and pseudo-science (Thompson, 2008). The knowledge created by mobs of amateurs on Wikipedia and social media sites, Keen (2007) argues, has left the public unable to distinguish between fact and fantasy. Reflecting on the post-September 11, 2001 era, former Vice-President Gore (2007: 21) describes the “assault on reason” and the ascendancy of “fear, superstition, ideology, deception, and intolerance.” Among the indicators of waning trust in authoritative expertise, Gore points to opinion polls in which a majority of Americans label global warming and Darwinian evolution as “myth.”

Large portions of the African American community lend credence to racialized conspiracy theories, including the idea that the government plans to kill blacks through HIV/AIDS, needle exchanges, and transracial adoption (Simmons and Parsons, 2005; Thorburn and Bogart, 2005). Race scholar Jackson (2008: 2–3) argues that racial paranoia has taken hold of black communities in the post-9/11 era, as many believe that the government was involved in both the September 11th attacks and the purposeful, controlled-detonation of the levees in the Gulf Region after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. Jackson describes racial paranoia as a discursive framework in which alarmist and conspiratorial attitudes are used to explain “race-based maliciousness and the benign neglect of racial indifference.” Thus conspiracy theories may be used to make sense of racial inequalities that are ignored or discussed in race-neutral coded language in a colorblind society.

Hip hop culture has been linked to these concerns about conspiratorial thinking and paranoia. McWhorter (2008: 59–61), for example, warns that rappers and “crackpot authors distributing

their books on street corners and at book tables in the lobby at Chitlin’ Circuit theater shows” are responsible for distracting black America with “grapevine theorizing, conspiracy theories, and unfocused cynicism.”⁴ Ethnomusicologist Keyes (2002: 178–185) observes that “the hip hop nation” believes that HIV/AIDS, the crack cocaine epidemic, and the premature deaths of high profile rappers are all part of a global conspiracy. Though concerned about this material, Keyes suggests that hip hop conspiracy theories can be linked to the black oral tradition of legends and myth, and may even serve a positive function by maintaining “social cohesion and group solidarity.” Likewise, Jackson (2008: 144) argues that conspiracy theory is intended to politicize the black underclass. He writes:

If paranoia is usually dismissed by committed scholar-activists, critics like political scientist Adolph Reed, as merely a distraction from real politics, something that dissipates the galvanizing energies required for true social transformation, hip-hop artists call on racial paranoia as a kind of lightning rod for politicizing otherwise disaffected black youth, asking them to wake up, recognize the global conspiracies afoot, and get their urban lives in order.

My research contributes to the scholarship on the production of conspiratorial thought in public discourse by analyzing the role of conspiracies in hip hop culture. With an eye on racial ideology found in hip hop conspiracy theories, I trace how music and new media technologies are used to circulate these ideas through various subsections of American society. I propose two additional conceptualizations that may also help frame the meaning and function of conspiracy theory in American discourse more broadly.

Drawing on previous research on hip hop’s knowledge systems, I conceptualize hip hop culture as a form of *counterknowledge*: an alternative knowledge system intended to entertain while challenging white dominated knowledge industries such as academia or the mainstream press. Instead of placing hip hop conspiracy squarely within the realm of political resistance, I situate the *raison d’être* at the junction of entertainment and calculated identity politics. This redefinition synthesizes Jackson’s discussion of racial paranoia and Keyes’ (2002) thesis of identity maintenance, but it also (re)emphasizes that oppositional texts are highly pleasurable (Rose, 1994: 99). Per historian Kelley’s (1996: 148) explanation, the bizarre tales spun by rappers may penetrate the boundaries of political significance, but they are also meant to be “funky,” “funny,” and “what the people want.” Hip hop culture values a sophisticated mix of humor and folk logic owing to the black oral and literary traditions of “the badman” and “trickster” tales (Perry, 2004; Quinn, 2005). This conceptualization of counterknowledge emphasizes the hybridist construction of hip hop as both political and entertainment work—the pithy expression “edu-tainment” (i.e., Harris, 2005) captures this dual function. Princeton University philosopher Cornell West has drawn on this formula by releasing hip hop albums, including *Sketches of My Culture* (2001) and *Never Forget* (2007), which mix spoken word and political commentary on the state of black America.

Key to hip hop culture is the de-privileging of expert knowledge gained through participation in white controlled spaces such as schools, and the problematization of passive acceptance of

⁴ The Chitlin’ Circuit refers to a string of black music venues, diners, informal gambling establishments, and theaters throughout the South that provided black entertainers opportunities to perform given their lack of access to white-only spaces during the era of legal segregation (see Neal, 1999). In contemporary use, this phrase carries a derogatory, classist connotation.

dominant narratives (Gosa, 2008). The “truth” and valuable skills, in the world of hip hop, can also be attained through lived-experience and “feeling it.” As Jackson (2008) also notes, the epistemology of hip hop uses affective intuition and skepticism as an affront to the white, authoritative truth. The value of feeling versus social-realist discourse provides an opening for even the most outlandish ideas that do not require authoritative support.

