Blackness in the absence of blackness: white appropriations of Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in Newcastle upon Tyne - explaining a cultural shift

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Blackness in the Absence of Blackness: White Appropriations of Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in Newcastle upon Tyne - Explaining a Cultural Shift

by

Andrew Laidlaw

A Doctoral Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of
Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

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ABSTRACT

In this study I am concerned to discover how and why local youth in Newcastle upon Tyne are appropriating black culture, in the absence of a local black population to act as a reference guide. In doing so, I provide a new approach to the analysis and interpretation of white identity in a globalised world. Central to this approach is the focus on ‘new ethnicities’ where the local is fused with the global in order to create identities free of the radical underpinning of ‘whiteness’ and ‘Englishness’. Thus, I argue, these identities are truly hybrid in nature, and can neither be labelled ‘white’, or ‘black’, as they are in equal parts influenced by Geordie and African-American cultures. I highlight this further by showing that this syncretisation and blending of cultures has been occurring in the North East of England for over forty years. The study is divided into two parts. The first begins with a substantive literature review of critical reflections on white appropriations. I then define hip-hop and rap, trace their origins, and beyond that analyse their antecedents. I also take a critical look at my location of study in terms of its social deprivation and struggle with post-industrialism, and introduce the techniques behind my fieldwork. In the second part I present an extended ethnography. During the course of four separate fieldwork chapters, I consider varying aspects behind these white appropriations, in terms of local sensibilities and cultural affiliations, cultural isolation and long distance black bonding, the denial of race and the need for authenticity, in the context of this specific urban setting. The thesis concludes with a summary of the information gleaning from my fieldwork.
Thanks to my supervisor, Professor Michael Pickering, for all of his help and support during the preparation of this thesis. Thanks also to my parents for their love and encouragement and to Tina for her support and understanding. Finally, thank you to the many individuals that participated in my fieldwork without whose co-operation much of this thesis would have been impossible.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

BLACKNESS IN THE ABSENCE OF BLACKNESS

Hip-hop culture and rap music have firmly made the transition from the African-American ghetto to the white suburbs. They have transcended geographical as well as ethnic boundaries, so much so that predominantly white areas, such as Newcastle upon Tyne, have their own local appropriations of the art form. Within this study, I intend to reveal the reasons why white youth have adopted a lifestyle which is alien to their traditional local culture. I intend to examine how and why local white youth are appropriating black music and culture beyond the proximity of a local black population who could act as an immediate reference guide. I will explore, amongst other things, the influence of social conditions and the mass media, the impact of ‘whiteness’ and the perception of white appropriations by those involved. The focus is very much on the respondents’ identity formation and lifestyle rituals.

In this chapter, I will introduce the main themes of my study with an initial overview of black and white relations, moving on to my theoretical framework, geographical area of study and specific research questions. A brief summary of my methodology is also included. Within the overall structure of the thesis my work is conducted on two fronts. The first consists of a substantial review of existing literature, which allows me to analyse and develop the main themes of my argument and locate a relevant theoretical framework. The second is the fieldwork, where focus groups, depth interviews, and participant observation will be utilised. From these, I will be in a strong position to analyse data (in a manner underpinned by my theoretical framework) that provides me with the answers to my research questions.

The dangers of essentialising hip-hop as an exclusively ‘black’ cultural form are clear when one considers the wealth of hip-hop scenes across the globe and the vast numbers of non-black fans and practitioners of the art form. It is clear that the allure of hip-hop is by no means limited to those connected with the African diaspora. Gilroy takes this view further, arguing that black culture has become the primary influence on global popular culture. He claims that the same forces that created the ‘black Atlantic’ (African diaspora) have
“themselves developed and now articulate its myriad forms into a system of global communications constituted by flows” (Gilroy, 1993: 80). Hip-hop can therefore be seen as a black cultural expression that is “originally but no longer the exclusive property of blacks dispersed within the black Atlantic world” (ibid: 3). The commercial potential of rap music, married with its aesthetic malleability, has resulted in a vast growth in its popularity, spreading its seeds across the planet. When we speak of hip-hop culture “we are also referencing hip-hop specific language, body language, fashion, style, sensibility and worldview” whose emergence in a global information age “is a major variable that sets it apart, vastly increasing its capacity to reach beyond anything the world has ever seen” (Kitwana, 2005: xii)

I intend to cover an area which has previously had very little research centred upon it. ‘White’ responses to rap have been relatively neglected in popular music studies, although a token study has been offered by Andy Bennett (1999b). Whilst ‘white’ British appropriations of other forms of black music (such as jazz, blues and soul) have been well documented in sociological work (Hebdige, 1987 and Jones, 1988), this has not been the case for the relatively ‘new’ form of rap music. My intention is to ascertain how the hip-hop movement has affected young white hip-hop consumers in Newcastle upon Tyne, England (which has been chosen because of its closeness to my roots, because of my knowledge of the local scene and more importantly, because it is over 90% white) (Bennett, 2001). The main analytical focus is on those who have been influenced and why. I am in effect covering very much new ground with this project as academic literature on hip-hop is extremely sparse, which is surprising as rap music is now (from originally being largely ignored by the ‘masses’), “mass-produced popular culture” (Lynch and Krzycki, 1998: 328) and ‘glocal’ in its application (Robertson, 1995). “One of the most potent, culturally sensitive tools in working with youth that has not been systematically explored is rap music” (Tyson, 2002: 134).

The main aim of this project is to analyse the reasons behind these white appropriations in a predominantly white area. Social and political conditions are almost certainly going to be very different for a middle-class white youth and a working-class black youth. Their financial status and sense of citizenship would be radically divergent. With this backdrop in mind, investigating the reasons behind white appropriations is an exciting prospect. The study has a set of key objectives designed to facilitate this aim. They are: 1) provide an adequate theoretical framework for interpreting these white appropriations; 2) provide an ethnographic
study of white, young, British hip-hop consumers in an almost entirely white area, and a detailed analysis of relevant media and academic interpretations; 3) analyse the implications these white appropriations have for social conflict, identity and youth citizenship.

My project will be influenced by the themes of lifestyle and consumption. Hip-hop for the people that I am interested in is a way of life, and the art form itself is subject to mass consumption. The focus on white appropriations will be heavily based on the cultural identities of the participants involved. This research project, as mentioned, seeks to provide a detailed analysis of ‘white’ appropriations of hip-hop culture in Newcastle. I hope to ascertain how far this culture has affected the behaviour, values and attitudes of white youth, and to find out the causes behind this. I will also look at questions of ‘whiteness’, authenticity, and how ‘white’ appropriations are received within the wider local community. To obtain this data, an extensive literature review along with three principal methods of ethnographic research will be used as briefly mentioned at the start: semi-structured interviews, participant observation and focus groups. These will be used with groups of young people who are avid consumers of rap music, and whose identities are constructed in relation to this art form. My methodology will be discussed in greater detail further on in this chapter.

Various commentators (Rose, 1994; Guevara, 1995; Light, 1992 and Tate, 2003) defend the inherent ‘blackness’ of hip-hop. They make it clear that white involvement is somehow unscrupulous and has been responsible for turning hip-hop into a disposable form of entertainment, therefore radically diluting and deflecting its key cultural forces. Being openly into hip-hop does not sit well with other white people, who view this overt affiliation as disrespectful (to their own culture that is) and ‘fake’. A term that is still consistently used is ‘wigger’, meaning ‘white nigger’ or wanting ‘to be black’ (Jones, 1988; Bennett, 1999b; and Rose, 1994). The dangerous aura and forthright expression associated with many black rappers (most commonly witnessed in ‘gangsta rap’) is seen as ‘exotic’ by suburban white listeners (Dyson, 1996), this voyeuristic pleasure of black cultural imagery being deemed as negative and contrived (Mitchell, 1996). William Wimsatt, author of Bomb The Suburbs, which was first published in 1994, has said, and this could be applied to a place like Newcastle: “I’m horrified by the aspect of the white hip-hop thing where you can be a white hard core hip-hop kid and not know a single black person. Their whole social circle is white. Their favourite rappers are white, and they’re trying to put out their own CDs, and so on. This
is shockingly and violently decontextualized from where hip-hop came and from what it’s about” (cited Kiwana, 2005: 7). The peculiar thing is that Wimsatt is a white man himself who is a graffiti writer at heart. He does not recognise any irony in his critique.

The noun ‘wigger’ has wholly negative connotations. It has a terminological counterpart in contemporary African-American culture which is, by contrast, wholly positive. In America, the term ‘nigga’ with an ‘a’ has been used so often that any racist connotations associated with this word are more or less forgotten among the current generation, whereas previous generations strongly objected to its usage in the old ‘er’ spelling. Light-skinned Latino rappers now go on record and use this term (which is a term of endearment, like the usage of ‘brotha’ in the 1970s) and even a select number of white people have been using it in the presence of young black men who don’t object (Kitwana, 2005). The word is not of any great consequence for the current crop of hip-hoppers. Although no white rapper has gone on record and said it as yet, they have been referred to as ‘my nigga’ when collaborating with black artists.

It is apparent that my topic is still a controversial, contentious and highly contemporary topic, and the study will delve further into the controversy surrounding ‘white’ hip-hop, as well as analysing the other issues I have referred to above. The project is centrally concerned with how existing white hip-hop consumers relate to an essentially black, urban art-form in a white locality, and the way in which these appropriations are perceived by the black hip-hop fraternity, academic commentators and the media.

As mentioned, hip-hop culture in general, let alone in the UK, let alone in Newcastle, is an under-researched subject. Though other white appropriations of black cultural forms in the UK (such as ska and reggae) have been sparsely investigated before, these have tended to take place in areas where there is already a black population to speak of. Newcastle is a unique site for examining the appropriation of black music and culture. Andy Bennett (1999b) did examine hip-hop in Newcastle (the only study to do this apart from mine - Anoop Nayak’s (2003) more recent effort was not hip-hop specific), but there are a number of glaring shortcomings in his work. Although this is useful as a starting point (more because it is the only other example), it must be said that it is in many ways flawed; added to which, the vast changes in the city and local hip-hop scene have rendered it somewhat out of date. The data that he amassed on hip-hop originally appeared within only a single chapter in his PhD
thesis (Bennett, 1996), the other fieldwork chapters being dedicated to other forms of music such as bhangra and electronic dance. Moreover, it dates all the way back to 1995, when it was first collected.

The central figure for his research was a Newcastle spoken-word poet named Ferank, still around the city today. To describe him as a ‘rapper’ is extremely tenuous to say the least, so Bennett’s subsequent reliance on him for information on the hip-hop scene immediately casts doubt on his findings. Though there are a number of interesting revelations in his work, and he should be applauded for being the first and only to contribute to the study of hip-hop in the North East (since parts of it remain useful), it can also be criticised for its highly truncated nature: a journal article that spans 21 pages. Bennett’s PhD work (ibid) is almost identical, word for word, to that which later appeared in the journal I have referred to, and so the same criticism can be levelled at this also, making his study at best a cursory glance at local hip-hop culture. Bennett’s work is a start, but a rudimentary one. In addition, the small independent record shop, ‘Groove’, where he gets the majority of his data from, doesn’t actually exist anymore, and I have personally never heard of it; the same applies to the place of his participant observation, ‘Mac’s Bar’. There is a possibility Bennett is using pseudonyms for these venues, although there is no acknowledgement of this.

What I find peculiar is that Bennett professes to have conducted “around twenty ‘one to one’ interviews with local hip-hoppers and then focus groups consisting of six to eight people” and to have attended a “dozen weekly ‘hip-hop’ nights held in a bar in the centre of Newcastle” (Bennett, 1999b: 7). Quite impressive stuff to have that amount of data in a 21 page journal article, more so when he actually doesn’t even talk about methodology until page 7, or discuss his findings until page 10. Similarly, the PhD thesis chapter (1996), which as mentioned later formed the aforementioned journal article, discusses the local hip-hop scene for only 12 pages. Apart from a few hip-hoppers with their names withheld, Bennett’s sole focus is on the dialogue in the ‘Groove’ record shop and his depth interview with the aforementioned Ferank. So for all of Bennett’s assumed fieldwork, little of it is used at all, and seems altogether to have been fruitless; he simply relies on the same fall backs in the 10 or so pages in which he talks directly about the scene. Perhaps because of the time that has since passed, or because Bennett changed personal names for ethical reasons (though he does not indicate this as such and doesn’t do so with the example of Ferank) I can find no record of either ‘Mac’s Bar’ or ‘Groove’ record shop on the Internet, although, as mentioned,
Bennett’s original data was collected in 1995, at a time which preceded common usage of the Internet.

Bennett’s work is highly unrepresentative of the real hip-hop scene in Newcastle (even at the time). He talks big on data, but comes up with nothing more than a few pages of quotes. The one time he actually does try to include a local ‘name’ he picks a spoken word poet instead of a rapper. Bennett seems oblivious to the difference, calmly referring to Ferank as a ‘rapper’. In contrast, I intend to offer a far more up-to-date, far more detailed and valid examination of hip-hop in Newcastle.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My theoretical framework will draw on the cultural studies terrain underpinned by Les Back’s (1996) concept of ‘new ethnicities’. My focus will be upon an interpretation of the motivations and beliefs behind the ‘hip-hoppers’ themselves. My work will look in depth at both meaning and causality. I will analyse the subjective values of the individual subculturalists via an empirical approach and hope to go behind the level of the individual to the collective forces that propel the actor (Ritzer, 1981). Additionally, the use of ‘lifestyle’ theory will enable me to examine patterns of consumption and the use of material and symbolic goods that these young white hip-hop fans use. Of equal influence will be some questions of what is perceived as being ‘authentic’ productions/reproductions of ‘true hip-hop culture’ by different groups in Newcastle.

The only classical sociological theorist to turn his attention to defining ethnicity, Max Weber, highlighted the nature of its use in the early 20th Century. Weber (1968) identified the change toward a more subjective notion of ethnic groups. In his definition, although blood ties are ethnic ties, a belief in common ancestry is equally binding. This marked a crucial shift in the usage of the word, and a move toward the view that self-definition and shared culture are crucial factors in defining ethnic groups. Today, most modern commentators demonstrate a trend toward offering a combination of a shared culture, history, common practice, or ancestry as the basis of ethnicity. This has clear implications for (and indeed forms the basis of) any investigation into ‘new ethnicities’. Writers have wondered whether an ethnic group
can be formed on the basis of, for example, a shared culture alone, despite the lack of shared heritage and ancestry. It is suggested that if this is the case, then it may be possible to have something of a dual or hybrid ethnicity. Stuart Hall was one of the first to discuss this new conception of ethnicity, seeing it as “a new cultural politics that engages rather than suppresses difference and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities” (Hall, 1992: 257). This notion of ethnicity, split from its historical bedfellows ‘nation’ and ‘race’, is a far more fluid and subjective concept.

One ethnographic study that develops this concept of ‘new ethnicities’, and is thus central to my theoretical framework, is Les Back’s 1996 work *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture*. Back is interested in racism and multicultural values in the lives of youths on two estates in south London, Southgate and Riverview. After exploring racism amongst young people in these areas, Back goes on to explore race identification and alliance among the youth of Southgate. He presents a fascinating exchange and re-working of ethnicity and culture. The majority of white youths reject what they see as the rigidity and connotations of English culture and ‘Englishness’, and Back finds many of them turning to appropriated forms of blackness as an alternative. This overlapping of cultures has resulted, argues Back, in new cultures that cannot be defined as solely white or black. Transcending racism and traditional racial boundaries, these youths are constantly creating new cultural forms that are, in many ways, black *and* white. Back moves on to explore the ways in which the younger residents of Riverview find an unwillingness to use or recognise the concept of ‘race’, with young people themselves often claiming it is “out of order” to talk about people’s colour (Back, 1996: 51). This rejection of ‘race’ allows these young people to draw upon and appropriate a wide range of black cultural resources (such as black vernacular).

Back then turns away from the ‘local’ in an attempt to put the processes involved into an international context. He draws upon data that is rich with ethnographic examples of the local mixing with international traditions and finds musical cultures from countries related to the African diaspora becoming embedded in new sites and infused with the existing culture. In this way Back demonstrates the main points of his research: culture is both embedded and mobile, and the new hybrid cultures spawned are simultaneously local, multinational and transcultural, creating new cultures or ‘new ethnicities’, crossing race and class lines. This is a mode of thinking I seek to support in my examination of hip-hop culture in Newcastle. The fact that the city is 90.5% white (Neighbourhood Statistics, 2005) with its large neighbour
Gateshead across the river Tyne having a 96.7% white population (ibid), and thus next to no black community to feed off, culturally speaking, means my work should be unique and can bring something new to cultural sociology. I will seek to answer the question of whether Back’s ‘new ethnicities’, that incorporate afrodiasporic identities, can be created in the absence of a strong black cultural presence. I would argue that this has indeed taken place, and that it has happened through the arrival in Newcastle of one of the most successful cultural globetrotters of the late 20th century, hip-hop culture. The hypothesis being that Newcastle upon Tyne is a site of overlapping cultures, albeit ones that are directly taken from the media.

As hip-hop culture mixes with local culture and the lifestyle surrounding the music is localised, people of all backgrounds are constructing new identities, still specifically ‘hip-hop’, but inevitably reflecting their region and background. It is these new identities that are my concern theoretically, along with looking at the collective forces behind individual consumption. I will be in a position to examine whether the youth of Newcastle upon Tyne are using the afrodiasporic roots and culture of rap music (along with local influences) to construct ‘new ethnicities’. It is this at once local and global characteristic of hip-hop that has led commentators such as Roland Robertson (1995) to employ the term ‘glocal’ to designate the asymmetric forms of interaction between a specific location and wider, internationalized processes. In this case, the global processes of rap music are assimilated by local youths in Newcastle. By this, it is meant that rap’s core text is being reworked, it is “customised, souped up, or retrofitted into local relevance” (Schwartz, 1999: 362). This ‘glocality’ of hip-hop is central to the proposed ‘new ethnicities’ that I argue are prevalent amongst the youths that subscribe to the hip-hop lifestyle in Newcastle upon Tyne. Thus, a collective identity defined by hip-hop is central to my proposed ‘new ethnicity’. This concept enables me to examine whether complex hybrid cultural and ethnic forms are being created through this culture. As Newcastle is such a small scene, there is something of a ‘hip-hop community’ spirit that binds the participants together like glue, and there is an argument for fans and artists alike to be assigned to a culturally hybridised ethnic group where Geordie culture has met afrodiasporic culture. It will be interesting to find out if this framework holds true and if the lines between white and black are blurred to such an extent that a new ethnicity is created.

My analysis is of particular relevance as it is covering new ground on a highly contemporary and contentious issue. The art form that I will be looking at is now the best selling musical
form in the world, surpassing the previous top-selling music format, country music (Farley, 1999). Thus, it is surprising that there has been very sparse literature on white appropriations of hip-hop in the UK, whereas there is a comparative abundance on black appropriations eg. Oliver (1990) and Marks (1990). My research will hopefully go some way to redressing the imbalance created by overlooking white participation, as well as shedding light on the subject itself. The topic intersects with four hugely significant contemporary discourses, that of ‘youth’, ‘lifestyle’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘consumption’. It will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of all, in relation to the ‘white’ experience of hip-hop participation. This area of research is truly deserving of additional empirical study. This research will be useful to academics, city councils, the cultural and music industry, marketing agencies, casual observers of hip-hop culture, urban/black music in general, and more, as I will be exploring in depth the dual themes of ‘lifestyle and consumption’ and ‘ethnicity and identity’. This direction is more or less self-explanatory, as hip-hop culture started out as a culture for young black people, and is, as mentioned, a lifestyle for its followers, while the musical (‘rap’) aspect of the culture is the biggest selling musical style in the world. The area of white appropriation in hip-hop is extremely contemporary, with very little written about it, considering the degree of white participation existing.

NEWCASTLE HIP-HOP: FACTS, IDEOLOGIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

The mass media have allowed black music and culture to extend into predominantly white only areas, and often form the basis for the sole point of contact with this ‘blackness’. Newcastle is an area which follows in this vein, the media creating the platform for any white appropriation to exist, as without its influx there would be no exposure, due to the area having an insignificant 1.1% ‘black or black British’ ethnic population out of 269,600 people in total (Neighbourhood Statistics, 2005), this percentage being the smallest out of all ethnic groups present. In neighbouring Gateshead, the ‘black or black British’ ethnic group makes up only 0.6% of a population totalling 190,400 (ibid), again, being the smallest ethnic group present. Most hip-hop kids are “taking from popular culture what they find useful, fashioning it to local needs, claiming it as their own and in the process placing their own stamp on it” (Kitwana, 2005: 3). Radio, TV, the Internet and the printed media are all consumed on a large
scale by the majority of fans in order to fill the void left by an otherwise culturally isolated locality.

