Counterknowledge, Racial Paranoia, and the Cultic Milieu: Decoding Hip Hop Conspiracy Theory

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Vitae

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Abstract

This paper examines knowledge production and popular racial discourse. Specifically, it explores the construction of conspiracy theories in hip hop culture. The hip-hop-as-culture thesis posits that knowledge—in addition to rap, DJing, dance, and street art--is the fifth element of hip hop culture. However, advocates of this perspective rarely specify why hip hop knowledge includes belief in conspiracy theory, such as New World Order secret societies or man-made HIV/AIDS virus. In this paper, I theorize hip hop culture as "counterknowledge," an alternative knowledge system intended to challenge political correctness and mainstream knowledge producers such as news media and academia. Building on John Jackson's notion of "racial paranoia," I argue that hip hop's alarmist and conspiratorial claims are meant to explain continued race-class disadvantage in an era of supposed color-blindness. In many ways, hip hop resembles the "cultic milieu," a space where conspiracy theories, apocalyptic prophecy, numerology, and other countercultural ideas propagate. The discourse can be linked to popular culture, prison culture, black books subculture, and Five Percent religion.

Key Words: Rap/hip hop; music; race; knowledge; conspiracy; discourse.

1. Introduction

This article considers the construction and function of hip hop knowledge, especially as it pertains to racial discourse.[1] Scholars such as Tricia Rose (1994) and Imani Perry (2004) argue that hip hop is a black, counter-hegemonic, discursive space. Following this thread of inquiry, the paper examines the structure of hip hop's meaning systems. An interpretative analysis of conspiracy theories is used to theorize hip hop as "counterknowledge," an alternative knowledge system intended to challenge political correctness and white dominated knowledge industries.

Much of the existing hip hop literature focuses on the themes of black rage (Gosa, 2008; Martinez, 1997), violence (Hunnicutt and Andrews, 2009; Kubrin, 2005; 2006), and hyper-masculinity and sexism (Collins, 2006; Sharpley-Whiting, 2007). These themes are certainly part of rap music's enduring legacy, but less attention has been given to the exchange of conspiracy theories and other stigmatized beliefs. There are concerns that hip hop (Jackson, 2008; Keyes, 2004; McWhorter, 2008) and the larger black community (Simmons and Parsons, 2005; Thorburn and Bogart, 2005) have become hotbeds for conspiratorial and alarmist beliefs. One of the goals of the present work is to review the types of theories that circulate in hip hop, such as New World Order global governance, secret satanic cabals, and plots to kill African Americans with HIV/AIDS. I argue for wider recognition of the political impetus of this conjecture, as hip hop conspiracy theory resembles what Jackson (2008) deems "racial

[1] The author acknowledges the poignant debates over the terminology of "rap" and "hip hop." In this paper, "rap" is meant 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.

paranoia," a hyperbolic yet deliberate discursive framework used to challenge race-class disadvantage in an era of supposed color-blindness.

The examination also explores how hip hop resembles what British sociologist Colin 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 believe, helps preserve hip hop's deviant status, while maintaining a fascia of defiance despite the wealth of its purveyors and positioning in le courant principal. The paper identifies four potential sources of syncretization that facilitate hip hop's cultic construction, including popular culture, prison culture, "black books" subculture, and Five Percenter ideology.

Rather than present an exhaustive quantitative assessment of rap lyrics for evidence of these claims, I develop an interpretative analysis of hip hop's "vertical intertextuality" in which the inter-related spheres of rap aesthetics ("primary texts"), media discourse ("secondary texts"), and interactions among hip hop fans ("tertiary texts") are "read" (see Androutsopoulos, 2009 for an example of this discursive approach). Selected rap lyrics, published interviews with rappers, hip hop literature, and fan-generated videos on sites such as Youtube are used to illustrate my perspective.

The nature of this investigation requires a few caveats. First, the purpose of this paper is not to verify or falsify the claims of hip hoppers. Whether or not, for example, the government manufactured HIV/AIDS as a tool of racial genocide is outside the scope of this paper. Preferred is a qualitative, constructionist approach that focuses on the discursive strategies and rhetoric used to (re)produce cultural meaning and social knowledge (see Gubrium and Holstein, 1997).