The second concept of the *cultic milieu*, along with counterknowledge, provides a framework for thinking through hip hop’s intellectual project. There is a tendency to view conspiracy theories in isolation from the other marginalized ideas that circulate in the world. Conspiracy theories are but a narrow slice of the counterknowledge constructed and forwarded by hip hop. It resembles what British sociologist Campbell ([1972] 2002: 14) refers to as cultic milieu, a cultural underground that encompasses,

The worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure. This heterogeneous assortment of cultural items can be regarded despite its apparent diversity as a single entity—the entity of the cultic milieu.

His discussion of the cultic explores how individuals seek refuge in marginalized, semi-secretive subcultures. The seemingly incompatible cultural items are held together by their deviance and unorthodoxy. Under the auspices of counter-hegemonic movement, multiple oppositional subcultures mix, mingle, and influence one another in the cultic milieu. The result can be the formation of strange political alliances. For example, on the basis of their separatist politics and belief in “real” racial distinctions, white supremacists and the Black Nation of Islam have joined forces to denounce the government (Gardell, 2002).

Campbell contends that small countercultural movements become large when they appropriate a wide range of marginal ideas, as the borrowed bits and pieces of oppositional knowledge combine to create a pop culture scene. While hip hop is often imagined as a coherent cultural movement or homogenous “nation,” the concept of cultic milieu suggests that it is comprised of multiple discursive spaces and borrowed ideas. In the milieu, it is possible for anti-racism, holocaust denial, Goth-punk-skateboard-culture, organic-veganism, Afrocentrism, and neo-conservatism—which presumably share little in common—to cross-pollinate in a space called hip hop. The varieties of beliefs that become folded into hip hop allow those seeking “the truth” or “the real” to move within a generic scene without getting bored. The influx of new ideas, including conspiracy theory, and the reconfiguration of previously incompatible knowledge work to attract new members, while keeping the movement fresh.

4. Decoding hip hop conspiracy theory

What types of conspiracy theories circulate in hip hop culture? How is stigmatized knowledge used to articulate and challenge racial inequality? And where do these ideas come from? Based on the above theoretical grounding, how might we “decode” or better understand hip hop conspiracy theory? Scholars recommend that analyses of hip hop consider the social practices found in music, how people talk about the music, and interaction surrounding hip hop in the wider culture (Androutopoulos, 2009). In this article, I focus on the knowledge exchanged in the music, published writings by rappers, books, videos, and fan interactions on Internet websites.

This study utilized an exploratory, “snowball” sampling approach to locate examples of conspiracy theory that circulate in hip hop culture. A graduate research assistant searched for videos and articles related to “hip hop/rap” and “conspiracy theory” on popular file sharing sites

such as MySpace, YouTube, and WoldStarHipHop. The initial discovery of materials led to new artists, lyrics, and message boards about the topics. This approach was used to identify reoccurring themes and conspiracy-related key-words such “Illuminati,” “Masons,” “New World Order,” “occult,” and “September 11th.” Targeted searches on “hip hop/rap” and these keywords revealed thousands of websites dedicated to decoding the hidden messages in rap songs and music videos or to theorizing government involvement in the murder of rappers. The searches conducted from November 2009 through February 2010 resulted in a rich, though non-random, sample of discourse readily accessible on the Internet.

These searches, along with the existing literature research on hip hop conspiracy theory (Jackson, 2008; Keyes, 2002; McWhorter, 2008), were used to identify artists with a reputation for invoking conspiracy theory in their music (e.g., KRS-One, Talib Kweli, Public Enemy, Canibus, Buckshot, Immortal Technique). While the sub-genres of rap are highly contested, these artists tend to be identified as “conscious” rappers known for politically progressive or racially conscious political content. Thematic and conceptual patterns in these artists’ lyrics and album covers were analyzed. In addition, the books, television shows, movies, or websites mentioned as the source of their hidden knowledge were also examined. Often rappers and hip hop fans provided references to self-published, “street” or “black books” supporting their claims. All of these materials were reviewed to the point of saturation.

The following discussion is organized around four spaces where conspiracy theory thrives, and from where many of hip hop’s ideas seem to come. I focus on these areas of cultural production because hip hop conspiracy theorists regularly merge the unrelated ideas found in these four spaces to create new countercultural narratives. Conspiracy theorists appropriate a wide range of marginal ideas, but these four areas are particularly salient for fulfilling both political and entertainment goals. Discourses from popular culture provide familiar and compelling plots; prison culture supplies a racial justice component; Five Percenter religion adds a tone of spiritual truth; while black books serve as a non-expert knowledge source. These materials, when combined, often appear as a coherent framework for recasting racial inequality. Importantly, hip hop conspiracy theory is constructed from cultural repertoires accessible to young black males, who continue to be the primary producers of rap music. The next sections provide some extended examples of conspiracy theories that regularly circulate in the hip hop world, while demonstrating how syncretism of hip hop knowledge is achieved by blending knowledge sets from diverse spaces.