The inherent ‘otherness’ of black youth culture, resplendent in its ability to evoke liberating pleasure, continues to impact upon young whites. Oppositional values derived from a relatively alien world have helped to cultivate and drive a symbolism of rebellion into otherwise mundane lives. Through an often contrived way, a resonance is found within the music that is then applied to individual circumstances. In relation to the local hip-hop scene in Newcastle, resistance is harnessed against the local ‘towny’ population, as opposed to any resistance against a socially and materially dominant culture (as would befit a Marxist based framework). Locals referring to members of this scene as ‘wiggers’ only serves to further enhance this almost ethnic minority mind set (closely related to my framework on ‘new ethnicities’).

Hip-hoppers, like most subculturalists, are adept at defining themselves against ‘oppositional’ outsiders. These ‘others’ are deemed to be not authentic in any way and so are used as a yardstick to attest to individual authenticity. A common perception is that only a select few understand the dynamics of hip-hop culture, hence increasing the feeling of solidarity within the scene. To get behind the reasons for an almost deliberate alienation, in a city with no hip-hop precedent, is most interesting. In London, for example, rap music has been quite prevalent since the early 80s, and is now at the forefront of their ‘urban’ musical output. Newcastle is, in itself, a somewhat isolated area. Cities like Sunderland and Middlesbrough and the surrounding ex-mining towns all follow the same mould but in even smaller measures (and so Newcastle is the only place to get a ‘hip-hop fix’ for these surrounding areas) before Leeds is reached approximately 90 miles south or Edinburgh approximately 120 miles north. No other hip-hop scene in the UK is as isolated in terms of geographical location or lack of ethnic diversity.

The consumption of hip-hop creates unique leisure spaces, alternative to the societal ‘norm’ of the local area, because of an engagement with black cultural produce. The unique make-up of hip-hop cultures styles, images and values enable those who follow it to live their lives by a set protocol, immersing themselves entirely. As a result of this extreme attachment, the spaces constructed within hip-hop are both different and potentially life changing. It is not just the construction of different spaces, but the construction of spaces differently (Forman,
Some people regard hip-hop as having the ability to influence and change one’s ‘mind state’. The abject need to want to be ‘different’, in an area that is contemporarily based on dance music culture, certainly needs further exploration.

The educative process involved in hip-hop culture is unique, containing various historical conditions (such as knowledge of important landmark albums) and social procedures (such as language and dress) that the participant is accountable to. Ultimately, the deep rooted nature of hip-hop’s identity formation is unlike that which exists in many other music-related fan cultures. Krims (2000) reasons that rap music fans bring an unparalleled degree of involvement and attachment to the music, and will (often blindly) defend their favourite artist or album’s authenticity to an unprecedented scale. My personal experience has also shown me that anyone, from artist to casual consumer, will go to great pains to prove and verify their own individual integrity and authenticity, from their degree of involvement to length of participation. The most important facet appears to be to have ‘knowledge’ of the culture itself, as ‘knowledge’ goes a great way to proving authenticity which is then coupled in with appreciation and respect or ‘props’. The term ‘4 real’, ‘to be real’, has often been used to reflect such behaviour. One way to ‘be real’ is to be distanced from commercialism (ironically the reason for many fans initial participation).

“A number of other local hip-hop enthusiasts firmly reject the notion that hip-hop can be understood only in terms of its African-American context and attempt to rework it as a platform for the expression of issues which relate more directly to the day to day experiences of white working class youth” (Bennett, 1999b: 10). As Bennett has shown, there is a core of hip-hop fans in Newcastle who, far from embracing the black ‘authentic’ American nature of hip-hop, revel in their independence from it. This is a slight contradiction in terms, for to be deemed ‘authentic’ a strong element of hip-hop’s history is required within this scene, as just mentioned, yet at every opportunity attempts to distance themselves away from it are made by various quarters. Pride is overblown due to the comparatively small size of the city and its burgeoning but minute hip-hop scene is the only one available, so it is often trapped in its own comfort zone, usually to its detriment. Indeed, unfamiliar faces at certain venues are regularly viewed with caution. Local sensibilities and accents are incorporated into the music and often the US scene (which obviously gave birth to the whole culture) is mocked, and this is most evident when UK acts adopt mid-Atlantic accents, which is akin to blasphemy for these people. The contradictory nature of this attitude, both embracing and rejecting
American influence at leisure, along with such behaviour as deliberately dressing and acting as black American artists appear to (as portrayed by the media and the recording industry), yet wanting to be fiercely independent at the same time, certainly warrants further discussion. A conflict is prevalent between respecting the American side of the culture on the one hand and craving individuality on the other.

Refusing to recognise the status of ‘race’ is a common theme in the area, with great emphasis on the irrelevancy of skin pigmentation. This is in effect denying ‘whiteness’ (again related to the framework on ‘new ethnicities’). They have forged an identity by drawing attention to parallel forms of ethnicity or by pointing to ‘equivalent’ modes of oppression based on class or gender. A well-used tactic is to substitute colour for a social class issue. I have found a constant denial that ‘racial’ differentiation is relevant or meaningful. There is a strong desire to banish ‘racial things’ because of their potentially divisive nature (Back, 1996). So even though there is a sense of fierce independence, local sensibilities are as far as it goes: this attitude stops well short of declaring ‘whiteness’, or even being remotely proud of the fact in most cases. To further dampen down the ‘towny’ slur of ‘wigger’, the response is that there is ‘no such thing as acting black’. This complete disassociation with race-related issues allows black association to be kept open: “The rejection of racism and the denial of the importance of race often opens black cultural symbols to white appropriation. What results is an identification with black people and black symbols” (Back, 1996: 132). ‘Englishness’ and ‘whiteness’ as appropriate identities are rejected in favour “of an encoded identification with blackness and black people” (Back, 1996: 135). ‘Whiteness’ is a concept that is firmly rejected by the scene in general. To be categorised within racial boundaries cuts off the opportunity to forge black-based identities, as mentioned. Colour is denied as being an issue throughout my fieldwork; instead the participants choose to focus on class-based modes of oppression to form parallel links with their black counterparts both in the UK and across the Atlantic. The potentially divisive nature of race is a thorny issue, and so responses such as ‘I don’t think it matters’, and ‘it’s only a skin colour’, are commonplace. If black styles are to be appropriated, then identity formation must be closely related to the style that is to be appropriated. Young whites are searching for a notion of social identity free from the ideological underpinning of a radicalised definition of ‘Englishness’, with ‘blackness’ utilised as a temporary solution. This is displayed clearly in the ‘hip-hop for all’ ethos, yet at the same time, within the scene itself, it is far from being open to all as I will show. A case of having one’s cake and eating it too.
Yet another contradiction now arises. As I have shown, any potential division due to race is disregarded; however, as mentioned, this is simply to allow black symbols to be kept open for appropriation. This tactic is used by members of the scene for merely selfish reasons, to keep themselves ‘relevant’. However, a direct contradiction lies in the inherent defence of hip-hop’s ‘blackness’ which is in stark contrast to the denial of race as an issue. But once again, it is because of selfish reasons that this comes about. “At the centre of this scene a hardcore of hip-hop enthusiasts share the belief that their intimate understanding of hip-hop’s essential ‘blackness’ as the key to its relevance for the white working class experience guarantees them a form of aesthetic supremacy over other local white hip-hop fans who, according to this group, have no such understanding and thus no authentic claim to the title ‘hip-hopper’ (Bennett, 1999b: 10). Yet again, self-centred reasons, as Bennett stresses, could be the reason for this defence of blackness (to give them greater ‘knowledge’ and supremacy over ‘lesser’ hip-hop fans), rather than some kind of noble gesture to its roots. The local hip-hop scene within Newcastle facilitates a vastly specialised set of responses to the inherent ‘black’ characteristics in hip-hop style. Bennett (ibid) asserts that this is an attempt to become the symbolic embodiment of ‘blackness’ within the city.

Thus, local rappers in Newcastle play the role of the minority (as mentioned earlier). Living in a predominantly white area makes it harder to practice the little nuances inherent within hip-hop as there is little interest and support, and with geographical isolation comes an increase in local hostility. As referred to earlier, local hip-hop fans revel in this exclusivity, so a worst case scenario would be for everybody to embrace hip-hop culture, as by fighting their ‘corner’ it makes them feel somewhat more connected with the oppositional music from the US streets. Something they pick and choose from at will.

Social class does have a bearing, in the sense that an imaginary shared affinity is developed with inner-city America. Although conditions are very different, white youth within Newcastle have had no problems in relating American urban tales to their own existence. For many participants, being working class is basically the same in the US and UK respectively. Somewhat paradoxically, this involves a close affiliation with local territory, and people from Newcastle’s scene are generally fiercely proud of their roots, perhaps as it is now in vogue to be the ‘have not’s’ (Vanilla Ice was but one white rapper who faked poverty as a way of obtaining ‘authenticity’). It is apparent that the white youth of Newcastle empathise with American rap, but this is based on an assumed connection that does not really exist. Claims
that rap ‘talks about everyday things’, and that ‘hip-hop is the voice of our generation’ are commonplace amongst white youth within Newcastle. These claims are purely romanticised notions of a close relationship with the American ghetto. Even in the example of UK rap, the same still applies. As the majority of UK rap emerges from inner city London, notions of affinity with the creole-influenced twang of a London rapper are as far-fetched as with a rapper in the USA.

The ability to evoke and produce certain emotions within white youth forms the basis of rap’s inherent appeal. It connects on many levels, and provides a platform for feelings to be expressed, and for lyrics to be applied to individual situations and towards culturally relevant issues (Jones, 1988; Forman, 2002). A rap vocal is poetic, but typically it emanates from everyday life. Participants are also drawn to the language itself; it’s a language they want to be part of. Rap *is* in the most part life music, hip-hop is a way of life followed to various extremes. It is the foundation on which many frames of references are built upon within the scene in Newcastle, no matter how much protestation there is surrounding independence from America or even rap from the large multicultural cities in the UK. Rap music, for the people involved, has thus become the soundtrack for their everyday lives. People adapt the genre to their own regional linguistic dialects and have turned the themes toward locally culturally relevant issues (Forman, 2002).

There are numerous reasons why white people in Newcastle are involved in hip-hop culture and rap music. The fact that there is no notable black population in Newcastle has ensured that a certain group of local youth has aspired to become the symbolic embodiment of black hip-hop sensibility in the city. To some extent, these consumers are filling a cultural gap. As mentioned earlier, hip-hop is assumed to relate to everyday life, and the voice of the working class, no matter where it is, still applies (in an imaginary way) to them. The perceived ignorance of the local community to white appropriations has led alienation to be something of a commodity played with by these white youth, alienation being attractive, as they are different, but not subordinated. The individual authenticity that is essential to hip-hop is also an attractive concept to youth looking to build self-esteem and a positive identity, as ‘knowledge’ is such an important concept within hip-hop circles. Anyone who studies the culture sufficiently will earn that craved respect, which is an attractive concept for participants. Hip-hop affiliation is also a distinct badge of exclusivity, a way of distinguishing the individual from the norm, in terms of style, music sensibility, and attitude. Newcastle’s
club culture is of the utmost importance for generating local interest in urban music, and by hosting events such as ‘freestyle’ tournaments, keeping that interest going. Hip-hop can also be used as a form of glamorous escapism, full of money, women, and glitz, and as a form of reaffirming masculinity via hip-hop’s ‘dangerous’ element, through imagining life ‘on the edge’. Finally, the power of the mass media is one of the central elements in encouraging local white participation in Newcastle. Hip-hop culture is accessible at a fingertip; it has become a smartly produced package just waiting for individual consumption. This rejection of race and racism, as well as the adoption of African-American dress-codes and language, does demonstrate a shift toward a truly hybrid identity, both afrodiasporic and Geordie.

**SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

What is the relationship between social conditions in Newcastle and the likelihood of being a ‘white’ hip-hop fan?
- To what extent is it possible that effects of locality (i.e. cultural/geographical isolation and regional solidarity/identity) and family background (i.e. social class) have a positive effect on youth becoming involved in hip-hop culture? By involvement, I am referring to anything ranging from being a fan to an artist, producer, radio/club DJ, journalist or club promoter.

What is ‘whiteness’ and how does this socially ascribed/ ‘ethnic’ category reflect itself within Newcastle’s hip-hop culture?
- To go behind white appropriations of a black art-form I must first get to grips with the concept of being ‘white’, and how important/relevant it is to the respondents themselves. I want to find out if their colour is an issue and if it matters or has any significant cultural limitations to their participation. Can white youth ever fully relate to an imported alien culture?

How are white appropriations of hip-hop culture received within the black ‘urban music’ (music of black origin) community?
- Is this viewed as beneficial? Or is it seen as a move to steal away another form of black culture? I will attempt to gain these views by a substantive referral to existing
literature from academics and journalists alike who are involved in analysis of the culture.

What are the collective factors that encourage and promote white hip-hop participation in Newcastle?

- Influences such as the importance of socialising, the media, glamorous escapism, wanting to be different/a sense of alienation, and dress, amongst others, will be analysed.

Just how important is authenticity within hip-hop?

- I will look at the levels of authenticity desired by local white youth involved in Newcastle’s hip-hop scene, and any issues surrounding attaining such status. Problems experienced by proving this authenticity will also be analysed. I intend to reveal incidences of ‘reflected racism’ from people of their own ethnicity, examples of these people being regarded as ‘fakers’ from others involved in the culture, examples of press criticisms etc. This all equates to questions of authenticity, ‘4 Real’.

Is there a longitudinal connection between the reasons of involvement in black music over the last four decades in Newcastle?

- I will pay specific attention to the blues scene of the 1960s and the contemporary local hip-hop scene of now and recent years. I will analyse whether there is any correlation between the local sensibilities and cultural affiliations for participation by looking at a variety of routes into participation taken by these two scenes, and look for any differences and similarities.

Within the hip-hop culture among the youth of Newcastle, do the afrodiasporic roots and culture of the music (as well as local influences) serve to construct new collective identities and possible ‘new ethnicities’?

- Can a more or less entirely white area really spawn identities on the scale that Back’s (1996) cross-cultural approach did? Instead of having a black population to refer to (the city is autonomous of major black insider influence), the participants within Newcastle simply have the media, ensuring through the effects of globalisation, that
local culture is no longer immune from international cross-fertilisation and multicultural influence. The question remains whether this is enough to construct an identity to match this ‘new ethnicity’ ideology much like the youths in South London had done in Back’s study.

**METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

I have used a qualitative ethnographic approach for the purpose of data collection, which involved the use of focus groups, depth interviews and participant observation. Four focus groups were conducted, with roughly five people in each, all lasting approximately an hour and being recorded digitally. Around fifty depth interviews also took place, both in person and via the Internet, involving those that had been particularly enlightening in the focus group setting and those that had not been involved or were unable to attend. Further interviews were done with participants in Newcastle’s black music scene in the 1960s and 1970s for a sense of local precedents of white cultural consumption of ‘blackness’. This data was further supplemented by several excursions to hip-hop/R&B orientated clubs within Newcastle which enabled me to gain a better understanding of the sensibilities of the local hip-hop scene. Greater detail on my methodological approach can be found in Chapter 6 ‘Introduction to Fieldwork’.

**THIS THESIS IS EXPECTED TO:**

- Not only inform, but actually help to create discussion on a critically under explored topic – that of ‘whiteness’ within hip-hop culture. This will be fertilised by a historical perspective. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, there is sparse academic literature on hip-hop itself, even though rap music is the biggest selling music in the world today and hip-hop culture pervades much of the media and fashion world. Taking it further past this point, to relating it not generally, but specifically to the white experience, means that huge gaps in the existing literature are there to be exposed.
Give an account of the UK experience. On the same notion as the above point, there has only been scant regard to anything based on hip-hop in the UK, even though the UK is the fourth largest music-buying market in the world (behind the USA, Germany and France). Most of the sparse academic work on hip-hop focuses exclusively on America. This will fill the void left by the existing literature by focusing on UK based white reflections. Previous work that has concerned the UK has been based on the black experience, and has been located in London. I am uprooting previous work and creating anew with a look at very northern, white takes on hip-hop culture in an area which has a ‘buzzing’ burgeoning scene yet has only (to my knowledge at least) had around 20 pages written about it by Andy Bennett in a journal article published in February 1999, with its data originating from 1995. My account will trace white appropriations of black music from the 1960s and 1970s blues scene in Newcastle through to today’s hip-hop scene, providing something that I am not personally aware exists anywhere else, a detailed forty year journey of these white appropriations in a single area. The long-established tradition in Newcastle of white appropriations of African-American music will at last be given the attention that it deserves.

Give a useful account of what actually came before rap music and what moulded it. Again, this is something that academia has turned a blind eye to, preferring (if at all) to start with The Bronx in the mid-1970s. I hope that my account of the antecedents redresses this balance and sheds new light on how the culture was formulated from a diverse range of different genres and practices. A detailed account of rap music’s trajectory from street corner music to the global phenomenon that it now is will also be tackled.

Deepen understanding of the role of rap music’s effects on making white youth in Newcastle reflect on their own racial construction and socially constructed identity (self-perception). I will also examine if rap music is followed because of some sense of alienation on the part of the listeners themselves, who may find safety within the music.

Illuminate how far the mass media have had an impact on the individuals themselves and how this is reflected in their day-to-day behaviour, values and attitude. I will
establish just how far black style is appropriated for some nuance of ‘black cool’, and in what ways this experimentation exists in a socio-cultural context where there is no established black population (over 90% white, as mentioned, with only 1.1% of the remaining number being described as black).
CHAPTER 2
BLACK AND WHITE RELATIONS

Like generations of people before them “white teenage rap fans are listening in on black culture, fascinated by its differences, drawn in by mainstream social constructions of black culture as a forbidden narrative, as a symbol of rebellion” (Rose, 1994: 5). From the interwar period onwards, the latest black style and image has appealed to white youth, certainly both in the UK and US. The fact that white teenagers have become so interested in hip-hop is not new for blues, jazz, and early rock ‘n’ roll had extensive white participation. The way that this has happened with hip-hop is consistent with these previous genres. But hip-hop is all-encompassing for its fans, and affects attitude, speech, style of dress, and musical sensibility amongst other things. For this reason, West (1994) has referred to this as the ‘Afro-Americanization of white youth’.

‘White’ participation in hip-hop throws up all manner of problems, however. Among other things, “extensive white participation in black culture has also involved white appropriation and attempts at ideological recuperation of black cultural resistance” (Rose, 1994: 5). Guevara (1995) insists that by repackaging and selling black or Latin aesthetic innovations to white audiences as entertainment tools, the original message, (the contextual and traditional meanings), have been ‘airbrushed out’. Light (1992) defends the essential ‘blackness’ of hip-hop. He sees it as remaining connected to the streets from which it came, with commercialisation and ‘white’ limitations being a direct affront to this ‘blackness’. Rose (1994) claims that white voyeuristic pleasure in black cultural imagery is as much a burden as a help, with Mitchell (1996) noting that white appropriation is ‘derivative’ and ‘dishonest’. Aaron (1998) declares that any suggestions stressing that the immersion of white youth in black culture is a natural, even progressive step, is to risk charges of malicious naiveté. “As nothing short of a fanatic, I have become ever more aware of how hip-hop’s real meaning is beyond me, withholding secrets that I, as non-black, non ghettoized listener am in no position to hear. Never will be”. (Allinson, 1994: 453).
RACE AND ETHNICITY

By the middle of the nineteenth century, ‘race’ was seen as characterising human diversity in terms of divisions “between fixed, separate and hierarchically ranked races, rooted in biological difference and a product of divergent ancestries.” (Mason, 2000: 93). The concept of ethnicity entered sociological debates partly as a retaliation to the perceived inadequacies of race and is seen as superior as it avoids biological determinism, it moves to cultural distinctiveness as the mark of an ethnic grouping instead (Back 1996). Smith (1986) sees that members specific to an ethnicity believe in a common sense of descent and common cultural heritage and tradition. Thus, members are allowed a certain element of self-definition (Pickering, 2001: 114). It is possible for people to have multiple ethnicities (for example a person might identify as English, British, Indian and European) and a mixture of races (for example half black and white). Ethnicity is a concept that entails both categorisation and identity: “it implies ‘we’ statements and ‘they’ statements” (Mason, 2000: 94).