Second, this is not a defense of expert knowledge, or an attempt to silence the voices of disadvantaged, black males. The argument is not that hip hop is a threat to the "enlightenment values" of "reason" (Gore, 2007), will dumb down America into a "ghettonation," (Daniels, 2007), or otherwise betray black commitment to science and formal education (McWhorter, 2003; 2008). Rather, I see counterknowledge as an important aspect of hip hop's intellectual *and* entertainment value that has roots in black oratory and literary tradition.

The paper is organized as follows. First, a synthesis of previous research is used to conceptualize hip hop as culture and alternative knowledge space, rather than just rap music. In the next sections, I use the concepts of counterknowledge, racial paranoia, and cultic milieu to articulate a perspective on decoding hip hop conspiracy theory. The remainder is an illustrative exercise structured around four sources of conspiracy theory that facilitate and reinforce hip hop counterknowlege.

2. Hip Hop Culture & Knowledge

The "black noise" of rap, as Tricia Rose (1994) puts it—with its repetitive nonsense sound, penchant for sampling (instead of real instrumentation), dense percussion loops, and break beat repetitions--began inducing dance and controversy around 1974 in the discarded boroughs of the South Bronx (Frick and Ahern, 2002; Kugelberg, 2007). Since the late 1980s, hip hop culture has become a ubiquitous aspect of American popular culture (Watkins, 2005), including professional sports, celebrity, and cinema (Boyd, 2008; Kitwana, 2002). With furtive hip hop scenes in almost every country (Alim et al., 2009; Basu and Lemelle, 2006), any hope that rap will be quickly supplanted by "real" music has been diminished.

As hip hoppers continue to come of age, "hip hop studies" (Forman and Neal, 2004) continues to gain momentum in K-12 schooling and university coursework (Hill, 2009; Parmar 2009).[2] As a trans-disciplinary movement, a coherent definition of hip hop and its study is non-existent, but two threads of conceptualization can be found in most discussions on the topic. The first thrust is that hip hop is more than rap music. Hip hop culture represents African-diasporic consciousness (Gilroy, 1987; Keyes, 1996; Rose, 1994; Toop, 1984), black youth culture (Kitwana, 2002), post-Civil Rights black political discourse (Collins, 2006), and black underclass verve (Forman, 2002; Chang, 2005).[3] Sociologist Prudence Carter (2003), for example, calls it "black cultural capital," a worldview, logic system, and resource that orients probable agency and status attainment within black subculture that typically yields little exchange value within white dominated spaces.

Second, the hip-hop-as-culture-thesis describes hip hop as political and cultural resistance. Ghetto artistry and subversive music are how members of the "post-soul" (George, 1992) or "hip hop generation" (Kitwana, 2002) responded to post-industrial shifts in the global economy, middle-class flight from inner-cities, an unsuccessful war on drugs, and the politics of abandonment that destroyed inner-city communities (Chang, 2005; Rose, 1994). Placing messages in the music, rap artists deliver information ("drop or kick knowledge") about social problems facing poor communities that are ignored by the mainstream media. As alternative news source, or "The Black Man's CNN," as Public Enemy's Chuck D often said, rap music

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[2] For example, in 2009, the nation's first hip hop studies college degree was established at Minnesota's McNally Smith College of Music.

[3] Hip Hop's "blackness" has become a major point of contention, as some argue that the emphasis on blackness devalues the contributions of Latinos, especially Puerto Ricans (see Flores, 2000 and Rivera, 2003).

provides an explicit socio-political discourse with Black Nationalist edges (Harris, 2005; Rose, 2008) and underground spiritual alternative (KRS-One, 2009). Tricia Rose (1994: 99) provides a nice articulation of hip hop as a site of oppositional culture:

> Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion. These cultural forms are especially rich and pleasurable places where oppositional transcripts, or the 'unofficial truths' are developed, refined, and rehearsed.

According to black cultural nationalists, the commodification of Afro-disaporic and post-industrial black survivalisms for white, global consumption threatens to destroy these "oppositional transcripts" (Asante, 2008; Powell, 2007).[4] Concerns about profit motive tend to involve the fear that it will cease to be a black, counter-hegemonic space.