4.1. Popular culture

Many of hip hop’s self-appointed representatives are committed to all-things countercultural and contrarian, as “going pop” maintains a negative connotation. Yet, it has always appropriated aspects of popular culture to create new meaning and to distinguish the boundaries of subgenres (Lena, 2004). In its earliest days, rap music sampled (i.e., incorporated sonic snippets from) mainstream disco break beats, European electronic pop music (“electro-funk”), James Brown riffs and screams, and Saturday morning cartoon jingles. As Toop (1984) discusses, New York rappers, infatuated with Bruce Lee movies—which were frequently featured in air-conditioned black movie theaters—incorporated kung-fu moves in break dancing and sampled clips from the Asian martial arts flicks of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

This “remixing” includes appropriating conspiracy entertainment found in Hollywood films, radio, television, and fiction. Paranoia and revisionist history are key aspects of popular entertainment in the post-war period (Melley, 1999). Masonic plots, alien intelligence,

and post-apocalyptic-Nostradamus-Ancient-Mayan-2012-calendar-end-of-the-world-conjecture have become inescapable in mass media. The saturation of these themes can be seen in prime-time television shows such as “Fringe,” “Dollhouse, and “V.”⁵ With the success of Dan Brown’s bestselling books *Angels & Demons* (2000), *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), and *The Lost Symbol* (2009) and their film adaptations, fears of secret Masonic plots are presently at the forefront of entertainment.⁶ This conspiracy theory entertainment functions as roux in the gumbo of hip hop counterknowledge.

Circulating in hip hop culture is the rumor that high profile rap artists—such as Jay-Z, Nas, and Kanye West—hold membership in the Masonic secret society known as the “Illuminati.” By far, Jay-Z has been the largest target of this thesis.⁷ His videos for “Run This Town” and “On To The Next One” (both *Blueprint 3*, 2009) have ignited an Internet sensation due to the supposedly hidden occult symbolism of skulls, crows, and anti-Christian messages (*Vigilant Citizen*, 2010). As several Internet videos suggest, Jay-Z’s signature “The Roc” hand gesture is thought to resemble the Masonic symbol of the “pyramid and all seeing eye,” the one that can be found on the back of a one-dollar bill (*Illuminati Archives*, 2007). For example, the DVD documentary entitled *Jay-Z: Hip-Hop’s Master Mason* reveals that Jay-Z is really a 33rd degree (the highest rank) Mason (*Anonymous*, 2009). To support these claims, the video notes that “Jay-Hova,” one of Jay-Z’s many aliases, sounds like “Jehovah,” god in some religions, suggesting that he worships the anti-Christ. Another part of the video plays the Jay-Z song “Lucifer” (*The Black Album*, 2003) backwards, yielding the audible phrases “I can introduce you to evil” and “Murder Murder Jesus 6 6 6.”

The Hip Hop Illuminati thesis exemplifies the major aspects of hip hop counterknowledge, racial paranoia, and cultic construction. First, the discourse is quite entertaining and pleasurable. Given recent complaints that hip hop has lost its creative edge, à la “hip hop is dead,” the conspiratorial offers jaded fans an compelling treasure hunt: they can “connect the dots” by playing tracks backwards and looking for secret Masonic handshakes in music videos. Borrowing from the plots of science fiction entertainment, hip hop’s use of the secret occult adds an air of mystery and wonder to an otherwise derivative and predictable cultural space.

The story is also imbued with racial paranoia, as the secret organization provides a stand-in for white corporate control of black cultural production. Implicit in these discussions is a fear that whites manipulate the thoughts and actions of blacks through popular rappers. For example, the documentary *Hip Hop & Freemasonry: Culture Creation & The Shape of Things To Come* (*Human Condition Forum*, 2009) alleges that hip hop is controlled by a secret Masonic organization. In exchange for record sales and stardom, rappers like Jay-Z agree to poison the minds of the black masses. According to the documentary video, rappers who present pro-black, humanist messages of resistance will be assassinated like Tupac/2pac Shakur, or like Lauryn Hill, have their careers ended. This is a highly dramatized explanation for what some angry hip hop

⁵ “Fringe,” as an “X-Files” remake, features teleportation, LSD induced telepathics, and alternative realities in which the World Trade Centers were not destroyed—the strange occurrences all seem to be connected to FBI, Harvard scientists, and an evil multi-national corporation. “Dollhouse” raises the specter that the rich use mind control to reprogram the poor for sex work. “V” involves alien visitors that are using tainted flu vaccines to colonize the planet.

⁶ Rap artists have attempted to capitalize on this success. See DJ Clue’s “Clue Vinci Code” (2006) and Raekwon’s “The Da Vinci Code Vatican Mixtape” (2007) albums.