What is missing from traditional debates about racial identity is its ever-changing face. This has historical precedents. In the example of America, ‘whiteness’ became something one had to attain as opposed to being a structural formality:

Being of Nordic or European ancestry did not automatically translate into whiteness. Whiteness had more to do with class privilege than some notion of nationality or physiology (and class is a better definition). Whiteness was purchased and fought for by Jews, Catholics, the Irish, Italians, Polish, indentured servants...all considered to be, at one time or another, non-white (Rux, 2003: 37).

For example, in How the Irish Became White, Ignatiev (1995) details the construction of whiteness for this ethnic group from the early 19th Century through to end of the Civil War period in America. Early immigrant Irish men initially entered the workforce as labourers, which usually involved working on the canals and railroads of this still developing country, and taking on dangerous and precarious work that existing ‘white workers’ wouldn't take. The Irish Famine of 1845 proceeded to open up a flood of immigration, and the Irish began to expand from strictly manual labour into work traditionally performed by recently freed blacks, such as industrial and service sector occupations (for example longshoring, or working as coachmen, housemaids and waiters). This progress was made achievable due to
the fact that they undercut the African American workers' wages, leading to the Irish dominating these areas of employment by the 1850s. The Irish had, by the 1860s, consolidated their position, and controlled, for example, drayage and longshore work in New York, began holding a firm place in various trade unions in North Eastern America, and were also dominating construction trades in Philadelphia. By driving out black workers from such occupations as longshoring and masonry in New York, Philadelphia and Boston in the second half of the 19th Century, the value of these occupations could be increased, because skilled trades were solely reserved for white workers. Ignatiev (ibid) argues that a white man gets part of his identity from doing ‘white men's work’, which is obviously work that black men don't perform, and this gradually became the case in regards to the aforementioned jobs.

Interestingly enough around the same time that the Irish were being enfolded and assimilated into the white American race (around the 1880s), the ‘Hunkies’ (people recently arrived from East-Central Europe, such as Poland and Hungary) and the Italians had yet to get their own foothold, and were still deemed second class citizens who were required to do the more basic, dangerous and dirty work (Brodkin, 1999).

**STRUCTURALIST ACCOUNTS OF RACISM**

Frankenberg (1993) makes an argument for the importance of critically reflecting on the social position of dominance that white people occupy in American (and Western) society. She makes it abundantly clear in her analysis that race is a socially constructed (as opposed to being an inherently meaningful) category of identity linked to relations of power and processes of struggle. She also theorises that the meaning of race changes over time because of various social forces (as opposed to being inherent and static), and in addition relates that race has often been deemed as inadequate, especially since the introduction of research into ethnicity - which escapes notions of biological determinism. However, in her opinion, this fact still does not minimise the social and political reality of subordination, and the structural advantage and privilege attributed to one group of people over another (white over black).

“Whiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination …To look at the social construction of whiteness, then, is to look head-on at a site of dominance.” (Frankenberg, 1993: 6).
Tate (2003) bemoans the fact that for much of the 20th Century, being black in America equated to a systematic denial of human and constitutional rights and equal economic opportunity. Even though the advances of civil rights and the black power movement made some in-roads into diminishing legal and economic inequality (through the acquisition of socioeconomic gains, opportunities, and legal protections previously denied to black people) in the latter half of the 20th Century, there is still a definitive quality of alienation which affects black/white relations in the 21st Century. “The history of racism is more alive than dead for many African-Americans – much of our public policy around crime, public housing, health care, and education continues to reflect a belief in second-class status for African Americans” (ibid: 3-4). The advent of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, with its devastating effects on mainly poor black areas of New Orleans, and the US government’s slow and clumsy response to the storm, again brought black and white relations to the forefront of discourse, and forced the nation to confront the legacy of anti-black racism. Five years later, thousands of (mainly black) displaced residents in Mississippi and Louisiana are still living in temporary accommodation.

Whiteness is thus shaped and maintained by the full array of social institutions - legal, economic, political, educational, religious, and cultural which then serve to preserve the position (through a race and class hierarchy) of a ruling white elite who benefit economically from the labour of other white people (the working class - who still receive privileges and benefits from the elite) and people of colour (the oppressed class - the bottom of the economic hierarchy who perform the most menial and devalued jobs without benefits). Racial oppression is therefore a key element in whiteness. Frankenberg (1993) links whiteness to histories of colonialism and imperialism and in terms of the United States, assimilation (ibid: 6). Therefore, because of the inception of the United States as a colony settled by Europeans, and because of the existing racial domination that developed: “there continue to be close ties in the United States between racist and colonial discourses, as well as between constructions of whiteness and of Westerness” (ibid: 15). In her view, one effect of these ‘colonial discourses’ is the notion of the white “self” as being separate and distinct from the colonised black ‘Other’, producing “an unmarked, apparently autonomous white/Western self, in contrast with the marked, Other racial and cultural categories with which the racially and culturally dominant category is constructed” (ibid : 16).
Dickerson (2004) details how American whites have systematically dehumanised, violated and murdered blacks in the name of physical and psychic subordination. She states that the majority of white people in America have, for the last 400 years, subjugated or benefited from the subjugation of blacks, and despite four decades of legal equal rights on the surface level, a significant number of whites still knowingly or unknowingly harbour racist sentiments. As Tate (2003) suggests, there has arisen a fearsome, seductive, and circumspect body of myths about black people, in terms of “black intellectual capacity, athletic ability, sexual appetite, work ethic, family values, and propensity for violence and drug addiction” (ibid: 4), with Mac and Ghaill (1992) seeing that blackness is often perceived as being dangerous, physically aggressive and sexually charged. These views tie in neatly with Murray’s (1970) identification of “the folklore of white supremacy and the fakelore of black pathology”.

According to Frankenberg (1993), ‘whiteness’ is seen as the ‘norm’ and therefore has been simultaneously ignored and universalised within sociology, with researchers instead opting to focus on the racial and cultural identities of these ‘marked’ ‘Other’ (black) and essentially dehumanised subjects instead; indeed Nayak (2003a) also suggests that there has been “an over-racialization of visible minorities at the expense of a de-racialization of ethnic majorities” (ibid: 139). There has therefore been a common perception during the latter half of the 20th Century onwards that whiteness equated to normalcy, or was monotonous or humdrum, and the ethnic majority have, as mentioned, long been fascinated with the more spontaneous, animalistic qualities of the ethnic minority, or the ‘Other’.

**POST-STRUCTURALIST ACCOUNTS OF RACISM**

There has been a brand of research which has reconceptualised what it is to be white in the current post-colonial climate, indeed Giroux (1997) sees the notion of whiteness as simply being a form of domination as ‘jaundiced’ (ibid: 302). The fixity of black/white models of race and racism has been questioned and challenged by recent post-structuralist approaches in the area of ethnicity. Thus, as Nayak (2003a) indicates, racism is not something that is inherent amongst white youth as a direct result of racial privilege, rather, all ethnicities are “suffused with elements of sexual and class difference and therefore fractured and criss-
crossed around a number of axes and identities” (Rattansi, 1993: 37). Building upon Foucault’s (1980) theory that power is not uniformly experienced, and is reproduced in often unpredictable ways through a continual shift of the boundaries of oppression and resistance, there has formed a critique of ‘rationalist’ accounts of the effects of power and racism. These post-structuralist accounts instead dismiss power as a simple matter of closed binaries, such as white/black, men/women, straight/gay, bourgeoisie/proletariat, and disagree with the notion that the former category must always dominate and subsume the latter category, instead opting to see that there are multiple interconnections between race, gender, sexuality and social class, with these processes constantly interacting and inflecting one another (Nayak, 2003a).

There have also been several approaches to psychoanalytical ways of avoiding overly rational, simplistic conceptions of social power relationships and the black/white binary. Accepted discourses of racism are turned upside-down, to attribute deeper meaning and expression to racial identities. Frantz Fanon (1967) was one of the first to recognise that the process of rejection is not a neat, clinical method of expulsion as more structuralist accounts would lead us to believe. Instead of external interactions (black skin/white skin), it is inner compulsions, encapsulated by his ‘black skin’/white masks’ analogy, that are the root cause of an image crisis leading to social exclusion and psychological damage, with the black persons supposed emotional connection to whiteness continuing to cause anxiety. Specifically, Fanon (ibid) pinpoints the divided self-perception of the black subject who, through an inferiority complex exclusive to subjugated people, and a wish to be identified with the colonialists and to imitate the European, has lost his native cultural originality and has overtly embraced the culture of the country he inhabits, leading to alienation from his own kind. Dickerson (2004) in a similar, but much more contemporary vein, identifies that blacks have a love/hate relationship with themselves at a cultural level, and at its most pernicious, that conflict uses the same racist structure that whites used against black people for centuries, including the assumption, to some degree, of superiority. This intraracial discrimination defies the concrete black/white binary, when in effect there is just as much conflict within black communities as between white and black.

As the above accounts show, black people (predominantly in America) have always had trouble finding their own identity, which is often attributed to the fact that they were brought over as slaves or indentured servants and incorporated into a dominant white society. This
society then proceeded to force them to view themselves negatively while viewing their white counterparts positively. The result has therefore became an internal racial division between black people that is based on everything from skin colour to physical features, with the lighter shades being seen as preferable to those of dark complexion, which harks back to the days of slavery, where light-skinned blacks were assigned to the house while dark-skinned blacks had to work the fields, and today's society still continues to think, to some degree, along the same lines. Those who are light-skinned are considered (within various areas of black culture) to have a better chance at succeeding in politics and business, achieving a higher education, and gaining more prominent social status than do those who are dark-skinned. Aside from skin shade, the focus is generally on the shape and size of a black person's nose and lips, and their hair texture, the more “Westernised” these things are, the more culturally acceptable it is in various quarters. Michael Jackson, is perhaps the most famous, and extreme, example of someone trading in his blackness, through skin bleaching and plastic surgery, for an (unauthentic) appearance of whiteness. The above ties in with the core message within this research, as I have shown, and will show further, that it is not just Fanon’s negro that is in conflict with his or her own image, there are also a number of white English youth who are struggling to find a new sense of place and identity in changing global times too (Nayak, 2003a).

In recent times several different researchers have expressed disillusionment with black/white models of racism. Tariq Modood (1988) in particular has been one of the chief proponents of change by issuing a robust challenge of the common usage of the term ‘black’, which he criticises as excluding the experiences of South Asian people. Delgado and Stefancic (2001), in the same way stress that nonblack minority groups, who don’t fit into the dominant society’s notion of race, have become marginalised, and invisible. Binary thinking, meaning that which only focuses on two groups alone (black and white) can conceal the way dominant society has often subordinated other minority groups. It is arguable, that upon the abolition of slavery, Mexicans and Native Americans (who both had land ‘legally’ taken away from them by laws passed through Congress), and the Chinese (who had to suffer ‘Chinese Expulsion’ Laws passed in 1882, just after California had made it illegal to employ Chinese workers), have been more maligned figures than the black people that structuralist forms of racist discourse only focus on. (ibid) Indeed, Nayak (2003a) sees that “the multicultural and anti-racist factions that conveniently came to congregate beneath the umbrella of a black/white
dichotomy are now finding that such assumptions are increasingly strained at the level of theory, political practice and cultural identity formation” (ibid: 145).

When the black/white binary is examined in a historical context, again, it can be deconstructed. The classifications started out purely as a product of economics (Painter, 2010). Prior to whiteness being seen as a representation of freedom and nobility, with black-skinned people cast in the role of undeserving underdog, there existed a time (prior to the transatlantic slave trade), where white-skinned people were not considered to be more elite than blacks. In *Before Colour Prejudice*, Howard University classics professor Frank Snowden (1983) documents innumerable accounts of interaction between the Greco-Roman and Egyptian civilizations and the Kush, Nubian, and Ethiopian kingdoms of Africa. He finds substantial evidence of integration of black Africans in the occupational hierarchies of the ancient Mediterranean empires and black-white intermarriage. In addition to this, he reports that black and mixed race gods appeared in Mediterranean art, and at least one Roman emperor, Septimius Severus, was an African. Snowden concluded: “There is little doubt that many blacks were physically assimilated into the predominantly white population of the Mediterranean world, in which there were no institutional barriers or social pressures against black-white unions. In antiquity, then, black-white sexual relations were never the cause of great emotional crises (ibid: 97).

Moving on to medieval times, it was largely whites who were the slaves, as during the 1300s there was a shortage of labour as a result of the Black Death, which resulted in white-skinned people from Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria being enslaved for use in the Christian kingdoms of the Mediterranean (Painter, 2010). Even with the advent of the tobacco exportation boom in Virginia, and the need for more bodies in the early 1600s because of the industry’s labour intensity, African bond labourers during the first four decades (from 1620 onwards) of their arrival in America from the Caribbean colonies, were not lifetime hereditary bondmen and bondwomen. Essentially, their status was the same as the European bond-labourers, namely limited-term bond servitude (early historical documents seem to indicate that little distinction was made between African descent (dark skinned) and European descent (light skinned) bond labourers). It wasn’t until the 1660s when a difference in treatment between black and white labourers began to emerge, and this was as an effect of deliberately contrived ruling-class policy, as opposed to the outcome of some inborn, inherent, preconditioned ‘race-
consciousness’. The elite started to create a working class that would support them and help suppress rebellion should it occur - as it had done in the Bacon’s Rebellion of 1673 - with both colours having a common cause against the ruling class - therefore they began giving special privileges to the white bond labourers, such as systems of rewards encouraging whites to turn in any runaways (Handlin and Handlin, 1950). One approach to dividing the bond labourers was to set different terms for servitude, and by 1680 laws essentially dictated that all bond labourers of African descent were to serve as lifetime bond labourers.

By the end of the 17th Century, with England having entered the slave trade, few Europeans were entering Virginia as bond labourers, while Africans arrived as lifetime bond labourers in increasing numbers. The term ‘white’ started to replace ‘Christian’ or ‘free’ in laws regulating free men and women, which led to poor European-Americans identifying as white by the middle of the 18th Century. White-skinned slave owners, enjoying the financial fruits of slavery, and with distinctions having now been firmly drawn, started to deify themselves, self-identifying as inherently superior to blacks – morally, socially and intellectually. Blacks were now seen by their white owners to be only three-fifths human. The widespread worship of ‘whiteness’ had begun, and to date, it has not ended. As the Trinidadian historian of slavery Eric Williams (1980) put it: “Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” (ibid: 7).

The recent work on ‘new ethnicities’, this thesis included, have proven problematic to these earlier models of race and racism. Notions of ethnic hybridity do not sit well within structurally defined boundaries and attribute to deconstruct the black/white binary. Exponents such as Hall (1993) and Back (1996) have perpetuated a post-structuralist movement which has eroded the validity of essentialist notions of colour and the divisions that have been attributed to them, seeing them more as discursive formations. Therefore, the agenda has shifted away from binary relations of racism (black/white) towards “composite forms of discriminations and internal gradations within the categories ‘white’ and ‘black” (Nayak, 2003a: 145). Therefore, ethnic differences within a race can be seen to be more divisive than the category of race itself, such as the tainted status of Irish Travellers and ‘bogus’ Eastern European asylum seekers, when compared and contrasted against the often xenophobic Anglo ethnic majority. Such inter-ethnic nuances cannot be ignored, and fly in the face of the black/white racist binary, complicating it by muddying the waters between white dominance and black subordination. The degree of difference in cultural experiences of these groups is
vast, independent of skin pigmentation, and established types of racism do not hold up when analysed in this way. Indeed, a post-structuralist notion of racial studies has helped to uncover and define how fragmented aspects of power exist within a colour, and allow the reader to see that old structuralist forms have made way for new expressions of hostility. For example The European Parliament Committee of Enquiry on Racism and Xenophobia found Irish Travellers to be amongst the most discriminated-against ethnic groups in Ireland (Danaher et al., 2009). Travellers, in both England and Ireland are stereotyped as anti-social, drop-outs and misfits, who settle illegally on land not owned by themselves. In fact, the terms ‘pikey’ or ‘gypo’ are just as familiar in racist language as ‘nigger’, ‘chinky’ or ‘paki’ are. This exemplifies, as mentioned, that there can be as much difference, if not more, between two ethnicities grouped into a single ‘race’ as there can be between ethnicities grouped (often arbitrarily) into another ‘race’. In the United States, for example, in what is referred to as the ‘one-drop rule’, people with a broad range of ancestries are categorised under one label, black, despite the fact that many who are termed black could be more accurately described as white through simple anthropologic tests.

WHITE AWARENESS OF CULTURAL LIMITATIONS

With its heavy emphasis on colour, rap music calls attention to the importance of racial difference and focuses attention on ‘whiteness’ as well as ‘blackness’. Rap thus troubles and problematises the system of racial difference whereby ‘blackness’ is marginalised, silenced, and excluded from the cultural dialogue and ‘whiteness’ is assumed as the norm. Rap can force white audiences to reflect on their own racial construction, on the ways that whites oppress blacks, and on the ways that their own subject positions are constructed in opposition to an ‘other’ who is often presented in a negative light. Rap is thus a significant part of the postmodern adventure that forces an increasingly multicultural and multiracial society to become aware of its differences and to learn to live with otherness and dissimilarity. Some may contend that white artists with this awareness who pioneer their way into hip-hop and other so-called black music forms have the potential (if they are allowed to do so seriously) to destroy race barriers, thereby bridging gaps of new perception in America and the world over. Conversely, others may contend that race inclusivity diminishes the organic intention and sentiment of rap music “until it simplifies into yet another popular entertainment form in the
marketplace, where its inventor will compete for a right to exist” (Rux, 2003: 24). In America, rap music, “more than any other contemporary form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between the black urban lived experience and dominant, ‘legitimate’ (e.g. neoliberal) ideology regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality” (Rose, 1994: 102).

Wimsatt (1994) is painfully aware of the cultural boundaries concerning his racial involvement and admits to his reliance on his continued ability to exploit his advantage over black people, calling it his ‘moral debt’. “If I never repay black America in my lifetime, I will have gone unpunished for a permanent theft...by learning more from them than I give back, I am still accruing a deficit every year on top of the towering debt I already owe” (Wimsatt, 1994: 40). ‘J-Love’ hypothesises that white people involved in hip hop’s cultural movement (such as himself) have various roles and responsibilities (to prevent the ideology that white people have merely self-imposed themselves into a culture which doesn’t want or need them) and has even gone so far as to draw up a ‘code of ethics’ for white people to realise the ways in which they fit and don’t fit, as the case may be. The point he makes, first and foremost, is that Caucasians involved in hip-hop should be aware of their whiteness:

As simple as it may sound, it seems as if many white folks down with hip hop try to avoid the fact that they are white, at all costs. This must stop. Acknowledging your whiteness is an important step in recognizing that regardless of who you are as a person, we come from a lineage steeped in racism and white supremacy...That is what we came from, and that we cannot change. What we can change is what we do about it (‘J-Love’, 2003 (URL).

He also proposes that white people should be conscious of their ‘unearned’ privilege (white skin being seen as an asset in the world), to be knowledgeable of the history of the culture, be open to being educated by others, be open to educating other white people, and be prepared to use their skin privilege to benefit the culture. A further ‘rule’ is that one must pay homage to the originators of the culture:

Once you learn the history of hip hop it is your responsibility to speak on it...one reason why some white folks may not want to do this is because it further magnifies the point that they had nothing to do with creating hip hop. Not that white people
haven’t contributed to hip hop since its birth, but its inception was purely melanin related (ibid).

Finally he stresses that the white hip-hopper should not think he/she is the ‘coolest person in the world’ or that he/she is the exception to the rule:

You are not so different and unique as to warrant a special ‘cool white person’ pass. Are you still trying to be the ONLY white person in the crew? Do you feel animosity when other ‘cool’ white kids come around and deflate your ego? Do yourself a favour, instead of trying to diss that other white kid, explaining how they are fake or whatever, maybe you should take the time to connect with someone who may be similar in some ways to you (ibid).