3. Conspiracy Theory & Hip Hop

One aspect of hip hop culture's oppositional discourse that has raised concerns is the embrace of conspiracy theory. For example, black conservative John McWhorter (2008) condemns rappers, especially "conscious" or "political" emcees, for using conspiracy theories to explain racial inequities in incarceration, health, and education. Black America, he warns, should stop getting its information from rappers and "crackpot authors distributing their books on street corners and at book tables in the lobby at Chitlin' Circuit theater shows" (59).[5]

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[4] The irony, of course, is that a crisis in capitalism created *both* labor market displacement *and* unprecedented access to global communications and technology that would create a generation of black rap superstars and millionaires (Kelley, 1996; Watkins, 2004; Quinn, 2005).

[5] The Chitlin' Circuit refers to a string of black music venues, diners, juke joints, and theaters throughout the South that provided black entertainers opportunities to perform given

McWhorter continues, “I know there are some black people who consider grapevine theorizing, conspiracy theories, and unfocused cynicism a kind of higher awareness. I'm not one of them” (61).

McWhorter can be dismissed as a “hater,” but serious hip hop scholars note the heavy reliance on conspiratorial attitudes. In her book *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, Ethnomusicologist Cheryl 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. According to Keyes, belief in New World Order plots is advocated by Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation and rappers cite conspiracy theory books in their rhymes. Though concerned about this material, Keyes suggests that hip hop conspiracy theories can be linked to the black oral tradition of legends and myth (180), and may even serve a positive function by maintaining “social cohesion and group solidarity” (185).

Race scholar John Jackson (2008: see chapter 5) makes similar observations about hip hop's use of conspiracy theories. Jackson 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-denotation of the levees in the Gulf Region after Hurricane Katrina. He 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” (2-3). Instead of unfocused cynicism, Jackson argues that

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their lack of access to white-only spaces during Jim Crow. In contemporary use, this phrase carries a derogatory, classist connotation.

hip hop uses conspiracy theories to politicize listeners against racial differentials ignored in the era of politically correct, colorblind society. He writes:

> If paranoia is usually dismissed by committed scholar-activists, critics like political scientist Adoloph 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. (144)

The conspiratorial attitudes found in hip hop culture may reflect beliefs that circulate in the wider black community. Recent work by William Simmons and Sharon Parsons (2005) confirm that blacks, regardless of social class, tend to believe that the government uses HIV/AIDS, needle exchanges, and transracial adoption to commit genocide against blacks. Based on review of national surveys, Thorburn and Bogart (2005) find that more than 50% of blacks believe that HIV/AIDS is a man-made virus, while 20% of blacks agree with the statement: 'The government is using HIV/AIDS to kill off minority groups." For comparison, only 4% of whites see HIV/AIDS as a deliberate form of genocide. Thus, hip hop as a black subculture may reproduce these types of beliefs.

4. Counterknowledge & The Cultic Milieu

I propose two additional conceptualizations that may also help frame the meaning and function of the hip hop conspiratorial. First, hip hop culture is a form of *counterknowledge*: an alternative knowledge system intended to entertain while challenging white dominated knowledge industries such as academia or mainstream press. This redefinition of hip hop as counterknowledge synthesizes Jackson's notion of oppositional political knowledge and Keyes' (2002) thesis of identity maintenance, but it also (re)emphasizes Rose's (1994: 99) argument that

oppositional texts are pleasurable. Jackson places 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. By counterknowledge, I mean that hip hop is intended to oppose, poke fun, shock, and undermine the dominant narrative provided by white America, while reinforcing in-group solidarity.

Per historian Robin D.G. Kelly's (1996: 148) explanation, the bizarre tales spun by rappers may penetrate the boundaries of political significance, but 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. As Eithne Quinn (2005: 140) describes of the discursive strategies found in "gangsta rap," absurd humor is derived from the knowing way in which the "'hidden transcript' of the oppressed" is broadcast in the "hypervisible commercial form" (23). From the plantation, to the juke joint, to the music video, Quinn describes how black storytelling has been intended to entertain dual audiences: "Not only the pleasurable shock of the intended audience—the 'oh-shit-I-can't-believe-he's-sayin'-that-shit' shock (as [rapper Dr.] Dre puts it)—but also the affront to those just outside, as well as the outrage of those far beyond, the juke joint" (140). Hip hop conspiracy may be meant to entertain both black and white audiences, while subverting the latter in the tradition of signifying. A number of scholars trace rap to the African American vernacular tradition of "cultural inversion" or signifying, in which word play and alternative meanings are used to voice dissent without white people (or the general "Other") catching on (see Perry, 2006: 60-67; Forman, 2002: 42-44).