⁷ There are over 500,000 Google search links to “Jay-Z illuminati/freemason/Satan,” (at the time of writing), with discussions of Jay-Z and the occult interlinked by reputable NPR.com and David Icke.com, perhaps the web’s most popular conspiracy theory site.

fans see as a general decline in the political substance of the music and the pandering of racial stereotypes to white fans. The idea that successful rappers are really puppets of the Illuminati (white power brokers) provides a lightning rod for politicizing hip hop—in effect, the message is to wake-up and reclaim hip hop as a tool of black empowerment.

The rumor that rap music is influenced by the Illuminati or Satan may not be empirically accurate, but the subtext contains important questions about the music industry and the appropriation of black cultural expression. Who controls the media? How much autonomy do black artists have in choosing the themes of their songs? Is the music having a harmful effect on young people? Ironically, though, the focus on shadowy organizations and subliminal messages can shift attention away from the multinational corporations that profit from racial stereotypes in mainstream hip hop. Rather than focus on the impact of media or radio consolidation, the alarmist reframing points consumers in the wrong direction towards the Illuminati.

The hip hop secret society movement is part of a strange milieu of stigmatized knowledge. The rap freemasonry videos already discussed are saturated with anti-gay themes. The Masonic plot is allegedly designed to convince young boys to cross-dress and have gay sex in order to control the population of black people.⁸ Racialized homophobia is mixed with technophobia, as the videos are also about the evils of robots and computer technology. The widespread use of “Auto-Tune” voice synthesizers by pop-hip-hop stars T-Pain and Kanye West are said to be a way to prepare the masses for their robot overlords (Human Condition Forum, 2009). Knowledge of this plot is gleaned from Hollywood films *The Matrix* and *Transformers*, and is connected to the Common and Pharell music video “Universal Mind Control,” (UMC, 2008), in which Pharell is wearing a robot head.

The influx of conspiracy theory has created an interesting alliance between right-wing conservative Alex Jones and rap’s political left. The face of “Prison Planet” and “Infowars,” Alex Jones has created a multimedia empire that spans radio, Internet properties, films, and lecturing circuits. His programming explores 9/11 conspiracies, doomsday weather weapons, the global warming “myth,” and secret society plots involving vaccines. As a guest on the Alex Jones show in 2009, rapper KRS-One suggests that Barack Obama is a puppet of the “New World Order” and that the US government was behind the 9/11 attacks (Prisonplanet.Com, 2009). Rap group Public Enemy encourages its fans to watch “The Obama Deception,” an Infowars documentary in which Professor Griff of Public Enemy also appears (Watson, 2009). Peruvian American rapper and political activist Immortal Technique performed a free concert with Alex Jones on the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, at which Jones lectured and screened his film “9/11: The Road To Tyranny” (Cannibus-Central.Com, 2006). The links between Alex Jones, rightwing conspiracy theorist, and black rappers illustrates how the cultic milieu creates unlikely political allies in oppositional efforts.

4.2. Prison culture

Hip hop is also connected to the culture and styles of incarcerated life. The fashions have been influenced by or transferred wholesale from prison culture since Run-DMC mimicked the laceless sneakers worn by former inmates. In the 1990s, the signature “sagging” pants copied the

⁸ The “related videos” feature on YouTube also crosslink to videos that “out” gay rappers (“Gay Rappers Exposed!”) and black actors (“Hollywood Queerism”). The comment sections of these websites are rife with anti-gay language and links to websites on “how to survive off the grid in the wilderness,” “the miracles of natural food,” and “Obama is really a Reptilian alien.”

style of male prisoners. The use of prison culture may reflect real trends in mass-incarceration of lower-class black males, who continue to be the face of hip hop. While many enter into the system with low levels of literacy and educational attainment, prison culture can also be a reading culture. Demico Boothe's experience of reading 500 books during a twelve-year sentence for drug dealing does not seem uncommon. Searching to understand why so many black men are in prison, the former inmate and writer Boothe (2007) recounts reading "the truth" in books about CIA drug dealers, secret societies, and the "Willie Lynch Papers: The Making of a Slave."⁹ According to Boothe, part of his penitentiary education involves reading about how the government manufactures HIV/AIDS to kill blacks in America and Africa. Also instructive is his belief that "gangsta rap" is part of an elaborate plot to destroy young black men and to turn black girls into lesbians.

Rapper Prodigy (of Mobb Deep) has become hip hop's premiere "conspiracy theory scholar" while serving a three year prison term for gun possession. The Internet and other new communication technologies allow prisoners like Prodigy to stay connected to the outside world and to use their newly gained prison knowledge to impact public discourse. Through a series of blog posts and open letters, Prodigy reveals Illuminati plots to take over hip hop, the secret explosions that brought down the World Trade Center, and the natural double-helix planetary energy grids that the oil companies do not want the public to know about. Posting in all capitalized letters on his blog, Prodigy discusses how the world has been controlled by a satanic cult for the past three-thousand years:

THE SKULL & BONES GO ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE PIRATES AND WAY BEFORE THEN. ANOTHER OLD SOCIETY HIGH UP ON THE TOTEM POLE IS THE 'BOHEMIAN GROVE' SECRET SOCIETY ... THEY HOLD MEETINGS IN THE CALIFORNIA REDWOOD FOREST AND PRACTICE RITUALS WHERE THEY WORSHIP A GIANT DEMON OWL CALLED 'MOLECH' AND THEY DO 'MOCK' SACRIFICES TO THEIR GOD "MOLECH" WHERE THEY BURN A BABY IN A BONFIRE, WITH HUNDREDS OF MEMBERS WATCHING ... NOT ONLY ARE THESE MISSING CHILDREN BEING USED AS SEXUAL TOOLS IN SATAN WORSHIP, BUT THEY'RE ALSO BEING EATEN AS A PART OF THESE VERY SAME RITUALS. A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T REALIZE THAT CANNIBALISM IS A PART OF SATANIC WORSHIP, AND IS A PART OF THE RITUALS THAT TAKE PLACE ... AFRICAN-AMERICAN GENOCIDE-GENOCIDE IS THE SYSTEMATIC AND PLANNED EXTERMINATION OF AN ENTIRE NATIONAL, RACIAL, POLITICAL, OR ETHNIC GROUP. SO IN THIS CASE BLACK PEOPLE IN AFRICA, AMERICA AND OTHER REGIONS ARE THE GROUP. STARTING WITH AFRICA, EVER SINCE THE EUROPEANS, SPECIFICALLY THE HYKSOS DYNASTY, INVADED EGYPT THE WHOLE CONTINENT AND THE WORLD HAS NEVER BEEN THE SAME. (Gawker, 2008)

Yale University secret societies ("Skull & Bones"), pirates, pedophilia and child rape, cannibalism, demon owls, European expansionism in North Africa—the breadth of the narrative is hard to follow, though this is the construction of cultic knowledge. While convoluted, it is

⁹ The "Willie" or William Lynch story holds that a British slaver owner gave a speech in 1712, in which he taught white Americans how to psychologically enslave blacks by using a "divide and conquer technique." While historically false, the story continues to circulate in the black community (Cobb, 2003).

important to notice that Prodigy's thesis is explicitly political, in that he is attempting to explain racial inequality. As an example of racial paranoia, Prodigy constructs a white supremacy plot from the 15th dynasty of ancient Egypt (1640 BC) to today's power elite at Ivy League colleges. His message is for blacks to start reading the truth, wake up, and organize.

In 2009, [Marche \(2009\)](#) wrote an essay arguing that America's obsession with 9/11 and New World Order conspiracy theories was destroying "reason." From prison, rapper Prodigy penned an open letter suggesting that the experience of racism in America provides enough "evidence" that conspiracies are real:

I would like to 'enlighten' you to the fact that, there is, in fact, a group of people who have conspired to rule and dominate the natural resources, indigenous people and land of this planet for many centuries . . . I'm speaking about the Caucasian . . . Not all of 'today's' whites are evil, in fact, most of them are beautiful . . . This nation was birthed and built on black slavery, rape and bloodshed. Plus the annihilation of the Native Americans . . . I forgive you for your ignorance and contradictions. (quoted in [Langhorne, 2009](#))

The letter is important for understanding why otherwise reasonable people entertain Prodigy's musings. Colonialism, slavery, racial segregation in public facilities ("Jim Crow"), and the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments on unknowing black men are real historical racial atrocities. Even with a Barack Obama presidency, de facto racism in the form of skyrocketing unemployment and incarceration likely make it "feel" like evil forces are still out to destroy poor and black people. However, these issues are much more difficult to mobilize against than legal slavery or the slaughter of indigenous people. Prodigy uses the outlandish conspiracies of child molestation and cannibalism to disrupt the colormute norms of public discourse. By connecting historical instances of racial oppression to racialized conspiracy theories, Prodigy attempts to activate black collective memories while playing on white guilt.

4.3. *Five Percenter ideology*

The Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE), better known as the "Five Percenters," provide a spiritual and social justice flavor to hip hop's secretive knowledge. Through its appropriation of the greeting "peace god" and use of the term "cipher," hip hop has been the public relations branch of Five Percenters ([Knight, 2007](#)). Still, the actual belief system of the organization is often misunderstood. In her book on Five Percent culture in rap music, [Miyakawa \(2005\)](#) describes the movement as off-shot of the Nation of Islam that recruits heavily in prisons and street corners; recruitment techniques that suggest why hip hop counterknowledge often invokes NGE language. Core to the belief system is that 85% of the world is ignorant ("dumb, deaf, and blind"), while 10% knows the truth, but uses it to exploit others. The other 5%, for which the group takes its name, uses "knowledge of self" to teach others how to live peaceful, spiritual lives. By self-knowledge, this religious group means getting in touch with one's inner god. Instead of god occupying the heavens, Five Percenters teach that the black man is a living god and that the black woman represents the earth.