He concludes that white people are inseparable from the origination of the ‘isms’ and thus, the ugly realities of this should be dealt with. The emphasis being less on guilt, and more on acknowledgement, acceptance and action (ibid).

HIP-HOP AS POST-SUBCULTURAL IDEOLOGY

Initially hip-hop was a grass-roots, bottom-up expression of who you were and where you came from, and its language was arcane and inaccessible to the mainstream. But now? Now hip-hop is the mainstream, and its language, both figuratively and literally, is the language of marketing and media. “The way hip-hop collapsed art, commerce and interactive technology into one mutant animal...seems to have almost predicated the forms culture would have to take to prosper in the digital age” (Tate, 2003: 7). Rap has been a mainstay in mainstream popular culture since the mid 1980’s, and has since become one of the most commercially successful musical styles of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This is exemplified by Eminem (a white rapper) selling 11 million copies in the US alone and 22.8 million units worldwide of his magnum opus, ‘The Marshall Mathers LP’, which was released in 2000.
Rap, the global popular art-form with artists appearing on every continent in various languages and cultures, is a product of the African diaspora. The term diaspora (meaning a ‘scattering or sowing of seeds’ in Ancient Greek) refers to any people or ethnic population forced to leave their traditional homelands, thus being dispersed throughout the world, and the ensuing developments in their dispersal and culture. Hip-hop culture draws on the wealth of African traditions and its rhythms, rhymes, and rebellions to strike a responsive chord throughout the ‘postmodern global village’.

Thornton (1995) finds that subcultures, as the product of youth’s dynamic and highly reflexive relationship with the mass media, provide young people with the visual and ideological resources which they incorporate into collective identities, which can be applied to the case of contemporary hip-hop. Kellner (1995) theorises postmodern subcultural identities as multiple and fluid. Conversely to what Thornton (1995) suggests, he sees the actual concept of subculture as becoming less applicable in the face of postmodernity; indeed, hip-hop has been viewed on many occasions as a way of life, not merely as a subculture. The work of the CCCS (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) can be seen as ‘modern’ in an Enlightenment sense, as it expresses a succession of ‘authentic’, cohesive and discrete subcultures unfolding in time. The contemporary demands of marketing, novelty, rapid turnover of fashion, trendiness and discontinuity all have a distinct postmodern or post-Fordist feel, and hip-hop being the commercial beast it has become during the 1990’s and 2000’s, has a strong postmodern make up. Hip-hop is made up of various styles (from the overtly urban to the smart), types of rapper (from the politically conscious to the hardcore), and variation in language and beats. Thus the commercialisation of hip-hop style does not necessarily lead to homogenisation; indeed quite the opposite can be true. It provides hip-hop as an accessible whole, and individuals are free to pick from it what they choose. “Without such media involvement, rap could not have achieved its ‘penetration to the core of the nation’ (Ice T) or its opportunity to ‘teach the bourgeois’ (Public Enemy)” (Shusterman, 2000: 68).

Hip-hop has reached localities worldwide through two interconnected movements, defusion and diffusion. Through defusion subcultural forms are commodified, while diffusion is the actual geographical and social dispersal of the style from the original nucleus of innovators to mass publics through the media. A postmodern trait is the celebration of the media by the relevant subculture, and this has certainly been the case with hip-hop, in fact it is directly
because of the media that a hip-hop culture exists within the UK. Mass media coverage creates the very notion of a subcultural identity itself. Hip-hop spread from the inner city in the mid 1970s to be embraced for its postmodern sensibilities by ‘avant-garde’ critics by the end of the twentieth century (Neal, 2002). Hip-hop is now, arguably, the most commodified form of popular black expression ever (ibid). Neal sees that issues inherent in contemporary black urban life have been presented to broader audiences via mass culture but “aspects of black urban life are reduced to stylistic acumen for mainstream consumers” (Neal, 2002: 121).

THE DESIRABILITY OF ‘SHOCK VALUE’: THE VICARIOUS THRILL-SEEKING OF WHITE YOUTH

Academics have noted the music’s increasingly global appeal (Bennett, 2000, Mitchell, 1996 and 2001). Some have suggested that this is because of its alleged glamourisation of graphic sex, violence and drug use (Epstein, 1990) and apparent ‘shock’ value. Ironically, the more hip-hop turns inward (with racist imagery - such as Ice Cube claiming that all white listeners are ‘eavesdroppers’ in 1993), the more certain white listeners want to hear it, albeit at a safe distance (Potter, 1995). Some observers have attributed rap’s appeal, and longevity for young people, to the way it can be “used as a means of engaging with and expressing dissatisfaction at the more restrictive features of everyday life in globally diffuse settings” (Bennett, 2001: 89). Dyson (1996) argues that rap enables subordinated individuals to seize the opportunity to speak for themselves, to represent their own interests at all costs, which in turn appeals to suburban white listeners.

African-American music and musical culture have historically impacted on white British and American notions of masculinity and this can be seen to be a predominant role in accounting for the largely white male fandoms of jazz, blues, rock n’ roll, soul, funk, reggae and now hip-hop. “Once the music of marginalized minorities, they have become the theme musics of a young white, middle-class male majority - due largely to that demographics investment in the tragic-magical displays of virility exhibited by America’s ultimate outsider, the black male” (Tate, 2003: 9). Tate also suggests that popular notions of white masculinity can be defined by the ineffable hipness, coolness, antiheroic, antiauthoritarian stances of a variety of black musicians (ibid). Rap appeals through its ‘age old’ image of blackness: “a foreign
sexually charged and criminal underworld against which the norms of white society are defined, and by extension, through which they may be defied” (Samuels, 1991: 25).

‘Gangsta’ rap appeals to white youth through the thrill of witnessing an otherwise impossible immediacy. “These safe voyeurisms of rap allow whites a flirtation with the coolness of ghetto composure, the hipness of an oppositional underclass, without having to deal with the actual ghetto” (Allinson, 1994: 449). ‘Gangsta’ rap has been severely criticised for lyrics that many people interpret as glorifying the most violent and misogynistic imagery in the history of popular music. The style's popularity with middle-class whites (in particular males) has been attacked as vicarious thrill-seeking of the most insidious sort. Defenders of ‘gangsta’ rap argue that no matter who is listening to the music, the raps are justified because they accurately portray life in inner-city America. Hank Shocklee, the producer responsible for early Public Enemy and Ice Cube releases, provides a useful analogy: “it’s like going to an amusement park and getting on a roller-coaster ride - records are safe, they’re controlled fear, and you always have the chance of turning it off” (cited in Samuels, 1991: 29). In further regard to Public Enemy, Nelson (1998) explains that they rocked and rebelled against the status quo, which in turn became an endearing part of the white teenage mind: “to be sure, this youthful rebellion is often superficial, not politically astute, and can be highly hypocritical - but it sells a lot of records” (Nelson, 1998: 66).

Anti-authoritarianism, coupled with the gun and revenge lifestyle, along with an almost cartoonish misogyny, has always titillated teenage boys, whether espoused by rockers or rappers. Costello and Wallace (1990) examine white youth’s ‘rigid fascination’ with blackness: “white people have always loved to gaze at the ‘real black world’, preferably at a distance and while moving briskly through” (1990: 69-70). Allinson (1994) goes on to speculate that hip-hop’s insularity provokes disquiet in its white audience, but the politics of ‘race’ is responded to through the dismissal of its very importance, as I have referred to earlier. Any open acknowledgement of it would become detrimental for white involvement and therefore be problematic for the fan when engaging in a voyeurism of the ‘urban jungle’ and when engaging in powerful encounters that articulate the ‘innate wildness’ of their own being.
ALIENATION

Adolescents the world over now consume hip-hop as an expression of what they are (and what they are not). The cultural dynamic inherent within this is obvious, as white people appropriate black slang for some nuance of black cool. “Yo dog’ says the white thirty something, and he’s ‘down’ with alienation. ‘Yo dog,’ says the black kid and he’s down and alienated. As alienation has become a commodity to be sold, so alienation continues apace” (Neate, 2003: 46). Many young suburban whites identify with rap because they too feel deeply alienated and rebellious against their parental culture (Kelley, 2003). This then fosters an identity with the ‘gangsta’ image, such as the ‘wigger’ phenomenon which appropriates selected forms of black culture for oppositional white identities. “White youth sample a flavour they can’t find at home. Affluent alienation finds, not quite a voice, but a texture of pain and its posturing that catches the breath” (Perkinson, 2005: 131). They are drawn into a sonic, private world where rappers are masters at creating an image as though they were writing in a ‘secret diary’. Pier (2005) argues that even the most paranoid, repulsive diatribes reveal a sense of vulnerability like a diary confession. “All the sneering machismo only serves to intensify the sense that one has snuck into a young man’s private space in which he is essentially defenceless. Rap in this style - as the music industry knows full well - is a perfect music for adolescent boys isolated in suburban developments” (ibid: 25).

Perry (2004) relates that there is a desire for a notion of exclusivity because rap’s selective usage of vernacular, “coded language” or “increasingly obscure dialect” has become “an essential element in maintaining a private hip-hop community” (Perry, 2004: 32). Wimsatt (1994) observes that rappers address their white audience directly, by accommodating their perceived tastes, or indirectly by retreating into blacker, ‘realer’, more hardcore stances, all the more titillating for their inaccessibility to white youth. “They want to experience blackness, dramatic and direct (more so than fans of jazz or reggae) - but not too direct, thank you very much” (ibid: 23). The more whites are denied access to the culture’s intricacies in underground hip-hop, through a compromising articulation of life being directed to the ghetto community, the more they want to be part of it (Allinson, 1994). Hip-hop is still denoted as ‘outsider culture’ by Rux (2003) which he sees as perpetuating its own outsider mythology. This entices economically privileged teenagers to dress, talk and walk like their heroes because “every generation of youth culture since Socrates has identified with outsider/outcast/radicalism, and typically pursued some kind of participation in it” (ibid: 24).
According to the U.S. Department of State: “when hip-hop artists wrote about the world they saw in the inner city, black and white teens recognized that the isolation of suburbia was not much different” (Walker 2006 (URL). Hip-hop caters for the young and the restless, and gives an opportunity to those seeking an identity in a world of alienation and purposelessness: “hip-hop speaks so loudly to rebellious kids from Greenland to New Zealand not because they identify with young American blacks, although they may, but because it's custom-made to combat the anomie that preys on adolescents wherever nobody knows their name” (Christgau 2002 (URL). Fred Durst, vocalist from the rock/rap outfit Limp Bizkit reveals his own escapism:

Subconsciously, getting into hip hop, I think I was probably rejecting this hateful, white, close-minded world...I felt special. I was like, ‘Wow, I get it’...I got knowledge on hip hop because I lived it...I’m not a fucking phony, and that’s why I sing about phonies. And half the people at my shows, the songs are about them. It’s ironic? Of course, it’s fucking ironic (cited in Aaron, 1998: 223).

It has been suggested by Gibbs (2003) that it is white America’s battle against its own nihilism which drives its youth’s engagement with hip-hop and ‘thug’ culture. As Allinson sees it, black music “subverts the dull absence that has attended the industrialization of Western popular culture” (Allinson, 1994: 430) which in turn is the inspiration behind forging creative white ways of ‘being’, whilst Cornel West explains hip-hop’s global presence as being “seductive to rootless and alienated young people disenchanted with existential meaninglessness, disgusted with flaccid bodies and disenchanted with the status quo” (West, 1988: 177).

THE ‘WHITE NEGRO’

Rap thus involves an articulation of black aesthetics, experience, style, and cultural forms in a hybridised synthesis of black culture and new technologies. By the late ‘80s, rap replaced R&B as the most popular music for young blacks, but the largest audience for rap music is, as mentioned, white suburban youth, linking back to the phenomenon of the ‘white negro’ diagnosed by Norman Mailer in 1957 for Dissent, a political journal (and later reprinted in his book Advertisements for Myself in 1959 and several times since). According to Mailer,
American existentialism, unlike its European counterpart, is based primarily on mood and feeling, and it finds its first major expression in the ‘hipster,’ the cool white ‘cat’ who drops out of white culture - condemned as staid, boring, affectless, corporate, and conformist - in order to enter the exotic world of black culture with its mesmerising rhythms and powerful expressions of sexuality and soul. Fleeing from the culture of ‘spiritual death,’ where the dominant norms are consumerism and careerism, the ‘white negro’ finds passion and creativity in a far more vital black culture (Mailer, 1992). Mailer’s controversial essay attempts to explain the impulse of white males who have dared to live with danger by attempting the art of the ‘primitive’, becoming “urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a Black man’s code to fit their facts” (ibid: 341), and so becoming heroes capable of providing the antidote to America’s stultifying post-war culture. “The hipster”, he states, has “absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes can be considered a white Negro” (ibid: 341). “So it is no accident,” writes Mailer “that the source of hip is the Negro, for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries” (ibid: 339).

The mid-twentieth century American ‘white negro’ emerged in a post-war era of convention; hip and cool black icons creating a counterculture of style, immorality, and self destruction whilst the latter twentieth-century version patterned himself after hip-hop culture’s ethos of rebellion - taking him on an unchartered but often imagined journey prone to danger (Rux, 2003). The roots of the resulting counterculture could be seen in the growing tendency among young whites to view black culture as a vibrant, sexually and emotionally honest alternative to what was regarded as the hypocrisy of the dominant culture. Chambers sees that black cultural forms provide a resource on which white youth can draw, thus undercutting and contesting the dominant cultural hegemony (Chambers, 1976). However, this was and still is a disposable concept, as Mailer points out, for example, the Beat hipster could, at the end of the day, return to being white.

As mentioned earlier, from jazz to rock ‘n’ roll to ska to rap, many white males have identified primarily with black music, language, dress, and style. Rux (2003) has labelled Eminem as the ‘new white negro’, seeing that “he dresses himself in the garments of the outcasts, has learned their language, their songs and rituals” (Rux 2003: 17). On one hand he mocks both Eminem’s “politically incorrect vaudeville routine” (ibid: 18) and his “bad-boy,
outcast minstrel, rebel superstar status” (ibid: 19) but on the other hand acknowledges where the line is drawn:

Eminem does not attempt to perform the authentic Nigga as much as he performs a New White Nigga. He maintains his whiteness with a quirky vocal Jerry Lewis-like phrasing and a bright Greek-god bleached-blond buzz cut…and the integrity of his performance does not overtly attempt mimicry, like those culture bandits who came before him, after him, or share pop-chart status with him (ibid: 27).

In his song, ‘The Way I Am’, the artist expresses his frustration with white Americans who view him as trying to be a ‘wigger’ because of the manner in which he talks:

And pigeon-holed into some poppy sensation
To cop me rotation at rock ‘n’ roll stations
And I just do not got the patience (got the patience)
To deal with these cocky Caucasians who think
I’m some wigger who tries to be black cos I talk with an accent…

Todd Boyd (2003) writes about Eminem as being more than just a ‘white boy’ imitator:

He is not a White Boy who wants to be Black, he is Black, yet his appearance simply happens to be White. Even so, to the extent that Hip-Hop has defined the real as rooted in a marginal, poverty-stricken, pathologically defined existence, then Em[inem] is potentially more Black than many of the middle-class and wealthy Black people who live in mainstream White society today. In other words, to me, Em[inem] is a nigga. No doubt (Boyd, 2003: 128).

In fact he can be seen to exist as both the ‘oppressed’ and the ‘oppressor’. His oppressed self makes him a minority and his oppressor self makes him a majority. It is this duality of existence that enables Rux (2003) to label him ‘the new white negro’.
White rappers have naturally had a difficult time finding a voice in hip-hop music. When groups like 3rd Bass and House of Pain tried to project the street-smart machismo associated with hardcore rap, the results were strained and insipid. As mentioned, the infamous Vanilla Ice, and his ‘Elvisian’ ambitions, brought hip-hop to an all-time low with his ‘flimsy rhymes’, and imaginary criminal record. He became the antithesis of ghetto authenticity which caused him to be vilified (Forman, 2002). In the post-Vanilla Ice era, white rappers’ most potent strategy has been defensive; to avoid being the butt of others’ jokes, they have embraced irony, accentuating the artifice of, and maintaining a winking distance from their rap personas. “You see it in the bug-eyed cartoon voice of Eminem's vivid narratives, in Kid Rock’s cavorting with a midget sidekick, Insane Clown Posses’s horror movie face paint, in the Beastie Boy’s campy music videos” (Rosen, 2003 (URL). This is in sharp contrast to the more carefree attitude of an earlier generation of white musicians toward black music (acts like Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, amongst others, making a career out of savvy appropriations of blues and R&B). “At its crudest, this practice could feel like outright theft and verge on a kind of latter-day blackface minstrelsy. It is doubtless a sign of social progress that white rappers feel conflicted about the propriety of cultural piracy” (ibid).

Eminem freely admits, with more than a hint of sarcasm, that he has exploited black music, previously identified in the early recordings of Elvis Presley, when he says the following in his song ‘Without Me’:

No I'm not the first king of controversy
I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley
To do black music so selfishly
And used it to get myself wealthy
(Hey!!) There’s a concept that works
Twenty million other white rappers emerge
But no matter how many fish in the sea
It’ll be so empty, without me

Perkinson (2005) recognises his own ‘cultural piracy’ and sees his personal poetry recitements as ‘channelling black creativity’. He goes further by even admitting that his
dramatic embodiment of personal accounts is “not innocent, but a borrowing that bordered on plunder - white man one more time turning to black soul craft for healing” (Perkinson, 2005: xxii). He relates that he faces a stark choice: “either retreat back into the anomic and anaemia of white middle class ways of being and the supposed safety of suburban space or an acceptance of the need - as well as the indebtedness - of being taught by those who know from long experience how to translate urban trauma into mini-triumphs of overcoming” (Perkinson, 2005: xxii). Another interesting point is that he feels that white males are ‘incarcerated’ inside the white body.

Tate (2003) acknowledges the change in attitude since the days of Elvis, with black people now functioning as arbiters of who is and who is not a legitimate purveyor of hip-hop, but instead of a ‘white conscience’ he attributes it to hip-hop remaining as much defined by the representation of black machismo as by black aesthetics. Rux (2003), although admitting that hip-hop culture has evolved into another classic ready-to-wear American original, like rock ‘n’ roll before it, also explains that this time the black rap artist participates in the profit and control of the industry (to some extent) more so than ever before. Prior to rap, black artists had to tolerate white appropriation, and were in no position of power to wage war on the disrespect they encountered from the white controlled music industry. Hip-hop has ensured that “the white audience encounters a fairly clear ‘fuck you’ that has its eyes on all the [formerly experienced] aspects of disrespect...Hip-hop is primarily by Black for Black” (Allinson, 1994: 442). Cornel West calls this latest expression a progressive ‘Africanization’ of black popular music (1988).

THE MULTICULTURAL AND UNIVERSAL SENTIMENT OF HIP-HOP

Given the multi-ethnic composition of the Bronx district and other inner-city areas of New York, some writers have questioned the ‘authentic’ claim that rap music and hip-hop were ever exclusively African-American culture. Histories of hip-hop have been criticised by Mitchell (1998) and Negus (1996) for overlooking the involvement of white youth in the culture’s development, and similarly, Flores (1994 and 2000) suggests that the dominant construction of rap in the media has excluded the Puerto Rican role. Most US academic commentaries on rap are not only restricted to the United States and African-American contexts, but also continue to insist on the socially marginal and politically oppositional
aspects of US hip-hop, as I have just shown, in regarding it as a coherent, cohesive, and unproblematical expression of an emancipatory African-American culture of resistance. In an essay that goes sharply against this prevailing academic grain, Paul Gilroy (1994) analyses the disappearance of any rhetoric of ‘freedom’ from rap music in the USA since the early 1990s, and notes its replacement by an ethos of abjection, male sexual predatoriness, and male body introspection. Its defiance is seen as overblown. Even if we accept that hip-hop is still a politically charged radical force, this is still deemed as all-inclusive because radicalism “is a multicultural and universal sentiment” (Rux, 2003: 23). Gilroy also argues that while hip-hop or other forms of black performance culture may once have been authentic, it is now a ‘profane practice’. He adds that “It [hip-hop] has been propagated by unpredictable means in non-linear patterns” (Gilroy, 1991: 21). Furthermore, he reasons that “the most important lessons music still has to teach us is that its inner secrets and its ethnic rules can be taught and learned” (ibid: 22). In other words, the very cultural values that exist in music are not restricted only to one group of people, but can be disseminated throughout different races. He concludes by asserting that “promiscuity is the key principle of its continuance” (ibid: 23). By this, he suggests that the influence of other cultures is not only present but also necessary to hip-hop’s survival.