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. 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 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. Hip Hop's demand that "you better recognize" and "get familiar," two common dictums of gaining knowledge, are predicated on aesthetic feeling. Hip Hop knowledge resembles what German sociologist Max Weber called "verstehen," roughly translated as an "empathetic understanding."[6] The hip hop equivalent to verstehen is "feel me" or "nah mean [do you know what I mean]." Far from meaningless mumble, "feel me" and "nah mean" are impassioned request for a deep, felt, and introspective understanding of the black experience vis-à-vis post-industrial rapture and racial oppression. 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

[6] For Weber the method and goal of sociology was to develop a thick affective understanding of the human condition, one that he believed was being destroyed by the "iron cage" of logic, rationalization, and predictability (Gerth and Mills, 1946).

by hip hop. It resembles what British sociologist Colin Campbell (1972/2002: 14) refers to as cultic milieu, a cultural underground in which

> 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 previous incompatible knowledge work to attract new members, while keeping the movement fresh.

5. Decoding Hip Hop Conspiracy Theory

What types of conspiracy theories circulate in hip hop culture? What intellectual work is being accomplished? And where do these ideas come from? Based on the above theoretical grounding, how might we "decode" or better understand hip hop conspiracy theory? The following analysis is illustrative in nature, not exhaustive. The framework of counterknowledge, racial paranoia, and cultic milieu is used to read hip hop conspiracy theory. The focus is mainly on the social knowledge exchanged in hip hop's primary, secondary, and tertiary texts, including music, published writings by rappers, hip hop literature, videos, and fan interactions on internet websites. The discussion is organized around four spaces where conspiracy theory thrives, and from where many of hip hop's ideas seem to come. In order to fulfill both political and entertainment goals, hip hop appropriates conspiracy discourse from popular culture, prison culture, "black books" subculture, and Five Percent religion. This approach provides 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.

5.1 Popular Culture

Hip Hop is committed to all-things countercultural and contrarian, as "going pop" maintains a negative connotation. Yet, hip hop has always appropriated and remade aspects of popular culture, including disco break beats, European electronic pop music ("electro-funk"),

James Brown riffs and screams, and Saturday morning cartoon jingles. This includes "remixing" 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 (Mellley, 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." [7] 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 forefront of entertainment.[8] This conspiracy theory entertainment functions as roux in the gumbo of hip hop counterknowledge.

Circulating in hip hop culture has been the fear 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.[9] 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

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[7] "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.

[8] 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.

[9] 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.

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 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 predicable 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 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 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 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.[10] 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 gleamed 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.

[10] 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."

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, HAARP 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.

5.2 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 lace-less sneakers worn by former inmates. In the 1990s, the signature "sagging" pants copied the 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 is also 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."[11] 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 (see chapter 3) and to turn black girls into lesbians (97).

Rapper Prodigy (of Mobb Deep) has become hip hop's premiere "conspiracy theory scholar" while serving a three year prison term for gun possession. 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

[11] 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.

> 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, 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 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 B.C) 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, Stephen 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, Jim Crow segregation—as well as the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments on unknowing black men—are real historical racial atrocities. Even with an 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. But the new racism, in an era of colorblind tolerance, is much more difficult to mobilize against than legal slavery or the slaughter of indigenous people. Most Americans would, however, agitate against child molestation and cannibalism. By connecting historical insistences of racial oppression to racialized conspiracy theories, Prodigy attempts to activate black collective memories while playing on white guilt.

5.3 Black Books and Street Literature

Many of these ideas circulate via black book stores and street vendors. As Anthropologist Maisha 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, Mitch 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 conspiracy theory, independent Afrocentric scholarship, and the gritty hip hop fiction known as

"street lit" or "ghetto lit." On street corners, canonic texts such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or Alex Haley's *Roots* are sold alongside the fictional Willie Lynch Papers. 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 street 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, and 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.