Historically, much of the "hip hop intelligentsia" and other explicitly political conscious rappers have drawn on teachings of the Five Percent Black Muslims ([Harris, 2005](#)). As political theorist [Ogbar \(2007:17–18\)](#) recalls, the black nationalist and religious ideology of the Five Percenters influenced early hip hop organizations, such as Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation. During the so-called "golden age of hip hop," when political and Black Nationalist messages were part of popular rap (1987–1996), hundreds of rappers identified with the NGE, including

Rakim, Nas, Wu-Tang Clan, Busta Rhymes, Poor Righteous Teachers, Digable Planets, and Brand Nubian (Miyakawa, 2005; Knight, 2007).

Five Percenter ideology is often invoked in conspiracy theory due to the movement's emphasis on mystery, riddles, and symbols. Known as "living" or "supreme mathematics," followers find meaning in numerology, while letters in the alphabet carry their own special meaning (Knight, 2007: 49–64).¹⁰ Converts preach and provide lessons of the truth based on decoding words that are used in everyday life. For example, Pete Rock and CL Smooth ("Anger in the Nation," *Mecca and the Soul Brother*, 1992) claim that both libraries and television are used to mentally enslave black people. Through deconstructive word play, they rhyme that "lie-braries" and "tell-a-lie-vision" are tools to oppress blacks: "A schism; negative realism/Four-hundred-and-thirty-five years still weak/mental deaf dumb and blindness put us to sleep."

Beyond the lyrics, Miyakawa (2005) notes how the albums by NGE influenced rappers racialize well-known conspiracy theory. Her description of the Poor Righteous Teachers' album cover for *The New World Order* (1996) is instructive:

The text is printed over a picture of piles of Revelatory, conspiratorial, historical, and theological literature with titles such as *The Illuminati 666*, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*; *Chemical and Biological Warfare*; *The Architect of Genocide*; *Secret Societies Unmasked*; and *Holy Bible*.

Through the lens of Five Percenter ideology, rappers "connect the dots" in ways that could be dismissed as strange, though again, the political intentions are clear. These materials differentiate self-proclaimed "conscious" rappers from the ostensibly gangster, all while adding a touch of intrigue and mystery for listeners. As a tool of resistance and identity maintenance, the strategy is meant to encourage black people to question the information they regularly receive from school and the mainstream media. Wise Intelligent, a member of the group, explains how this alternative knowledge is meant to empower listeners to become active agents in their education: "After gaining this knowledge [of self] I would question the teachers. I question them to things like colors. They have color wheels [in art class]. I would ask them why isn't black on the color wheel?" (Eure and Spady, 1991: 63). Indeed, there is no black on the color wheel.

4.4. Black books and street literature

Many of these ideas circulate via black book stores and street vendors. As Anthropologist Fisher (2006: 83) observes, black books have become a valuable "alternative knowledge space" that provides "an opportunity to access knowledge that is often devalued or omitted from mainstream schooling." Likewise, Duneier (1999), in his four year ethnography of black book dealers on the streets of Greenwich Village, finds a vibrant intellectual community on the streets. Through the use of books on black history, music, and culture, older black men serve as mentors and encourage younger black males to self-educate.

It is important not to dismiss the value of books from independent presses and the culture of literacy that is nurtured in these spaces, as McWhorter (2008) does. But the types of books sometimes promoted by street intellectuals contribute to a subculture that is a strange mix of

¹⁰ The simplest example may be the word "A.L.L.A.H," which is "decoded" to mean Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, and Head. This is decoded to reveal that man is really god. The use of "hidden knowledge" found here is similar to that of other Afro-diasporic cultures, including Dancehall and Reggae, which draw on aspects of Rastafarian mysticism.

conspiracy theory, independent Afrocentric scholarship, and the gritty hip hop fiction known as “street lit” or “ghetto lit.” On street corners and in prisons, canonic texts such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or Alex Haley’s *Roots* appear alongside the fictional Willie Lynch Papers (see footnote 9). Common themes in this underground literature include accounts of clandestine plots by Masonic cabals and government plans to insert micro-chips in the skulls of black prisoners. Books and self-published pamphlets detailing these conspiracies circulate around prisons, and are sold by black book street vendors.

Hip hop’s favorite conspiracy book may be William Cooper’s *Behold the Pale Horse* (1991), which details the US government’s staging of the Apollo moon landing, the John F. Kennedy assassination conspiracy, as well as a covert world government that is colluding with space aliens. References to the book are commonly used in rap lyrics to explain the “plot” or “game” to re-enslave or brainwash blacks (Keyes, 2002). Recently, the racialization of Cooper’s *Pale Horse* has been taken up by the rapper “William Cooper aka Booth,” whose album *Beware of The Pale Horse* (2009) updates the Pale Horse conspiracy theories with narratives of Barack Obama being a puppet of the New World Order, tainted swine flu vaccines, and GPS tracking devices implanted in children. The “behold the pale horse” meme can be found on the US flag burning track by Nas (“Testify,” 2008), or the Public Enemy (“Kill ‘Em Live,” 2004) track critiquing the mass incarceration of black youth. In each song, the Cooper allusion is used to question governmental motives and to highlight on-going racial inequalities.