WHITE ENTREPRENEURS/BUSINESS MEN IN HIP-HOP

The role of white Americans within hip-hop’s development and continued success has often been ignored within academic circles, as I have already stressed. This involvement can be broken down into three categories: entrepreneurial/business involvement, white fans, and white artists. First, the myth that hip-hop, at any point of its history, was owned and controlled by a majority of black people must be debunked. Admittedly, Sugar Hill Records (the first label to put out rap music) was financed by a black contingent but from 1981 to the present day most rap music has been released under the ownership of white entrepreneurs. Nelson George (1998) claims that “on the owner front...without white entrepreneurial involvement hip-hop culture wouldn’t have survived its first half decade on vinyl” (ibid: 46). Some of the most influential white investors in hip-hop history include: music producer Rick Rubin, who along with co-label owner Russell Simmons brought through early notable Def Jam Records acts, such as Run D.M.C., L.L Cool J, seminal white outfit Beastie Boys and
Public Enemy; Tom Silverman owner of Tommy Boy Records whom was responsible for De La Soul, Coolio, white rap group House of Pain amongst others; Dante Ross label executive of Tommy Boy Records and Elektra Records who helped to sign and release to the public domain such luminaries as Queen Latifah, Brand Nubian, Busta Rhymes and Pete Rock and CL Smooth; Michael Berrin (A.K.A ‘MC Serch’ from the early 90s white rap duo 3rd Bass) who cultivated Nas’ arrival upon the music scene; and Harvard graduates Jon Schechter and David Mayes, who were founders of The Source magazine, the world’s biggest selling rap monthly.

Alongside the above individuals, and other unmentioned white entrepreneurs, arguably the most important white men since hip-hop’s inception are Barry Weiss and Jimmy Iovine. While other record companies often sign artists who fit the image and set the agenda of the record company - Suge Knight of Death Row Records for example only signed artists who would perform hardcore ‘gangsta’ rap - former CEO of Jive Records Weiss instead pursued a plethora of artists. A list of artists whom he has signed or helped sign include KRS-One, A Tribe Called Quest, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, R&B acts such as Aaliyah and R. Kelly and later huge pop sensations Backstreet Boys, ‘N Sync and Britney Spears. Chairman Jimmy Iovine’s Interscope Records has been home to some of the pioneers of rap on the West Coast, such as Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur and Snoop Dogg, and some of today’s most popular artists, such as Eminem, 50 Cent and The Game. Indeed it is Iovine who is credited for discovering Eminem and for passing his demo tape onto Dr. Dre. Iovine has also waxed lyrical about ‘whiteness’ in hip-hop:

Hip hop is more reflective (than rock ‘n’ roll) of how kids feels today, bottom line. It feels more exciting, more potent, more to the point. Both lyrically and sonically, it’s keyed into kids’ emotions...I think the best hip hop feels accurate to these kids’ emotions, not literally, because most of these white kids haven’t had the same experiences as these artists, but emotionally. When I was a teenager in the sixties in Brooklyn listening to [Jimi] Hendrix and Sly Stone, I thought they were singing about my life, even though they weren’t (cited in Aaron, 1994: 56).
WHITE FANS AND ARTISTS

The presence of white people in hip-hop can be seen through their participation as fans and purchasers of rap music. If it was arguable that a white contingent was a substantial consumer of rap in its early days, this fact can now be stated with far greater accuracy. “It is a fallacy that there ever existed a time when hip hop buyers were exclusively black...In fact, a straight line can be drawn from ‘Rapper’s Delight’ to the hip hop present by looking at popular rap hits whose sales testify to the devotion of the white teen audience” (George, 1998: 60). The claim that rap is mainstream is credited to the very fact that rap has been topping charts (for example the Billboard charts in America) since the mid 1990s (although in the last few years album sales, across all genres but more particularly in rap, have for the first time seen a downturn, partly due to the increased marketing emphasis on ring tones, the illicit free download of albums, and the dawn of digital sales). Surveys have established that approximately 70% of rap music sales are to the white community (Gibbs, 2003).

As an underground product in the 1980s, hip-hop appealed to its white audience as a “form of activism,” claims one early hip-hop fan (cited in Kitwana, 2005: 87). Unlike today’s situation, it was a culture that was embraced by politically inclined, leftist white kids who saw it as a form of defying the status quo: “like punk, hip hop was a counterculture. It gave youth a voice to tell the truth and exposed the ills of society, especially racism and our hypocritical government.” (ibid). The early-to-mid 1990s brought about a plethora of hip-hop fans as this era saw a drastic change in popular culture. After white rock acts, such as Nirvana and Pearl Jam, had achieved enormous success, the hype surrounding grunge music began to die down, especially following the suicide of Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain. “Sometime after [his] death, the hip hop kid - over-sized clothes, syrupy slang, skateboard double-parked outside - emerged as the nineties embodiment of youthful, white alienation.” (Aaron, 1998: 215). Additionally, this era epitomised the commercialisation of hip-hop culture, which subsequently was absorbed into mainstream pop culture itself. This heralded the shift from politically charged themes to violent, misogynistic lyrics and imagery. Activism was replaced by rebellion of a different kind, against one’s parents. As one white rap fan remembers: “my early love for hip-hop was in part a revolt to growing up in a very upper-class, extremely closed society where I saw first-hand that money doesn’t bring happiness.” (cited in Kitwana, 2005: 87). As entrepreneurs packaged ‘gangstaness’ on the back of records by artists like
NWA, the young white teenager fully embraced and fused the violent, ‘gangsta’, harsh elements of this rebellious music into an otherwise safe and mundane environment. Regardless of the motive for being involved in hip-hop, white’s continuation of participation has brought about a new form of race relations. Henry Giroux, a professor at Penn State University and author on race in several books on pop culture, describes hip-hop as:

The only popular culture that takes seriously the relationship between race and democracy in America. This music has had a grip on white kids for fifteen to twenty years, and everybody calls it pathology and that’s that. Are all these white kids idiots who are being duped and manipulated by the record? Who is cynical and arrogant and detached enough to believe that? Sure, some kids are just latching onto the moronic gangsta elements, but the vast majority are caught in some middle space where they’re trying to figure themselves out (cited in Aaron, 1998: 225).

In other words, hip-hop is, in some ways, bringing whites closer to the reality of blacks, as was done during the civil rights era. Hip-hop has created a space of discourse, a space of self-searching, and a place for white youth to re-evaluate themselves, as individuals of inherent power solely based on their race. “If hip hop can be a tool for White kids to defy their racial destiny, that’s amazing. They may look corny and say some really stupid things, and they may do some really stupid things, but I think they’re making a genuine effort not to inherit the racism of their forefathers. Their souls tell them it’s not right.” (ibid: 227).

‘Boots Riley’ of black political outfit The Coup laments: “My audience has gone from being over 95 percent black 10 years ago to over 95 percent white today. We jokingly refer to our tour as the Cotton Club” (quoted in Kitwana, 2003 (URL). This is a reference to the 1920s and 1930s Harlem jazz club where black musicians played to white only audiences. “It’s almost like a white chitlin circuit of underground rap music” stresses the rapper (ibid). He also recognises the hazardous effect that mainstream exposure has had on hip-hop: “It has a lot to do with the fact that the emphasis on the culture has now been taken away. It’s just the industry now and it’s sold back to us - it’s not ours anymore. It used to be anti-establishment, off the radar, counterculture. People in the streets are now being told what hip-hop is and what it looks like by TV” (ibid). There is a real signal that the withering black audience reflects the discussion of blackness in public discourse: “black folks will say that they aren’t trying to hear hip-hop artists remind them of their problems...so many black people don’t
want to hear it...they want that thug shit.” says Zion, MC of the independent rap group Zion-I (ibid).

The least popular avenue for whites to participate in hip-hop has been as artists or MC’s. While the music is influenced via the investor and consumer end by white Americans, performers of rap have, and continue to remain, exclusively African American and Latino, with a few exceptions. Charles Aaron (1998) summarises that white performers of rap or any other form of black culture can be grouped into two categories. He categorises white rappers into ‘the Elvis syndrome’ or the ‘white negro’. Todd Boyd (2003), Professor at the University of South California and hip-hop scholar, accuses artists who have the Elvis Presley ‘syndrome’ of abject imitation. In rap, the classic example of an imitator is the aforementioned Dallas raised Robert Van Winkel, more widely known as Vanilla Ice.

AFRICAN ‘DIASTORA’: THE LINK BETWEEN AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND AFRO-CARIBBEANS IN BRITAIN

Beyond the African-American perspective, other writers have extended their view to include a pan-cultural context. Indeed, some focus on the ‘African diaspora’, a global discourse that has acted to link displaced peoples of African descent throughout the world (this I will discuss further in the antecedents chapter) (Bennett, 2001). Cobley and Osgerby’s (1995) study of the local hip-hop scene in Peckham, London is one notable example. A dominant theme throughout the study of this scene was that young African-Caribbean rappers whom were interviewed shared a sense of identification with African-American hip-hop culture. Obviously certain differences occurred (such as the use of Jamaican patois in the case of the African-Caribbean rappers, and lyrical style) but the perceived notion of an African diasporic discourse linking African-Americans with African-Caribbeans in Britain was clearly evident with their ‘comparable diversities’. For instance, whilst African-Americans may be attacking the ‘powers that be’ for not hearing their voice (or choosing not to), British African-Caribbeans may be attacking the racist ideologies underlying the discourse of ‘little Englandism’ (Samuel, 1988). Storry and Childs (1997) regard American ‘ghetto’ music’s influence in Britain as causing a ‘cross-fertilisation’ of African-American-Caribbean black culture, (seen by the successful examples of black British acts Soul II Soul and Estelle).
The claim of black solidarity worldwide is what Negus (1996) calls an ‘exceptionalist’ one, which is built upon an essential, unchanging, racial self, in other words ‘ethnic absolutism’. Negus suggests that this approach, when critiqued by white writers, might be construed as romanticisation because of its focus on the overtly ‘natural’, spontaneous, expressive and emotional traits of a stereotypical ‘other’, this ‘other’ being judged against a convention-riddled, ‘safe’ world of middle-class restraint. However, with black writers, this approach is often associated with black ‘nationalism’ and calls for self-determination, exclusivity, and separatism. “Guiding this approach is often the belief that all black people are essentially African or that there is a ‘black thing’ that those who are not black cannot understand. From this perspective the diversity of black population is unproblematic; there is an underlying racial self, a source of identity that produces the characteristics of a popular aesthetic and corporeal sensibility” (Negus, 1996: 106).

THE ARGUMENT AGAINST ‘ETHNIC ABSOLUTISM’

Gilroy (1987 and 1993) argues against forms of a historical ‘ethnic absolutism’ (an unchanging Africanness). He suggests that the bond (both cultural and political) between black people has been continually created through identities and practices that have been generated during processes of movement and mediation. Thus, his ‘black Atlantic’ concept successfully moves away from prior essentialist, bounded and nationalist perspectives towards a diasporic concept of black identity. Therefore, fixed essences of ‘blackness’ are replaced by a more discontinuous process in which cultural traditions are continually remade and new ‘hybrid’ identities are created. Indeed, Mercer sees that black forms in Britain are not created within a self-contained black diaspora but at a “site of many, overlapping diaporas, including the Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and broader South Asian diaporas” (1994: 251). If an African-American perspective is the first stage, and a pan-cultural ‘essential blackness’ of hip-hop is the second stage, then the third, and the one which I am concerned with, is the examination of rap and hip-hop by youth of non-African descent in different parts of the world (see Bennett and Mitchell, 2001). “The radical transformation of hip-hop over time, especially its crossing over into the market of white youth, has complicated its ability to proclaim black identity” (Neal, 2002: 189).
The power of hip-hop is not to be underestimated, rap music and hip-hop culture are cultural, political, and commercial forms, and for many young people (including those in Newcastle) they are primary cultural, sonic and linguistic windows on the world. Rappers such as Chuck D and Ice-T have argued that hip-hop is at its most revolutionary when it enters the ears of white teenagers. Chuck D (1997) has noted that young whites are able to get a heartfelt perspective through black music from which they can interpret black situations through their hearts and minds. As mentioned, I will be concerned with the primarily white area of Newcastle in North Eastern England, a place where the ethnic make up is as different to inner city America as one can possibly get. How has hip-hop’s influence extended to there, and most importantly, why?

The commercial availability of rap music and hip-hop culture at a global level has ensured its broadening appeal amongst young people of differing ethnic backgrounds in cities and regions across the globe, in such a strong way, that it is no longer viable to speak in terms of hip-hop culture as being an exclusively ‘black’ cultural form (Bennett, 2001). In 2001 rap was “one of the fastest-growing music genres in the United States, accounting for $1.84 billion in sales out of a $14.3 billion total for the U.S. recording industry, according to industry statistics. Interestingly, nearly 70 per cent of those sales were to white suburban youth, a striking transformation considering rap music’s beginnings” (Bennett, 2001), which, as mentioned, were rooted in the inner city block parties in the Bronx district of New York. Indeed, hip-hop’s audience has, from the start, crossed racial and regional lines, and invited identification across so-called ‘forbidden’ lines (Potter, 1995). From its inception ‘progressive minded whites’ along with African-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans and Latinos were involved in rap (Mitchell, 1996). “Not since pre-Civil War blackface minstrelsy has popular culture been such a racial free-for-all” (Aaron, 1998: 218). For pre-Civil War blackface minstrelsy, see Cockrell, 1997, and Lhamon, 1998, chapter 1). Aaron compares the art of minstrelsy with the art of ‘acting’ hip-hop. A minstrel show of the nineteenth century (in which both white and black performers wore a burnt cork mask to fulfil audience fantasies) is compared to the pop culture of the 1990s in which whites (and blacks) customise their personas to ‘keep it real’. “Blackface was an exorcism of prejudice, self-hatred, forbidden lust, and genuine respect; it threw up feelings onstage that couldn’t be expressed anywhere else. These days on The Jerry Springer Show (or Jenny Jones) nothing sets off studio-audience alarms like the spectacle of a white hip-hop kid” (Aaron, 1998: 219).
‘GLOCAL’: COMBINING THE GLOBAL WITH THE LOCAL

In Gilroy’s opinion, ‘black cultural forms’ are “no longer the exclusive property of blacks dispersed within the black Atlantic world” (1993: 3). Rap music survives globally in transformed resonances, gestures, and counter-gestures and in new cultural inflections (Krimms, 2000). Hip-hop and rap cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African-American culture; it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world. Even as a universally recognised popular musical idiom, rap continues to provoke attention to local specificities. Rap and hip-hop outside the USA reveal the workings of popular music as a culture industry driven as much by local artists and their fans as by the demands of global capitalism and U.S. cultural domination (Mitchell, 2001). The rap text has been reworked in ways that incorporates local knowledge’s and sensibilities, thus transforming what was an art form for black inner city youth into a means of communication that works in the context of specific localities. Lull (1995) has called this process ‘cultural reterritorialisation’: “the foundations of cultural territory - ways of life, artefacts, symbols, and contexts - are all open to new interpretations and understandings” (Lull, 1995: 159-160). Bennett (2001) sees that rap is particularly conductive to the process of cultural reterritorialisation due to its street cultural and largely improvised origins. Thus central to the localisation of rap music is a process of creative adoption and adaptation, “rap’s core text being continually re-explored and redefined through the inscription of particular urban narratives” (ibid: 94). Rap has thus “become loosened from what was once considered to be an organic connection with the inner-city districts of the US” (ibid: 102). Rap changes faces in different societies, but at the same time, maintains links to global (or globalised American) developments, responding to both local and global forces (Krimms, 2000).

The idea of rap having multicultural significance is certainly valid. Not only white folks throughout the Western world but folks in Zimbabwe; British kids of Pakistani descent in England; of Algerian descent in Marseilles; Native Americans, Japanese, the list goes on; all of these folk find a limitless fund of oppositional meaning and just plain old meaning in rap music. Clearly rap is able to mean all kinds of things to all kinds of people, beyond the very specific context of its creation (Allinson, 1994: 446).
Hip-hop has become a transnational global art form capable of mobilising diverse
disenfranchised groups, and has surfaced in a wide range of cultural and intercultural sites
(Potter, 1995). Hip-Hop culture has been appropriated across Western Europe and further a
field, with acts like MC Solaar (France) Sa Razza Posse (Italy) Advanced Chemistry
(Germany) and Papa Dee (Sweden) all making marks on home territory with a highly
localised form of rap. In the case of Britain, acts like Sway, Blak Twang and Rodney P have
all rapped about their concerns, touching upon topics such as debt, unemployment and
domestic violence, all based in a localised black London context. Indeed, the London scene
itself is thriving in an underground context, as are other big, highly black populated cities
such as Birmingham and Nottingham. A number of artists from the UK put emphasis on
‘staying true’ and rapping in regional accents about localised concerns, and acts are criticised
for attempting to ape the language of black New York to document and mythologise
happenings (Back, 1996).

An analysis of the concrete effects of global and local belong in the rap music equation to a
greater extent than current scholarship reflects, for “hip-hop and rap seem to have penetrated
virtually every crevice in which the international record industry registers a significant
presence” (Krimms, 2000: 198). Rap moved from the music of the city - from the sounds of
black and brown life - to become the score of the suburbs, the ‘chew toy’ of white suburbia.
Contributions from all shades of the human pigmentation spectrum have since occurred. A
circular, black diasporic influence has been invoked to justify claims that the roots of rap and
hip-hop are quintessentially African-American; but these roots are as culturally, eclectically
and syncretically wide ranging as they are deep (Toop, 1991). Brain Cross claims that hip-
hop is now a “unitary phenomenon” (Cross, 1993: 63), as hip-hop scenes have rapidly
developed from an adoption to an adaptation of US musical forms and idioms. This has
involved an increasing syncretism and incorporation of local linguistic and musical features
(Mitchell, 2001). Roland Robertson (1995) has employed the term ‘glocal’, combining the
global with the local, to emphasise that each is in many ways defined by the other and that
they frequently intersect, rather than being polarised opposites. “As the cultural influences of
hip-hop’s varied forms and expressions have gradually spread through global systems of
diffusion, these themes can be heard in other languages around the world, expressed with a
shared emphasis on spatial location and identity formation but informed by radically different
contexts and environments” (Forman, 2002). Schwartz states that contemporary hip-hop
across the globe “has been customized, souped up, or retrofitted into local relevance” (1999:
362) with Gilroy recognising the development from black Atlantic autonomy into a truly
global multi-ethnic entity. *National Geographic* recognises hip-hop as "the world's favourite
youth culture" in which “just about every country on the planet seems to have developed its
own local rap scene" (Pryor, 2008 (URL))

**THE MARGINALISATION OF UK HIP-HOP**

It is arguable that with a few exceptions, such as the success of ex-pat British rappers Slick
explains this failure as a mixture of sad tales of under-funded promotion by the major labels,
who fail to fully exploit the potential of their domestic rap acts, and ongoing struggles by
small cash strapped independent labels to keep British rap ticking over. Indeed, British rap
has historically been “marginalized and to some extent impoverished by an over reverential
attitude towards US rap, by the attempt to reproduce style and languages developed in very
different contexts” (Hesmondhalgh and Melville, 2001: 87). Conversely, there were those
who realised that to transpose US forms would inevitably rob UK hip-hop of the ability to
speak for the dis-enfranchised British constituency in the way that US hip-hop has so
successfully spoken to, and for, its audience. But by adopting this ‘purist’ attitude towards
US models, in their determination to remain ‘true to the game’ and ‘keep it real’, “British hip-
hop has flown in the face of the complex transnational processes that birthed it…By adhering
too closely to a set of precepts, a sense of correctness, that emerged in very different
circumstances, under different racial and social conditions, British hip-hoppers have, it
seems, largely succeeded in marginalizing themselves” (Hesmondhalgh and Melville, 2001:
94).