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 (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 (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 hoppas" are required to eat water-based soup every seven days (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). Alah'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; Alah, 2009b: 153-155).

5.4 Five Percent Ideology

The Nations of Gods and Earth (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 Percenter culture in rap music, Felicia 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 on 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 Jeffery 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 indentified 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).[12] 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."

[12] 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.

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 Revelationary, 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 positive 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.

6. Discussion & Conclusion

Through the case study of conspiracy theories, this paper has explored the construction of hip hop knowledge. Centered on the theorization of counterknowledge, racial paranoia, and the cultic milieu, I have attempted to complicate previous descriptions of hip hop culture. The analysis builds on a growing literature that describes hip hop as an oppositional culture. Here, I echo these observations, as the exploration of conspiracy theory shows how hip hop challenges

political correctness and white dominated knowledge industries. The racialization of well-known conspiracy theory is often a way for hip hoppers to explain and challenge continuing race-class disadvantage. The fanciful tales of clandestine plots and secret societies that circulate in the culture are meant to be disruptive to the mainstream public discourse on the state of race.

The paper was rooted in the specifics of hip hop culture, but has implications on how we might rethink the role of the conspiratorial in the wider black community. As research has shown, large numbers of black people seem to buy into these ideas. Likely, aspects of hip hop culture reviewed in this article reflect and reinforce this kind of thinking. Based on my reading of hip hop conspiracy theory, one might wonder if what is really being expressed is a more nuanced political stance. Echoing both Cheryl Keyes and John Jackson, more attention might be paid to how the conspiratorial works to preserve group cohesion and to mobilize against increasingly complex social problems that impact black communities. The discussion of hip hop's reliance on conspiracy entertainment and news media should also caution against filtering the situation through the lens of "black exceptionalism." As the analysis implicated, television, movies, books, and news-entertainment are saturated with paranoia. Hip Hoppers appear to be appropriating this material, racializing it, and then recasting it to speak about real social problems. Hip Hop conspiracy 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 because the powers-that-be don't care.

This paper also speaks to the need for researchers to remember, as pioneers Tricia Rose and Robin Kelley have stated, that hip hop is primarily an entertainment culture. This does not

mean that it is politically or socially meaningless, as John McWhorter suggests; nor does it negate the potentially harmful norms that many, including self-proclaimed fans, ascribe to the culture. As shown, one troublesome aspect of the conspiracy theory discourse is the flagrant anti-gay and homophobic rhetoric. That hip hop chooses 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.

Recognition of the hybridist quality of hip hop as social discourse and entertainment might cause critics to consider how themes of violence, heterosexism, or conspicuous consumption—like conspiracy theories--may be part of the counterknowledge construction of entertaining and shocking all, while subverting popular discourse. Hip Hop's in-group members might be able to "decode" or "feel something" that eludes simplistic interpretations. To the extent that hip hop really reflects Afro-diasporic cultural sensibilities, or black oral and literary traditions, attention should be given to the dualistic or tripartite meanings of these cultural expressions beyond the literal.

Researchers and fans claim that hip hop is a culture, beyond rap music. In this spirit, the paper was intentionally focused on hip hop culture and knowledge broadly. It is not clear in the existing literature how prevalent conspiracy theory is in the music. Therefore, systematic content analysis of these themes is still needed. I expect that future researchers will find these themes concentrated in the lyrics of more "political," "socially conscious" rappers, though I would expect that "hardcore" rappers who embrace street and prison knowledge also espouse these beliefs. Given the scope of this paper, these questions must be left for others to answer.

The analysis of conspiracy theory as part of the larger cultic construction of hip hop knowledge, per Colin Campbell's concept, raises several important points for future research. Hip Hop is often invoked interchangeably with "black culture," or shorthand for black youth culture. Likewise, hip hop is often described as a coherent, neat set of identities or worldview. The image of hip hop as the cultic milieu challenges simplistic notions of black culture and/or hip hop. Hip Hop as an isolated discursive space is a miscategorization, as I have shown, because it intermingles with popular culture, prison culture, "black books" subculture, and Five Percent religion. 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 manages to survive despite the yearly declarations of its demise. By way of multiple information sources and influences from the margins and popular imagination, hip hop maintains it appeal.

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