Scholars Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (i.e., Forman, 2002: 36; Forman and Neal, 2004) claim that they and their books are important parts of hip hop culture. True, but left out of this conversation is the fact that rappers and “non-academic scholars” are also part of the hip hop book industry. With the accessibility of independent presses and print-on-demand Internet websites (i.e., LuLu), this alternative hip hop literature is often sold on the street. The themes of these books are much different than what is typically found in hip hop books published by Oxford or Duke University Press.

In terms of more mainstream publications, two books by Wu-Tang Clan’s *The RZA, The Wu-Tang Manual* (2005) and *Tao of Wu* (2009), exemplify the cultic milieu. The books provide insight into the Wu Tang mythology, a blend of Five Percenter ideology, street martial arts and chess strategy, Eastern spirituality (i.e., Buddhism and Taoism), and references to old Kung-Fu movies. Endorsed by Professor Cornell West, *Tao of The Wu* is framed as edu-tainment with valuable notes on philosophy and self-improvement strategies. This knowledge though, according to RZA, is derived from playing Spades (a card game) in prison (RZA, 2009: 81–83), reading Marcus Garvey Black Nationalism, watching *The Matrix* movie, eating psychedelic mushrooms and smoking marijuana laced with “angel dust” (PCP phencyclidine), and intellectualizing with gang members (RZA, 2009: 158).

The eclectic character of this new genre of hip hop street intellectualism can be seen in a fascinating book by the self-proclaimed “teacha” and activist, KRS-One. In his 832 page expansive tome modeled after the Christian bible, *The Gospel of Hip Hop: First Instrument* (2009), KRS-One reframes hip hop outside of historical black culture or rap music. Instead, he argues for the “metaphysics of hip hop.” He proposes that hip hop is revealed through participation in an all inclusive hip hop spirituality, diet, cosmology, and even color-ology. Thus, this framing of hip hop might appeal to new-age hippies or vegans, as “true hip hoppers” are required to eat water-based soup every seven days (KRS-One, 2009: 386).

The Wu-Tang and KRS-One books are middle-of-the-road in comparison to the self-published hip hop literature that has emerged in recent years. The book trilogy by Supreme Understanding Allah, a community activist and writer, is a case in point. His books *Knowledge of Self: A*

Collection of Wisdom on the Science of Everything in Life (2009a), *How to Hustle and Win: A Survival Guide for the Ghetto* (2009b), and *Rap, Race, and Revolution: Solutions for Our Struggle* (2009c) are vivid examples of the cultic milieu. The author combines practical “how-to” money management strategies with the virtues of a vegetarian lifestyle, even messages of sexual abstinence. This is mixed with a healthy dose of racial paranoia, including the thesis that “Little Hugs”—those twenty-five cent juice boxes sold in corner stores and bodegas—are part of a white supremacist plot to turn black men gay and to spread HIV/AIDS in the black community (Allah, 2009c: 73–80).

Allah’s books contain well-written passages on successful black slave and Native American rebellions that are indeed inspiring and accessible. But à propos the folklore of the cultic, the author also connects the dots between the “true” events of September 11th, Adolf Hitler, and Cointellpro (US government counter intelligence program; Allah, 2009b: 153–155). His heavy reliance on conspiracy theory is meant to expose the economic, political, and healthcare inequities facing both black and indigenous peoples in America. Yet, his sincere message, that race still matters, is supported by claims of secret organizations and biological warfare. With less attention given to the structural sources of racial inequality, readers are directed to engage in individual self-help improvement strategies.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Through the study of hip hop culture, this article has examined the production and circulation of conspiracy theory in contemporary society. Conspiracy theories provide discursive resources for voicing and challenging racial inequality. Fanciful tales of clandestine plots and secret societies that circulate in hip hop are meant to be disruptive to the mainstream public discourse on the state of race. While colorblind ideology seeks to obscure the mechanisms of racial inequality, hip hop conspiracy theory seeks to expose the architects of stratification. Specifying the political intent of conspiracy theory extends our knowledge of how people attempt to speak against increasingly complex social problems that impact black communities in an era of supposed colorblindness. Hip hop’s racial paranoia comes with an explicit message that rebukes socioeconomic and racial discrimination; holds government responsible for the wellbeing of all its citizens; and, perhaps most importantly, one that exclaims for black people to “wake up” and take action.

By highlighting the political construction of conspiracy theory, these findings suggest against simply dismissing this discourse as crackpot theorizing by fringe groups. Similar to recent work by Fine and Ellis (2010) and Wuthnow (2010), the rumors circulating in hip hop appear as responses to real structural shifts and social problems in American life. My findings highlight how members of the hip hop community use new digital spaces to contribute to the wider collective fear in American society. When viewed within the contexts of entertainment and calculated identity politics, the ideas examined here represent a playful, yet subversive, challenge to expert knowledge. Instant communication through social media technology allows for non-experts to appropriate mainstream entertainment, mix it with stigmatized ideas found in prisons, self-published books, and marginalized religion, and redistribute it to millions via the Internet.