**FINDING NEW EXPRESSIONS OF LOCALISED WHITE HIP-HOP**

As mentioned in the introduction, it has been assumed that British appropriations of black
musical styles can only take place in settings where a prominent black population serves as a
continual point of reference (Jones, 1988). In the large black urban areas, various white acts
have emerged, all rapping in the same tone (often with a high amount of Jamaican patois
prevail) as their African-Caribbean descended colleagues. Local accents are thus important markers for vernacular expression and construction of identity, and fans within these cities have a vibrant scene on their doorstep. This leads on to the main crux of my thesis, which is how can white appropriations and white participation of hip-hop culture exist in a place where there isn’t a strong black population to refer to. Newcastle is a prime example of a white dominated society. Why do white youth from this city experiment with black music in a socio-cultural context where there is no established black population? (and where over 90% of the population is white). It is interesting to get behind black appropriations in an area that has a very ethnically (white) marked landscape. In short, “there are no fixed outcomes within rap music because the form itself is about altering cultural resources in order to produce new forms of expression” (Back, 1996: 204), localised white hip-hop being one of these new forms of expression. Local white youth through black music and culture have successfully navigated away from the restricted enclosures of whiteness through an engagement with a globally imagined blackness, negotiating the ‘global’ through the ‘local’ (Nayak, 2003a). However, as we will see in later chapters, these notions are often disregarded by the people who are actively involved in creating these new cultural spaces, as by admitting to ‘acting black’ or aping black culture, a division is placed between these participants and the culture being emulated, therefore the union formed can potentially be seen as being contrived and ‘forced’ as opposed to natural. Colour issues are thus sometimes replaced by ones of a social class nature, to eradicate colour divisions and to allow the working-class white fan to dwell on an imagined trans-Atlantic social class bond.
CHAPTER 3

HIP-HOP

HIP-HOP CULTURE DEFINED

Hip-hop culture involves dress, dance, music, language and graffiti, but it is not easy to classify because it is not just a style of music; it also embraces a particular lifestyle. “It’s not a homogeneous subculture but a diverse supraculture transcending ethnic, geographical, and artistic boundaries” (Brown and Benson, 2001 (URL). Hip-hop culture is intense body culture; it finds its expression in dance and gesture. Expressive, dynamic, and energetic, hip-hop gave rise to new forms of dance like break-dancing, while gesture, movement, and bodily rhythm are a key aspect of its cultural style as well as its musical performance. Hip-hop is also highly visual, represented in its distinctive art form of graffiti and urban art. Along with hip-hop as a distinctive fashion, these provide extremely strong visual imagery, serving as models and badges of cultural identity and belonging. Together, these forms provide a vivid hip-hop spectacle, embracing style, identity, politics, and a way of life for individuals throughout the world. At its core is a marked and clearly recognisable attitude.

Rap is the voice and sound of hip-hop culture while dance and bodily movement enact its rhythms and moves; graffiti inscribes spatial identity and presence; fashion provides subcultural style; music videos present a compendia of hip-hop's sounds and images; and digitised multimedia furnish a sign of its migration into new cultural terrains and the emerging millennium. Encompassing style, fashion, and attitude, hip-hop culture thus becomes a way of living, a subculture and way of life that seems somehow appropriate for the postmodern adventure. “Now we know that rap music, and hip-hop style as a whole, has utterly broken through from its ghetto roots to assert a lasting influence on American clothing, magazine publishing, television, language, sexuality, and social policy as well as its obvious presence in records and movies” (George, 1998: ix). The elements of hip-hop, namely music, clothing, dance and attitude, have enabled it to be adaptable worldwide because of its ‘essential mutability’ (ibid). These have now “congealed as a mass-marketed commodity” (Austin, 2001: 204).
George (1998) sees that at its most elemental level hip-hop is a product of the ‘schizophrenic’ post-civil rights era in America, containing a set of cultural forms originally nurtured by African-American, Caribbean-American, and Latin-American youth within or near New York in the 1970’s. Hip-hop’s emergence, with its b-boys and graffiti writers, is seen by George as a direct reaction to disco, funk and to the chaotic world of New York City, especially around the dilapidated South Bronx borough (complete with burned-out buildings, gang and drug problems, and no industrial base on which to rebuild as this had previously been relocated to Manhattan). He calls these individuals ‘hip-hop’s first generation’, or ‘America’s first post-soul kids’. These are a collective group of people who came of age in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, when obvious barriers had been broken (such as the right to vote for black people) but other more subtle ones remained (such as the institutionalised racism inherent within the police). “Some say this is the first generation of black Americans to experience nostalgia. And it all showed up in the music” (ibid: xi).

RAP MUSIC DEFINED

Hip-hop is a highly vocal culture and rap music provides its voice and its sound. Drawing on the sonorities and inflections of the rhythms of everyday vernacular discourse, as well as the sounds of traditional music, it involves the creative use of previous musical technology, and the appropriation of new musical technologies. Rap is noisy, oral, and rhythmic, providing a soundtrack for life in a high-tech world of rapid transformation and turbulent change. Simply defined, rap is a form of vocal delivery which is spoken in a rhythmic style over a continuous beat. Rose sees rap music as “a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music” (Rose, 1994: 2). Rappers speak with the voice of knowledge and authority by taking on the identity of observer or narrator. Dyson (1991) calls them ‘urban griots’ who dispense social and cultural critiques. “Rap is a spoken newspaper, a fax from the wax; on the other side, rap fits into the storytelling tradition of oral history and symbolic teaching” (Toop, 1984: 188). Memorable phrases and catchy beats lend themselves to long, involved and sometimes abstract stories. Succinctly, ‘rap’ describes only a kind of music, whereas hip-hop is a way of life, or as rapper KRS-One stated “rap is something you do, hip-hop is something you live” (cited in Copeland 1995: 8).
Rap has proven itself to be a very potent and powerful musical idiom. The best rap draws on the hyperactive tradition in popular music; one visible in Elvis Presley, James Brown, Janis Joplin, and others, driving its audiences into ecstasy and frenzy. With its extreme sexuality and violence, rap then bursts through the boundaries of propriety, good taste, and decorum, creating genuine shock effects of the sort described by Walter Benjamin (1969), who argued that in a media-saturated world art must shock its audiences to get their attention. Like certain forms of surrealism and futurism, rap deals in extremes for the sake of an edge. Indeed, there are times when it goes over the edge into that tabooed region of excess that seems to threaten the protectors of law and order, morality and ‘good taste’. For this reason Koza (1994) recognises rap as a significant aesthetic experience for disenfranchised youth and a powerful cultural artefact for those who feel alienated from the mainstream.

Rap is, then, a formidable form of musical expression, a subcultural means of opposition, a cultural idiom of counter-hegemonic anger and rebellion, and an indicator that existing societies are structured according to a system of differences between dominant and subordinate classes, groups, races, and genders. Exploding false homogenisation and humanisms, rap music is an anthem of postmodern marginality and conflict, a vivid articulation of the extent to which difference and opposition are structuring principles of contemporary society, and a reminder of the growing differences between the haves and the have not’s. It is the thorn on the rose of media culture, which pricks its audiences into awareness of the shadow-side and underclass of American society. Indeed, a generation has been inspired to say what was too long unspoken about (George, 1998).

Rap, in short, is a testimony to the intraracial class division that has plagued African-American communities...the increasing social isolation, economic desperation, political degradation, and cultural exploitation undergone by most underclass communities...has given rise to a form of musical expression that captures the terms of underclass existence. This is not to suggest that rap has been limited to the ‘ghetto poor’, but only that its main ingredients (major themes and styles) continue to be drawn from the complexities, conflicts, and contradictions of urban black life (Dyson, 1991: 16-17).

Dyson (2004) gives credit to rap’s ability to act as sociological commentary and political criticism but still sees it fundamentally as “an art form that traffics hyperbole, parody, kitsch,
dramatic license, double entendres, signification, and other literary and artistic conventions to get its point across” (Dyson, 2004: xii). Written off by its detractors as a passing fad in the early 80s, rap has “outgunned punk, post-punk, New Wave, Rave, House, techno, and other much-hyped musical forms of the age” (George, 1998: xi). It has proven wrong those who viewed it as an ‘epiphenomenal’ cultural production that would cease as soon as black youth became bored and moved on (Dyson, 1991).

**THE LIMITATIONS OF RAP MUSIC**

Rap music can be criticised as being repetitive and lacking in originality, due to the fact that its backing track is predominantly ‘sampled’ and ‘looped’ as opposed to being performed by live musicians. Musically, it is often on one sonic level, being bereft of the ‘peaks and troughs’ of a live band, and it is this inherent inability to produce these musical highs and lows that render its live performance somewhat limited and rigid; the only difference from the recorded output being a variation in lyrical content or vocal expression. The lack of musical ability, in the traditional sense, renders rap overly dependent on previously recorded musical forms to create a ‘new’ audio tapestry. Shusterman (2000) lists several aesthetic reasons which seem to discredit rap as a legitimate art form:

Rap songs are not even sung, only spoken or chanted. They typically employ neither live musicians nor original music; the soundtrack is instead composed from various cuts (or “samples”) of records already made and often well-known. Finally, the lyrics seem crude and simple-minded, the diction substandard, the rhymes raucous, repetitive, and frequently raunchy (ibid: 201).

Shusterman, however, ultimately determines that the music satisfies the most crucial criteria for aesthetic legitimacy, existing as both poetry and fine art. Van Rooyen (2006) dismisses rap’s claim to be a genuine musical form, due to the lack of a sung melody, and deems it too bereft of lyrical introspection and too focused on the black American ‘way of life’ to be considered authentic. Irrespective of this, she does recognise rap as a form of poetic expression.
Rap is primarily consumed by males, and with its often homophobic, misogynistic and violent lyrics it can be considered a force for dissent and social polarisation. The intense first person narrative and persuasive transmission of often flawed ideals, regularly crosses the boundaries of ‘good’ taste and morality to a highly impressionable fan-base. Outside of the genre, casual observers can find the attitudes and behaviour within the art-form alien, even frightening, which is fuelled by the regularly aggressive lyrics, obscene imagery, pugilistic eroticism and reference to drugs, weapons and death. Rose (1994) describes rap as a confusing and noisy element of contemporary American culture, that through illegal use of musical samples, ‘gangsta raps’ (lurid fantasies of cop killing and female dismemberment), and black nationalist rappers proclaiming white people the ‘devil’s disciples’, the media has both hyped and condemned on an immense scale. Such rap music provides a spectacle of angry self-assertion with images of black rappers threatening white power structures, usually with vitriolic racism combined with an often misplaced spectacle of revolt and insurrection in its live performances, music videos, and recorded forms. However, critics of rap music’s limitations do sometimes make the mistake of confusing its symbolic expression with direct calls to assault women, kill police officers, and other things of that nature. Of course there is room for such confusion in the overlap between symbolic expression and incitement to commit violence, and both feminists and liberals do have a point, but if rap is poetry it is not, by that fact, equivalent to a political manifesto or street-action leaflet.

THE STORY OF RAP MUSIC/ HIP-HOP CULTURE

Just as ragtime, jazz, R&B (rhythm and blues), and other black musical idioms and forms entered mainstream culture last century; today it is hip-hop culture and its distinctive sound of rap music that has become an important form of music and cultural style around the globe. As mentioned, it encompasses dance and performance, visual art, multimedia, fashion and attitude, and is the music and style for the new millennium. A highly protean and assimilative culture, it is set to remain at large in the public eye as it absorbs new influences, is appropriated throughout myriad cultural forms and forces across the globe, and has become a major mode of the global popular. As mentioned, rap is one element of a broader hip-hop culture. Stylistically it drew on the Caribbean vocalisation associated with Jamaican sound system culture, African rhythmic patterns, African-American verbal games such as the
dozens, rhythm and blues and soul styles (Negus, 1996). “It was formed initially out of specific conditions within the Bronx area of New York city. Unlike British reggae artists, who were responding to the experience of immigration, rap in the USA was formed out of the experience of urban segregation” (ibid: 109). Kofsky (1970) suggests that the ghetto was central to the development of blues, jazz and rhythm and blues, hence rap is consistent with this, the music’s ‘cultural potency’ being fostered in the racially segregated conditions under which it was created (Rose, 1994).

THE ORIGINS, 1976-1979

Regardless of its aesthetic quality (or lack thereof) and its huge internal social problems, the Bronx was anything but a cultural wasteland. Sweeping aside the decay and neglect initially caused by the implementation of the Cross Bronx Expressway and the relocation of business and commerce outside of the area, there existed a place of vibrant, unnoticed and quite visionary creativity attributed to its racial mix and relative isolation (George, 1998).

Contemporary street rap emerged around 1976 (Stanley 1992), yet its birth and emergence as a form of music went unnoticed by most Americans for a number of years. Rap is “rooted in the experience of lower class blacks in America’s big northern cities” (Hebdige 1987: 136). Toop (1984) reveals that rap music developed out of the street culture of young black Americans and their urban associates living in The Bronx and soon assumed significance as a form of self-expression. It became particularly important as a community-wide means of addressing and negotiating the extreme socio-economic circumstances which characterised everyday life.

Nelson George (1988) documents how New York’s black radio stations in the early 1970s began to position themselves so that they would appeal to a more affluent, older, and to a large degree, white audience. These radio stations had previously played a large part in the city’s black communities by acting as a musical and cultural guide and had been a primary source of information and enjoyment. However, as the format began to change, black radio was no longer languaging itself so that a young generation could hear themselves reflected within this medium. Young people increasingly found themselves excluded, especially with the advent of ‘Europeanised’/‘bubble gum’ versions of disco music being broadcast, which to
many, lacked soul, spontaneity, and was too formulaic and mechanical. New York began to lose its connection with funk music during this time and so acts such as James Brown and George Clinton went unheard in favour of generic disco music. With this backdrop in mind, a void was being created and hip-hop was set to fill it. Rap music was therefore a direct response to the watered down, ‘Europeanised’ disco music that permeated the airwaves at that time. Indeed, block party DJs would play the funk music that otherwise would have gone unheard.

The lack of traditional musical skill needed gave rap a ‘hands-on’ quality, making it an ideal medium for inner city youth to voice views or vent frustration regarding issues such as interracial violence, poverty and unemployment (issues that were a consequence of the ghettoisation of the Bronx district and its labelling as a ‘no-go’ area) (Lipsitz 1994). Rap “was the first form of black music where its originators couldn’t care less what white people thought of them” (Neal, 2002: 122). It originated as a cross-cultural product and most early practitioners - including DJ Kool Herc, DJ Hollywood, and Afrika Bambaataa - were either first or second-generation Americans of Caribbean ancestry. Herc and Hollywood are both credited with introducing the Jamaican style of cutting and mixing (heard in Jamaican dub music) into the musical culture of the South Bronx (Tate, 2003). George (1998) calls this group of people the ‘old school’ or the ‘founding fathers’: “a loose community of energetic, creative, and rather naive young people from the Bronx and upper Manhattan who reached adolescence in the ‘70s...by naive, I mean the spirit of openhearted innocence that created hip-hop culture” (George, 1998: 20).

**DJ KOOL HERC**

As I will discuss further in the next chapter, by most accounts, Herc was the first DJ to buy two copies of the same (usually obscure) record for just a 15-second break (a rhythmic instrumental segment) in the middle. By mixing back and forth between the two copies, he was able to double, triple, or indefinitely extend the break. In so doing, Here effectively deconstructed and reconstructed so-called found sound, using the turntable as a musical instrument. For DJs at the time:
The important part of the record was the break—the part of a tune in which the drums took over. It could be the explosive Tito Puente style of Latin timbales to be heard on Jimmy Castor records; the loose funk drumming of countless ‘60s soul records by legends like James Brown or Dyke and the Blazers; even the foursquare bass-drum and snare intros adored by heavy metal and hard rockers like Thin Lizzy and the Rolling Stones. That was when the dancers flew and DJs began cutting between the same few bars on the two turntables, extending the break into an instrumental (Toop, 1984: 14).

While he was ‘cutting’ with two turntables, Herc would also perform with the microphone in a Jamaican ‘toasting’ style—joking, boasting, and using myriad in-group references, all broadcast through his huge Jamaican style ‘Herculoid’ sound system. Herc eventually enhanced his presentation by employing a friend named Coke La Rock to be his official master of ceremonies (or MC), his job being to introduce and comment on the selection being played. “La Rock didn’t rap as we’d recognise it now but was more in the style of the Jamaican sound system toasters or black radio announcers hyping a record...some old-schoolers assert that La Rock was the first hip hop rapper” (George, 1998: 18). Herc's musical parties eventually gained notoriety and were often documented on cassette tapes that were recorded with the relatively new ‘boombox’, or ‘blaster’, technology. Taped duplicates of these parties rapidly made their way through the Bronx, Brooklyn, and uptown Manhattan, spawning a number of similar DJ acts. George (ibid) asserts that Herc’s contributions were essentially musical, but Afrika Bambaataa’s (one of the new breed of DJs) may have been sociological. “If Kool Herc is the base, then Bambaataa and Flash are twin pillars who complemented and extended the original version” (ibid: 45)

AFRIKA BAMBAATAA

Afrika Bambaataa (the original name was that of a late nineteenth century Zulu chief, meaning ‘affectionate leader’) was the first important Black Muslim in rap (the Muslim presence would become very influential in the late 1980s). Bambaataa often engaged in sound-system battles with Herc, similar to the so-called ‘cutting’ contests in jazz a generation earlier and of course the sound system battles in Jamaica, which gave rise to both ska and
reggae. The sound system competitions were held at city parks, where hot-wired street lamps supplied electricity, or at local clubs. Bambaataa sometimes mixed sounds from rock music recordings and television shows into the standard funk and disco fare that Herc and most of his followers relied upon. By using rock records, Bambaataa extended rap beyond the immediate reference points of contemporary black youth culture and gave his work an electric, multiethnic quality (ibid).

During one legendary battle against Disco King Mario, Bambaataa opened his show with the theme song from *The Andy Griffith Show*, taped off his television set. He mixed the ditty with a rocking drumbeat, followed it with the Monster’s theme song, and quickly changed gears with ‘I Got the Feeling’ by James Brown. His knack for coming up with unexpected cuts and ‘bugging out’ the audience earned him the title Master of Records (Hager, 1982: 20).

By the 1990’s any sound source was considered fair game and rap producers borrowed sounds from such disparate sources as Israeli folk music, bebop, jazz records and television news broadcasts.

**GRANDMASTER FLASH**

Now better known as a recording artist, and a Rock n’ Roll Hall of Famer (along with his crew ‘The Furious Five’ who were the first rap artists to be inducted in 2007) Grandmaster Flash created several purely technical DJ innovations. Grand Wizard Theodore may have introduced the technique of scratching in 1978 to produce rhythmic patterns, but Flash was the one who made it matter (George, 1998). ‘Punch phrasing’ meant playing a quick burst from a record on one turntable while it continued on the other, and ‘break spinning’ involved spinning both records backward to repeat the same phrase over and over. Flash was more of a showman than either Herc or Bambataa, and he mixed and entertained in equal measure. Tricks that are still used to this day, such as the aforementioned ‘break spinning’ with his back to the turntables and using his feet to mix, were products of his fertile imagination (ibid). “By playing short, rapid-fire cuts from a variety of records, while at the same time maintaining a steady dance beat, Flash created the art of the musical collage” (Hager, 1982:
21). Grandmaster Flash also began experimenting with an electronic percussion machine called the ‘beat box’. Over a musical track mixed by Flash, Melle Mel, and the other four rappers whom made up The Furious Five, created an angry, aggressive, percussive style of rapping that placed much greater emphasis on rhythm and rhyme. By relying on an inventive use of urban slang and the staccato effect of short words and unexpected internal rhymes, the art of rapping was elevated to another level and elaborate rap routines resulted which were immediately copied by every other MC in the Bronx and helped to shift the attention away from the DJ’s and onto the rappers (ibid).