Despite the bizarre ideas exchanged on message boards and YouTube videos, one notable aspect is the blurring of lines between media consumer and producer. User-generated videos can be used to criticize commercial artists such as Jay-Z or even the president of the United States. The speculation that superstars are puppets of the Illuminati or New World Order demonstrates how individuals can resist being unreflective consumers of popular culture. My decoding of hip

hop conspiracy theory highlighted the more constructive parts of the discourse, yet one troublesome aspect is the flagrant anti-gay and homophobic rhetoric. That hip hop conspiracy theorists choose to malign same-sex loving people in its quest to liberate the masses from the control of the global elite is disheartening and divisive, as it trades on one form of oppression to attack another.

In addition, conspiracy theories do give voice to inequality, but this subversive racial reframing of social problems also tends to point consumers in the wrong direction. Wrapping legitimate concerns in the dramatics of Masonic plots can serve as a digression from the institutional reproduction of racial inequality in society. The reliance on conspiracy theories may hinder hip hop's ability to be a powerful cultural force for racial justice. The discourse points away from engaged critique of mass incarceration, the unsuccessful War on Drugs, decaying inner-city schools, or media monopolies. Almost tragic is that hip hop conspiracy theorists fixate on poisoned juice boxes instead of the lack of quality grocery stores and hospitals in urban communities. The discursive strategy provides the much needed alarm about continued racial inequality, but establishes a search for individual conspirators rather than seeking systemic solutions to societal problems.

In this respect, my case study of hip hop conspiracy theory is analogous to the Barack Obama conspiracy theories forwarded by the conservative Tea Party and "Birther Movement." Since the 2008 election of Obama as the first black president of the United States, these groups have used Internet media to spread the rumor that Obama is a Kenyan-born Muslim, a socialist, and that he attended terrorist training schools in Indonesia during his childhood. In a colorblind era, these conspiracy theories are used by some whites to voice racial anxiety and concern over the shifting racial demographics of the country. Rather than focus on rising social class inequality or a lack of political power, these groups have turned to elaborate conspiracy theories about Obama's American status. Similar to hip hop conspiracy theory, the embrace of Obama conspiracy theory obscures the structural sources of discontent.

This research has implications for the study of hip hop culture. Hip hop as an isolated discursive space is a miscategorization, as I have shown, because it intermingles with popular culture, prison culture, Five Percenter religion, and "black books" subculture. The image of hip hop as the cultic milieu challenges simplistic notions of black culture and/or hip hop. Examinations beyond conspiracy theory will likely demonstrate multiple influences and transmigration of hip hop to and from unexpected spaces. Co-mingling under the cultural tent of hip hop, one can already find right-wing conspiracy theorists, natural-foodies, homophobes, and black-nationalist-socialist all basking in the milieu. This, I suspect, gives insight into how hip hop avoids complete assimilation into the mainstream. By way of multiple information sources and influences from the margins and popular imagination, hip hop maintains a counter-cultural appeal. My research contributes to the growing interest in conspiratorial discourse in hip hop, though it is not clear in existing literature how prevalent conspiracy theory is in the music or how these themes have changed over time. Based on the analysis presented here, I expect that future researchers will find these ideas concentrated in the subgenre of more "political" or "socially conscious" hip hop.

This study has focused on the cultural production of conspiratorial discourses in hip hop culture, including the verbal content of rap music and the movement of these themes through multiple spaces. From content analysis alone, I am not able to assess how people might consume, read, or utilize these ideas. Nor can the effects of these materials be presumed. Indeed, as the existing literature on media reception emphasizes, consumers often make meaning out of cultural objects, or texts, in surprising, counter-intuitive ways (Lembo, 2000). Hip hop fans are not passive recipients of ideas and are unlikely to passively "believe" or "accept" the often bizarre

claims explored in this study. Many consumers of this material, I suspect, are skeptical of the truthfulness of the conspiracy theories, while others derive pleasure from the fantastic amount of creativity used to restructure well-known plots of television shows or novels to create entertaining stories.

The literatures on media consumption and racial ideology hold some clues as to how people might engage this material. Rap music entails cultural process of creating meaning systems and identities, not just a cultural product. For example, in the process Dimitriadis (2001) calls “mediated text,” black youth map their own lives and local realities onto prepackaged content to make new meanings that defy static or coherent textual readings alone. Likewise, Rodriquez (2006) finds that while consuming rap music, white youth remove the racially coded meaning of rap music to make hip hop a colorblind space. This is an ironic and unexpected use of a cultural form which is unambiguously and explicitly racial. In the case of conspiracy theories, it is possible that these consumers might discount the race-based grievances and focus on the compelling narratives of covert plots and shadowy figures. Future research is needed to explore how hip hop conspiracies are picked up and used by audiences.

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Appendix A. Supplementary materials

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Travis L. Gosa is an assistant professor of social science at Cornell University. He received his Ph.D. in sociology from The Johns Hopkins University in 2008. His research examines the social and cultural worlds of African-American youth. He is currently working on a manuscript examining hip hop culture and the black-white achievement gap.