1979 - FATBACK BAND AND THE SUGARHILL GANG

Until 1979, little attempt had been made to spread the subculture we now collectively call hip-hop beyond the boundaries of New York city. Rap music had been transmitted primarily through live cassette recordings of soundsystems, which were played loudly around the city via ghetto blasters (a portable tape machine). In 1979 the first two rap records appeared: ‘King Tim III (Personality Jock),’ recorded by the Fatback Band featuring King Tim, a radio personality, released in July of that year, and in October ‘Rapper's Delight,’ by The Sugarhill Gang. George (1998) notes that ‘King Tim III’ caused a ripple in hip-hop circles, but ‘Rapper’s Delight’ was a tidal wave worldwide. The record “is regarded as the signal barrier breaker, birthing hip-hop and consolidating the infant art form’s popularity” (Dyson, 1991: 12-13). Rap was unnoticed by mainstream music and popular culture industries prior to entrepreneur Sylvia Robinson releasing ‘Rappers Delight’ (Rose, 1994). Encompassing a series of verses recited by the three (formerly unknown) members of The Sugarhill Gang, the track became a US national hit, reaching number 36 on the US *Billboard* magazine popular music charts. The spoken content, mostly braggadocio spiced with fantasy, was derived largely from a pool of material used by most of the rappers around at that time (such as Grandmaster Caz). The backing track was supplied by hired studio musicians, who replicated the basic groove of the hit song ‘Good Times’ (1979) by the American disco group Chic. “In retrospect, it makes perfect sense that a no-name group using partly stolen rhymes—would have been the first to tap hip-hop’s platinum potential...they had no expectations to fulfil, no street reputations to keep, no regular audience to please, and absolutely no consequences if they failed” (Chang, 2005: 129).
I said a hip hop the hippie the hippie
To the hip hip hop, a you don’t stop
The rock it to the bang bang boogie say up jumped the boogie
To the rhythm of the boogie, the beat
Now what you hear is not a test - I'm rappin’ to the beat
And me, the groove, and my friends are gonna try to move your feet
See I am Wonder Mike and I like to say hello
To the black, to the white, the red, and the brown, the purple and yellow
But first I gotta bang bang the boogie to the boogie
Say up jump the boogie to the bang bang boogie
Let's rock, you don’t stop
Rock the riddle that will make your body rock

‘Rapper’s Delight’ was thus tailor-made to travel, to be perfectly accessible to listeners around the world who had never heard of rap or hip-hop or The Bronx (Chang, 2005). Perceived as novel by many white Americans, it quickly inspired ‘Rapture’ (1980) by the new-wave band Blondie, as well as a number of other popular records, such as Kurtis Blow’s platinum selling ‘Christmas Rappin’ (released in late 1979, the first rap single on a major label) and ‘The Breaks (Part I)’, released in 1980. Compared to what was to follow, Dyson (1991) regards these early days as ‘benignly parasitic’.

1982, BAMBAATAA ‘PLANET ROCK’ AND FLASH ‘THE MESSAGE’

In 1982, Afrika Bambaataa's (along with ‘The Soul Sonic Force’) ‘Planet Rock’ became the first rap record to use synthesizers and an electronic drum machine. With this recording, rap artists began to create their own backing tracks rather than simply offering the work of others in a new context. The single achieved gold status (although its influence far outweighs the number of copies sold) and was an immediate club success. Malcolm McLaren, the creator and manager of the Sex Pistols, addressed the 1982 New Music Seminar in New York with the following words:
‘Planet Rock’ is the most rootsy folk music around...the only music that’s coming out of New York City which has tapped and directly related to that guy in the streets with his ghetto blaster. The record is like an adventure story; it’s like that guy walking down the street. And, if Elvis Presley was that in the fifties, then Afrika Bambaataa is that for the eighties...This music has a magical air about it because it’s not trapped by the preconditioning and evaluation of what a pop record has to be (cited in Hager, 1982: 25).

According to Chang (2005), ‘Planet Rock’ perfectly captured Bambaataa’s air of mystery with its stripped down sound, framed by swooping, synthesized orchestral stabs. The synthesizer sounds were mixed with those from a vocoder and blended with the rhythm of a drum machine (the first rap single to use this device as mentioned). The style of production was influenced by electro acts Kraftwerk and Gary Newman and funk legend George Clinton. Tom Silverman, owner of the fledgling ‘Tommy Boy’ label which the single was released on, stated:

‘Planet Rock’ had more impact than any record I’ve ever been involved in...The only record I can think of in the hip-hop movement that maybe had more of an impact was ‘Rapper’s Delight’ because that’s the first one that opened the door. But ‘Planet Rock’ took it in a whole ‘nother way. That was the record that initiated that it wasn’t just an urban thing, it was inclusive. It was okay for rockers, new wavers, uptown coming downtown. That’s when they started pouring in from France and England to cover hip-hop. That’s when hip-hop became global (cited in ibid: 173).

A year later, Bambaataa introduced the sampling capabilities of synthesizers on ‘Looking for the Perfect Beat’ (1983). It displayed quick mixing, in which sound bites as short as one or two seconds were combined for a collage effect. Quick mixing paralleled the rapid-editing style of television advertising used at the time.

Shortly after the advent of quick mixing, Grandmaster Flash’s partner Melle Mel composed the first extended stories in rhymed rap. Up to this point, most of the words heard over the work of disc jockeys such as Herc, Bambaataa, and Flash had been improvised phrases and expressions. The result was the now legendary ‘The Message’, released on the Sugar Hill Records label in May 1982. This helped to further boost the rapper’s profile over that of the DJ. “The picture this song painted of inner-city life for black Americans-the hues of dark
social misery and stains of profound urban catastrophe-screeched against the canvas of most suburban sensibilities” (Dyson, 1991: 13). The song made the pages of the *New York Times* in September 1982, and is cited as being responsible “for creating what we now call hip-hop culture” (Stephens, 1991: 30). Adler (1983) calls ‘The Message’ an ‘apocalyptic’ rap anthem. If ‘Planet Rock’ portrayed universal communion and transcendence, ‘The Message’ delivered ghetto strife and specificity. ‘The Message’ was too slow to ‘rock’ a crowd, which in turn focused attention on the vivid lyrics and delivery that was resigned and enraged in equal measure.

Broken glass everywhere
People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away but I couldn't get far
'Cuz a man with a tow truck repossessed my car

Don't push me 'cuz I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
Uh huh ha ha ha
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under

**SAMPLING**

“Rap is a highly appropriate music, borrowing inventively from myriad sources in the creation of new sonic forms” (Forman, 2004: 11). Sampling (or recontextualising) brought into question the ownership of sound. Some artists claimed that by sampling recordings of a prominent black artist, such as funk musician James Brown, they were challenging white corporate America and the recording industry's right to own black cultural expression. More
problematic was the fact that rap artists were also challenging Brown's and other musicians' right to own, control, and be compensated for the use of their intellectual creations. By the early 1990’s a system had been implemented whereby most artists requested permission and negotiated some form of compensation for the use of samples, ending a more liberal use of musical samples throughout the 80’s. George (1998) maintains that old soul and funk performers, on the whole, were not aggressive about chasing royalties, or rather they were used to being ripped off. When progressive groups such as Public Enemy and De La Soul began expanding beyond black music for samples, into the realms of rock and pop, contention resulted. 70’s balladeer Gilbert O’ Sullivan sued the record label ‘Cold Chillin’ because of its signee Biz Markie using an unauthorised sample of his 1972 hit ‘Alone Again (Naturally)’. O’ Sullivan insisted that all pressings were recalled and that it was not sold until the song was removed. The 1960’s band The Turtles sued De La Soul for using a snippet of one of their records, resulting in a costly out-of-court settlement. This has brought about all composers of samples being formerly credited. Some commonly sampled performers, such as funk musician George Clinton, released compact discs containing dozens of sound bites specifically to facilitate sampling.

One effect of sampling was a newfound sense of musical history among black youth. Earlier artists such as Brown and Clinton were celebrated as cultural heroes and their older recordings were reissued and repopularised. Rap moved sampling technology to a central place in music production, the same way R&B did with the electric guitar and bass in the ‘50s and Stevie Wonder did with the synthesizer in the ‘70s. Rap is seen to thematise the eclectic pastiche and cannibalisation of past styles that is central to the postmodern: “its plundering and mixing of past sources has no respect for period, genre, and style distinctions: it cannibalizes and combines what it wants with no concern to preserve the formal integrity, aesthetic intention, or historical context of the records it plunders” (Shusterman, 2000: 70-71).

THE MID 80’S - MOVE TO MAINSTREAM- (BEASTIE BOYS, RUN DMC ETC)

Over the five years following its first release on record, rap music was ‘discovered’ by the music industry, the print media, the fashion industry and the film industry (Rose 1994), each
of which hurried to cash in on this supposed passing fad. During the mid-1980’s, rap moved from the fringes of hip-hop culture to the mainstream of the American music industry as white musicians began to embrace the new style. In 1986 rap reached the top ten on the US *Billboard* pop charts with ‘(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (To Party!)’ by the Beastie Boys (which was included on their 5 times platinum seller, ‘Licensed to Ill’) and ‘Walk This Way’ by Run-DMC and Aerosmith (both released on ‘Def Jam’ records). Known for incorporating rock music into its raps, Run-DMC became one of the first rap groups to be featured regularly on MTV (Music Television), and to record the first gold rap album, the self-titled long player ‘Run-DMC’ in 1984 (500,000 copies sold) and the first rap album to go triple platinum (3 million sold) with 1986’s ‘Raising Hell’. Samuels (1995) states that Run-DMC’s first three albums blazed the trail that rap would travel into the musical mainstream. “Run-DMC is widely recognised as the progenitor of modern rap’s integration of social commentary, creatively diverse musical elements, and uncompromised cultural identification - and integration that pushed the music into the mainstream and secured its future as an American musical genre with an identifiable tradition” (Dyson, 1991: 14).

Run-DMC are seen by Chang (2005) as one of the fundamental reasons that hip-hop’s centre shifted away from The Bronx. The trio hailed from Queens, and by 1984 were the biggest crew in rap music. Their stripped-down look and sound became a reaction to the old school style that had been prevalent before their emergence. Shiny suits were replaced by black leather jackets and black denim jeans, booming drum machines and echoing raps contrasted sharply with its house-band disco rhythm and crisp electro polyrhythm predecessors. Their early hits ‘It’s Like That’ and ‘Sucker MCs’ created a tectonic shift in rap music (ibid) which resulted in the displacement of existing perceptions of commercial viability for rap music, and any notions of it being a ‘passing fad’. The tempo was slowed, the beats sounded more rugged, the rhymes more vicious. Run-DMC is to be the second rap act (after Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five) to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, in 2009.

Also during the mid-1980’s, the first female rap group of consequence, Salt-N-Pepa, released the singles ‘The Show Stoppa’ (1985) and ‘Push It’ (1987); ‘Push It’ reached the US top 20 on the *Billboard* pop charts. The mid-late 80s signalled the trend of ‘pop’ rap with acts ‘crossing over’ into the mainstream. Acts such as The Fat Boys, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince and Tone Loc all had huge success worldwide with multi-platinum sales (Dyson, 1991). Due to Def Jam’s epochal feat of pop integration, a rap signing blitz was unleashed.
Major labels realised that rap music was not a passing fad and that they were missing out on an opportunity. Their black music departments were outdated, having previously been geared towards promoting expensive R&B (modern soul distinct from earlier rhythm and blues) acts that appealed to middle-class sensibilities. “By the end of 1986, and continuing for the better part of a decade, majors moved in the other direction, trying to sign every rap act they could. It was one of those rare moments in pop music history where major-label disorientation left the door open for any visionary to walk through and do something radical” (Chang, 2005: 246).

**LATE 80’S - BLACK POLITICS (PUBLIC ENEMY, BDP)**

In the late 1980’s, a large segment of rap became highly politicised, resulting in the most overt social agenda in popular music since the urban folk movement of the 1960’s. The group Public Enemy, with its black nationalist political articulations (Rose 1994), and Boogie Down Productions, epitomised this political style of rap. Public Enemy came to prominence with their second album, ‘It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back’ (1988), and the theme song ‘Fight the Power’ from the motion picture ‘Do the Right Thing’ (1989), by American filmmaker Spike Lee. Proclaiming the importance of rap in black American culture, Public Enemy's lead MC, Chuck D, referred to it as the African-American CNN (Cable News Network) and Public Enemy called themselves ‘the Black Panthers of rap’. This political movement coincided with the playful Afro-centricity, tongue-in-cheek spoof of rap’s aggressive masculinity from groups such as De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah, and Black Sheep.

The politicism/pro-black stance of the late ‘80s extended to album covers. On Public Enemy’s debut ‘Yo! Bum Rush the Show’ (1987) and Boogie Down Productions’ debut ‘Criminal Minded’ (1987), both crews were depicted in dimly lit basements, conveying an air of Black Panther-style militancy. Public Enemy’s cover carried the message ‘The Government’s Responsible...The Government’s Responsible...The Government’s Responsible...’ across the bottom. Scott La Rock and KRS-One (meaning Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everybody), who made up Boogie Down Productions, were bunkered down in the Bronx with handguns, ammo belt, and grenade. After the murder of Scott La Rock, KRS-One posed for Boogie Down Productions’ second album, ‘By All Means
Necessary’ (1988), alone, peering from behind a window curtain for enemies below, gripping an Uzi and recreating the infamous pose of Malcolm X and his rifle two decades previously. The album title is an often quoted statement made by Malcolm X himself. Chang (2005) reasons that the old school had more in common with Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, Rufus Thomas and Slim Gaillard. The black radicalism of P.E and B.D.P is seen to carry on the tradition of the Watts Prophets. the Last Poets, H. Rap Brown, and Gil Scott-Heron. The ‘bumrush’ meant to force media, both black and white, to listen to the voiceless and to represent them truthfully without any of the glitz associated with old school and R&B (as mentioned, the modern commercial soul variety). Chuck D proclaimed that:

R&B teaches you to shuffle your feet, be laid back, don’t be offensive, don’t make no waves because, ‘look at us! We’re fitting in as well as we can!’...The point is that there’s no hard information in any of these formats. Where’s the news about our lives in this country? Whether or not radio plays us, millions of people listen to rap because rap is America’s TV station. Rap gives you the news on all phases of life, good and bad, pretty and ugly: drugs, sex, education, love, money, war, peace- you name it (cited in Allen, 1988: 250-251).

Chang (2005) calls this aggressive approach to the music business ‘agit-prop’. Public Enemy’s message was ripe with militaristic symbolism. The British press embraced them, but their relationship with American music scribes was often vituperative through accusations of anti-Semitism and pro-black separatism.

‘GANGSTA RAP’ (NWA AND AFFILIATES)

Alongside the rise of political and Afro-centric rap came the introduction of ‘gangsta’ rap, which attempts to depict an outlaw lifestyle of sex, drugs, and violence in inner-city America. Chang (ibid) traces the origin of ‘gangsta’ rap to the NWA (Niggaz With Attitude) single ‘Gangsta Gangsta’ (1988). “Gangsta-rap was not so much about gangster lives as about a metaphorical, solemn, doom-laden recreation of the noir/thriller atmosphere of the urban drug culture. Gangsta rap was about the mythology and the metaphysics of the gang life, with sexual and criminal overtones.” (Scaruffi, (URL). It was highly regarded as the ‘new punk rock’ (Chang, 2005), bringing forth aspects of threat, theatrics, oppression and rebellion in
equal measure. Although predated by Schooly D’s ‘PSK’ and Ice T’s ‘6 In The Mornin’ (both singles released in 1986), in 1988 the first major album of ‘gangsta’ rap was released: ‘Straight Outta Compton’ by NWA. Journalist Joan Morgan, writing in 1990, called the album “nothing short of demonic” and “the must fucked-up, violent, sexist rap album I’d ever heard” (Morgan, 1990: 92). Their music has been described as a “rap mural of ghetto life, spray painted with blood” (Koza, 1994: 178) and a redefined ‘reality’ that emphasises ghettocentric futility, with white stereotypes of black people being blown up, restyled, and thrown back in white people’s faces (Aaron, 1998).

NWA captured the twists and turns of daily inner city life whilst existing on the margins of society. “With their urban-canyon echoing drums and casual descriptions of explosive violence, the new myths of crack, guns, and gangs sounded a lot larger than life. On Straight Outta Compton, they reached their apotheosis” (Chang, 2005: 317). Songs from the album generated an extraordinary amount of controversy because of their violent attitudes and representations of moral degradation, which in turn inspired protests from a number of organisations, including the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), which involved a warning letter from the FBI assistant director and an on-stage arrest when NWA performed the following:

FUCK THA POLICE
COMIN STRAIGHT FROM THE UNDERGROUND
YOUNG NIGGA GOT IT BAD CUZ I'M BROWN
AND NOT THE OTHER COLOUR SO POLICE THINK
THEY HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO KILL A MINORITY
FUCK THAT SHIT, CUZ I AIN'T THA ONE
FOR A PUNK MUTHAFUCKA WITH A BADGE AND A GUN
TO BE BEATIN’ ON, AND THROWN IN JAIL
WE COULD GO TOE TO TOE IN THE MIDDLE OF A CELL
FUCKIN’ WITH ME CUZ I'M A TEENAGER
WITH A LITTLE BIT OF GOLD AND A PAGER
SEARCHIN MY CAR, LOOKIN’ FOR THE PRODUCT
THINKIN’ EVERY NIGGA IS SELLIN’ NARCOTICS
YOU'D RATHER SEE ME IN THE PEN
THEN ME AND LORENZO ROLLIN’ IN THE BENZO
Beat tha police outta shape  
And when I'm finished, bring the yellow tape  

However, attempts to censor ‘gangsta’ rap only served to publicise the music and make it more attractive to both black and white youth respectively. “White America’s favourite phantasm- the sexually potent, paranoid, heavily armed, black male outlaw; in NWA’s words, the ‘gangsta’ was back, bigger and deffer than ever” (Aaron, 1998: 212). With its claims of street authenticity, its teen rebellion, and its manifestation of urban stereotype “gangsta rap fit hand-in-glove with a multicultural youth demographic weaned on racism and Reaganism, the first generation in a half century to face downward mobility” (Chang, 2005: 320). ‘Straight Outta Compton’ impacted upon American popular culture with much the same force as the Sex Pistols’ ‘Never Mind the Bollocks’ had in the UK eleven years earlier. NWA became a platform for launching the solo careers of some of the most influential rappers and rap producers in the ‘gangsta’ style, including Dr. Dre, Ice Cube (who was further criticised for racism on his solo track ‘Black Korea’ which targeted Korean store owners in black urban areas), and Eazy-E. As rap became increasingly part of the American mainstream in the 1990’s, political rap became less prominent while ‘gangsta’ rap, as epitomised by the Geto Boys, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and Tupac Shakur, grew in popularity. Once ‘gangsta’ rap had crossed over into the mainstream, it proved to be more than just the ‘new punk rock’; it became a formidable tool against the suppression of youth culture, albeit a music that was hard to defend. Critics argued that it sometimes seemed less about a catalyst for progressive discussion or the objective reporting of social despair and more about the regression of black people into walking talking stereotypes (ibid). ‘Straight Outta Compton’ marked the beginning of hip-hop’s obsession with ‘the real’.

From now on, rappers had to represent-to scream for the unheard and otherwise speak the unspeakable. Life on the hair-trigger margin-with all of its unpredictability, contradiction, instability, menace, tragedy and irony, with its death and resistance - needed to be described in its passionate complexity, painted in bold strokes, framed in wide angles, targeted with laser precision. A generation needed to assassinate its demons (ibid: 328).
THE INFLUENCE OF RAP ON YOUTH

Since the mid-1980s rap music has greatly influenced both black and white cultures in North America and the world over. Much of the slang of hip-hop culture, including such terms as ‘diss’, ‘dope’, ‘holla’, ‘chill’, and ‘wack', have become standard parts of the vocabulary of a significant number of young people of various ethnic origins. Many rap enthusiasts assert it functions as a voice for a community without access to the mainstream media. According to advocates, rap serves to engender self-pride, self-help, and self-improvement, communicating a positive and fulfilling sense of black history that is largely absent from other American institutions. Political rap artists have spurred interest in the Black Muslim movement as articulated by Minister Louis Farrakhan, generating much criticism from those who view Farrakhan as a racist.

Rap music has emerged as one of the most distinctive and controversial music genres of the past three decades. It is an informational medium to tune into, one that describes the rage of African-Americans facing growing oppression, declining opportunities for advancement, changing moods on the streets, and everyday life as a matter of sheer survival. In turn, it has become a cultural virus, circulating its images, sounds, and attitude throughout the culture and body politic. Given the relatively low expenses in producing and distributing popular music, black artists and producers themselves have often controlled this mode of musical production and have been able to create a form of communication relatively free of censorship and control by the dominant class and social groups. Moreover, rap is part of a vibrant hip-hop culture that itself has become a dominant style and ethos throughout the world today, as can be seen in the worldwide effect that it has had on things such as advertising, right down to how vast numbers of young people dress and talk in countries around the globe.

CONTEMPORARY HIP-HOP AND RAMPANT COMMERCIALISATION

“In 1991, a new data-tracking system called Soundscan transformed the music industry when *Billboard* magazine switched its weekly record charts to the new programme” (Chang, 2005: 416). Prior to this, *Billboard* had based their charts on a network of retail reporters, which was very much open to bias. Afrika Bambataa’s ‘Planet Rock’, for example, sold 15,000
copies a week at its commercial peak and indeed was eventually certified gold, but only scratched to a highest position of 47 within the old system. Soundscan’s innovation enabled bar-code reading to tally actual sales for the first time, the results of which shocked the music industry to its very core. Independently distributed NWA’s second album ‘Efil4zaggin’ (Niggaz4life read backwards) debuted at number two, whilst simultaneously dozens of formerly ‘big-bank’ pop and rock bands tumbled off the charts. Certainly, common perception and reality had been two separate entities. “What the industry thought were mere niche markets-country, metal, and rap-were in fact the biggest things going...Suddenly rap appeared to have boundless crossover potential. Apparently lots of suburbanites and whites were down with a ‘Niggaz 4 Life’ program. Soundscan told the music industry what the kids had been trying to tell them for years” (ibid). Mass marketers, such as Nike, Adidas and Pepsi, had embraced hip-hop increasingly from the mid ‘80s, and began to climb upon the urban, multicultural ‘gravy train’. Run-DMC, for example, popularised Adidas footwear via the song ‘My Adidas’ and in their videos (elevating the brand to hip-hop cult status) and were given a contract to formally promote its product as a result, the first rap act to achieve such a feat. This set the precedent for the intense relationship between hip-hop culture and brand advertising which continues to this day.

Black radio, which had ignored black working class sensibilities in the 1970’s and 1980’s, as I have mentioned earlier, was forced to re-think. ‘Safe’ crossover acts such as Lionel Ritchie and Michael Jackson were replaced with a hardened ‘urban’ sound, as a direct result of hip-hop culture, in effect reversing the audience back to the ghetto, the way it had previously been in the 1960’s. The properties of a new racial dynamic and a sweeping cultural change in the streets of the 90’s were reflected in black radio output (ibid). Elevating further the status of hip-hop culture, and in particular rap music, was its acceptance by MTV. Yo! MTV Raps, launched in the summer of 1988, quickly became the network’s most watched show, five whole years after Michael Jackson had first broken the ‘colour line’. It seemed a long time coming, but the results were immediate. Within a year, MTV had gone from almost no rap videos to twelve hours of rap programming a week, and the explosion continued. In the present day, MTV has an entire channel, MTV Base, dedicated to contemporary rap and R&B. “Urban style no longer trickled up from multiracial networks of cool, but was instantly available via remote control to vanilla suburbs...television had brought middle America closer to a generation’s rage than ever before” (ibid: 419). In a much discussed essay published in The Source magazine (which now has a circulation of around 500,000 worldwide every
Chicago graffiti writer William ‘Upski’ Wimsatt, in an article entitled ‘We Use Words Like Mackadocious’ (later reprinted in his book Bomb The Suburbs), attacked the sudden influx of what he deemed ‘wiggers’ into hip-hop culture: “One day the rap audience may be as white as tables in a jazz club, and rap will become just another platform for every white ethnic group-not only the Irish-to express their suddenly funky selves” (Wimsatt, 1994: 73). The co-founder of The Source, David Mays, commented on hip-hop’s meteoric rise when interviewed in 1994: “This isn’t a niche market, or just an ethnic market...Hip-hop is like rock and roll was twenty-five years ago. It’s a music-driven lifestyle being lived by an entire generation of young people now...this market is dying to be marketed to” (cited in Kerwin and Warner, 1994: 48).

In marketing terms, hip-hop had became a lifestyle business by the early 1990’s, with its relentless push towards the mainstream, and has continued to do so. ‘Gangsta’ rap increasingly became less about public outrage and more about being considered care-free ‘all-American’ music by 1992, the year which saw the release of Dr. Dre’s magnum opus ‘The Chronic’. Rap had gone from niche to commercial, from disposable to indispensable, and a previously non-profitable generation were assimilated, categorised and made profitable (ibid). In the way of artistic integrity often came a somewhat predatory, mercenary, ‘right here right now’ ethos, which still prevails today. “At the turn of the century the hip-hop generation was now at the centre of a global capitalist process generating billions in revenues” (ibid: 447). Today the biggest artists are brands themselves, and often spectacle outweighs actual quality of artistic output. Indeed, 50 Cent, one of the most successful rappers on the planet, starts up ‘beef’ with fellow artists simply to generate further sales in anticipation of a new release. Commercial rap, unlike its distant underground relative, is more akin to the dynamics inherent within WWF wrestling (macho posturing, acting) than any relationship to its old school ancestors. Groups of young people do keep the candle somewhat burning, the so-called ‘conscious’ and ‘back pack’ rappers (genre labels now dominate rap music, whereas before abject commercialism everything fell under the same banner and rap was just that, rap) are considered niche, and have more in common with a Melle Mel or a Chuck D than anything currently in the mass media spotlight. “By the turn of the century, to be labelled a ‘conscious’ or ‘political’ rapper by the music industry was to be condemned to preach to a very small choir (ibid: 448).
HIP HOP AS THE POSTMODERN

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MODERN AND POSTMODERN MUSIC

As a musical condition, postmodern music does not have any one particular style, technique or characteristic. The music of modernity was viewed primarily as a means of expression while, in contrast, the music of postmodernity is valued more as a spectacle, good for mass consumption, and an indicator of group identity. For example, one significant role of music in postmodern society is to act as a badge by which people can signify their identity as a member of a particular subculture (Kramer, 1999). The difference between modern music and postmodern music is that modernist music was characterised by a focus on musical fundamentals and expression. In postmodern music, however, the commodity being sold by record companies and pop stars is not the fundamentals of the music, but the cultural image surrounding the music, which reverberates through film, television, and other media. Shusterman (2000) believes that rap “is a postmodern popular art that challenges some of our most deeply entrenched aesthetic conventions, conventions that are common not only to modernism as an artistic style and ideology but to the philosophical doctrine of modernity and its differentiation of cultural spheres” (ibid: 61). He defines the characteristics of postmodernism as a focus on appropriation and recycling as opposed to unique original creation, an eclectic mixing of styles, an embrace of new technology and mass consumer culture, a challenging of modernist traits of artistic purity and an emphasis on the localised and temporal rather than the universal and eternal. Rap challenges the traditional ideal of radical originality and uniqueness that has long formulated the traditional conception of art. “Thus, even if we reject the whole category of postmodernism, these features are essential for understanding rap” (ibid). Rap’s cut and paste aesthetic corresponds to Jameson’s notion of postmodernity, being representative of its ‘schizophrenic fragmentation’ and ‘collage effect’ (Jameson, 1984).

POSTMODERN SAMPLING

Stylistically, rap music arguably stands between the modern and the postmodern, deploying postmodern techniques of sampling, quotation and collage of various sounds for modern
purposes of self-expression, and articulating social critique and rebellion. Rap has a close relation with musical technologies and can be seen as a form of technoculture, for while it depends heavily on the voice and diction for its effects, its production involves highly skilled use of new musical technologies. While early rap music mocked the technical sophistication of disco through the medium of a technically versatile DJ's manipulation of turntables, and while some early rap was technically primitive, later rap evolved into a highly complex tapestry of sound, using sampling, multi-track overlay, computers, and a variety of sophisticated mixing techniques. There is, in fact, often not much ‘real’ or ‘original’ music, but simply basic drum beats and guitar riffs, overlaid with recorded sounds.

Sampling can be seen as a challenge to mainstream popular music. Similarly, Back (1996) shows that a ‘cut and mix’ form is achieved in musical terms in rap music beats, as fragments of music across a range of genres are taken from their original context (sampled) and are recombined to make new pieces of music, turning consumption into production (Potter, 1995). Musical forms from all areas are “appropriated, recycled, pastiched, mutated, and recombined” (Mitchell, 1996: 12). This quality has led some theorists to suggest that rap is a postmodern music, as mentioned, where the reassembling of songs and sound bites from different genres, eras and cultures of music corresponds with the blurring of stylistic boundaries now occurring across a range of cultural and artistic concerns. Rap is a form of fusion that draws on many divergent musical styles (Neal 2002). “By re-editing the extracts, they change the meaning of what people in power think they’re saying” (Hebdige 1987: 145). Back (1996) states that through rap, new forms of cultural syncretism have become possible, whereas Potter (1995) states that it rebuilds art from parts, both mobile and recombinant. Mitchell (1996) suggests that rap’s eclectic pastiche and cannibalisation of past styles is central to the postmodern and opposed to the rational, disembodied, and formalised aesthetic of modernism. Conceptually, it has always understood postmodern irony; sampling the best beats and hooks from anything from old soul tunes to kid’s TV (Neate, 2003).

Starting around 1987-88, Public Enemy and other rap groups began experimenting with multilayered sound collage, appropriating sounds from contemporary media culture, everyday life, and the archive of the voices of black radicalism. “All that rhetoric is intensified with heavy-metal vigour by a tapestry of samples that set standards few have come close to since” (George, 1998: 84). Thus, the DJ or mixer, such as Public Enemy's Terminator X, have played an important part in the production of the sound of rap, and are
often respected accordingly. At this moment, rap articulated with a postmodern aesthetic of sampling, quotation, and appropriation, thus becomes part of the postmodern turn in culture. Sampling (also known as ‘sonic shop-lifting’), is sometimes done respectfully in the manner of quotation, sometimes ironically in the mode of juxtaposition, and sometimes satirically or critically by counterpoising a romantic love song with misogynous lyrics or violent street sounds. Rap groups regularly sample black classics like James Brown, but also engage in crossover poaching with DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince ironically sampling the ‘I Dream of Jeannie’ theme for their rap ‘Girls Ain't Nuttin' But Trouble.’ The group De La Soul created something of a scandal by sampling an Aerosmith song in the early 1990s, but by now this is accepted as normal, as, for example, when Coolio sampled (‘interpolated’) Kool and the Gang's song ‘Too Hot’ to make its catchy riff and lyrics more relevant for the ‘90s. “It’s a postmodern art in that it shamelessly raids older forms of pop culture- kung fu movies, chitlin’ circuit comedy, 70’s funk and other equally disparate sources- and reshapess the material to fit the personality of an individual artist and the tastes of the times” (ibid: vii).

**BRICOLAGE - CHANGING OF MEANING**

“If blues is the ‘classical’ music of African-American culture, and jazz is its ‘modernist’, then hip-hop has a powerful claim to be regarded as their postmodern successor” (Potter 1995: 18). Back compares the hip-hop DJ to the Levi-Strauss (1976) concept of ‘bricoleur’, as the DJ is a “craftsperson who makes use - in this case - of musical fragments in order to create new music” (Back, 1996:192). Bricolage is a French term, referring to the cultural transformation of the meanings of objects and symbols, first seen in youth cultural studies in the work of Hebdige (1979) who emphasised the bricoleurist quality of the British punk scene. Elements are appropriated from the dominant culture, and their meaning transformed, for example through ironic juxtapositions, to challenge and subvert that culture (Edgar, 1999).

**PUSHING BOUNDARIES AND DISMANTLING BORDERS**

Hip-hop and rap have influenced many other musical styles and cultures, breaking down boundaries between music, image, spectacle, and everyday life. Hence, rap is
becoming the familiar soundtrack to postmodern techno culture, and is part of advertising, film and TV, and the new digital and multimedia culture. As it knocks down borders between musical styles, absorbing every conceivable type of music, rap crosses the national borders of the world becoming a key component of global culture. Firmly ensonced in cyberspace and everyday life from London to Los Angeles, rap is becoming the flagship of the global popular, bringing style, attitude and voice to marginalised groups and hip entrepreneurs who package its sounds to a growing audience throughout the world. Practically, it was the first musical genre to rely almost exclusively on technology.

A dominant cultural form in many parts of the world, hip-hop is hybridising and localising, producing new cultural matrices from Sao Paolo to San Francisco. Rap articulates the hip-hop ethos and gives voice to the subcultures that are producing and circulating it. It is a new and democratizing cultural force, circulating ideas, images, sound, and style. It is becoming central to the new multimedia global culture and is an expression of a multicultural world with no borders and limits. Given to excess, it explodes boundaries of good taste and cultural propriety, bringing a new loud, plebeian and disruptive ethos into the interstices of the mainstream, announcing a multicultural and potentially subversive presence, as well as the vitality of marginalised culture in the new world (dis)order.

NON-TIME SPECIFIC - A FRAGMENTED WORLD

Potter (1995) sees the central trait of postmodernism as being its refusal of fixed or progressive models of time: “rappers situate themselves within a black diasporic time zone, outside the ‘official’ time of calendars and digital watches” (Potter, 1995:7). For instance the music of Tupac Shakur is still relevant and extremely popular today (in fact he has had more posthumous releases than he released when alive - and totalled up is the best selling rap artist of all time) despite his sudden murder at the age of 25 in 1996. His music, as is common, was not time-specific and so is still applicable to the next generation listening to it more than a decade later. Potter (1995) calls hip-hop’s triad of graffiti, dance and rap post-apocalyptic arts, thus, hip-hop aims for a world fragmented, aiming for a world made hole instead of the modernist yearning for the world made whole by art. “The overall impact of the
postmodernist condition is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of grounding, even if it is not informed by shared circumstances” (Potter, 1995:9). Hip-hop, for some, is an “ideally postmodernist phenomenon” (Mitchell, 1996: 22).

MODERNIST ELEMENTS IN RAP

In a postmodern media culture, there is evident pleasure in quotation, sampling, and mixing material from different sources and eras. Houston Baker, accordingly, describes rap as ‘postmodern’ by virtue of its "non-authoritative collaging or archiving of sound and styles that bespeaks a deconstructive hybridity. Linearity and progress yield to a dizzying synchronicity" (1993: 89). Like other postmodern artistic products, rap is eclectic and pastiche-oriented, and subverts modernist notions of authorship. However, from the perspective of the concept of postmodern culture marked by depthlessness, the absence of affect, the disintegration of the authorial voice, and so on, rap appears to also be somewhat modernist in form. Creating highly expressive modernist collage, the best rappers have distinct voices, styles, and messages, often related to modern politics. Thus, rap draws on both modernist and postmodernist strategies and is somewhere between the modern and the postmodern (Kellner, 1995).

MODERNIST COHERENCY AS OPPOSED TO FRAGMENTATION

Rhyming in complex patterns, rap songs create tension between the spontaneity of the performance and the fixity of the lyrics. Thus, in opposition to fragmentary, disconnected, flat, and one-dimensional postmodern texts, which only refer to themselves or lack depth of meaning, most rap music strongly signifies and the collaging often adds up to a political statement, rather than fragments of nonsense. This approach identifies with politics like '60s black radicalism or Afro-centrism, and uses transgressive sounds such as the noise of police cars, helicopters, bullets, glass breaking, and urban uprisings in order to underscore the tension, desperation, and violence in the inner cities.
THE TRANSITIONAL/HYBRID NATURE OF RAP

As I have shown, rap music subverts, if not rejects, traditional conceptions of art and morality. Rap is a postmodern aesthetic due to its extensive and pioneering use of sampling, however, this is counter-balanced by it drawing upon modernist associations with authenticity, ‘the voice from the street’. A subversion of traditional musical forms is thus shared with a concise form of self expression, making rap truly hybrid in nature. Manuel (1995) stresses that rap: “can be seen to combine postmodern techniques of pastiche, bricolage and blank irony with modernist socio-political protest” (ibid: 227). The postmodern juxtaposition and the combination of elements of disparate sources inherent within the backdrop of rap music can be contrasted with the macho boasts and vitriolic expression of the lyrics layered over the top of them. The dialogue presented can be seen in sharp contrast to the classic postmodern stances of chic irony, depersonalisation and de-signification (ibid). Many hardcore rap videos are also modernist in nature, instead of being situated in some form of synthetic virtual reality, the visual representation takes place in the specific social geography of the ghetto, with its abandoned buildings and brooding malevolence. To conclude, the postmodern and modern elements within rap music are integrally related in a coherent expressive framework as opposed to being in conflict or in awkward co-existence. Postmodern techniques are therefore utilised and capitalised upon to express predominantly modernist themes and imagery.
CHAPTER 4
THE ANTECEDENTS OF HIP-HOP

When we refer to the ‘black chord’, this relates to the lineage and musical continuum that resonates through the music that African descendants continue to forge mainly along the pathways of the old slavery trade routes linking North and South America, Britain and the Caribbean. This ‘black chord’ incorporates blues, soul, jazz, rap, ska, reggae, dancehall and samba amongst various other musical genres. In each territory, music is not only a source of enjoyment but also a means of identifying the artists’ communities. “With great tenacity, Africans throughout the diaspora have woven the black chord, as an assertion of strength and identity in an often hostile, constricting society” (Goldman, 1999: 9). Rap music in particular has drawn upon memories of Africa’s oral tradition in becoming the global language of contemporary society (Boyd, 1997). Indeed, rap is anything but new, its forebears stretch back through disco, street funk, radio DJ’s, Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, The Last Poets and Gil Scott Heron. This list also includes Muhammad Ali, acappella and doo-wop groups, ring games, skip-rope rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, ‘signifying’ and ‘the dozens’. The tradition can even be argued to extend all the way back to the griots of Nigeria and The Gambia (Toop, 2000), making rap’s roots ultimately the deepest in all of contemporary African-American music.

In developing this line of argument, it has been said that the distinctive vocal technique employed in rapping “can be traced from African bardic traditions to rural southern-based expressions of African-Americans - toast, tales, sermons, blues, game songs, and allied forms - all of which are recited in a chatted rhyme or poetic fashion” (Keyes, 1991: 40). In addition, Szwed (1999) recognises that the technologically sophisticated context in which rap emerged (the use of sound processing, sampling, mixing, drum machines, and various studio apparatus) is sophisticated but also notes that the artful logic which lies beneath these techniques has been part of African-American aesthetics for at least a century. He sees rap music as still being beholden to folklore and tradition. “On a diasporic flow chart, you could plot an unbroken line from Africa to the Caribbean and on to the United States” (Szwed, 1999: 3). Indeed, the musicality, expressivity, sexuality and ideology of rap have obvious historical, social, political and cultural continuity (Spencer, 1991).
Just as ragtime, jazz, R&B and other black musical idioms and forms entered mainstream culture on a cross-national basis earlier last century, today it is hip-hop culture and its distinctive sound of rap music that have became an important form of music and cultural style across the globe. Hip-hop erupted from the New York dance and party culture of the 1970s, as I explained in the previous chapter, encompassing dance and performance, visual art, multimedia, fashion and attitude. Rap is the musical genre for the new millennium due to its almost unique ability to switch with the times, remaining ever relevant because it absorbs key cultural influences, caters to contemporary local concerns, and fits neatly within present-day consumer culture. Rap music and hip-hop culture rely “on a variety of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American musical, oral, visual, and dance forms and practices in the face of a larger society that rarely recognises the Afrodisaporic significance of such practices” (Rose, 1994: 23). Indeed, as mentioned, rap can be traced to the centuries-old tradition of West African storytellers (Stanley, 1992). A bearer of this tradition is known as a ‘griot’ through whom West Africans have, since the fifteenth century, challenged social transgressors to listen to the will of the people (Krzycki, 1993). Yasin (1999) suggests that youths participating in hip-hop culture are maintaining an established African-American custom that survived the middle passage during slavery, though of course they are not necessarily doing this in any conscious or deliberative manner.

Keyes (2004) works from the vantage point of folklore in her book. She also believes that the concept of rapping, or talking in rhythm over music to an internally realised beat, is grounded in the bardic practice of West Africa from which several African-American verbal-musical forms later evolved. These genres have ranged from rural southern forms, such as blues, storytelling, and game songs, to urban northern styles, such as street corner jive and radio disk jockeying. Also, Jamaican vocal traditions, such as reggae toasting, are a direct influence upon rap’s development. The name ‘rap’ is not new because, even though modern day rap had emerged as a distinct form in the 1970s, the term ‘rap’ had been used to designate a stylised way of speaking among African-American urban or street speakers years prior to this. Rap music is thus a confluence of African-American and Caribbean cultural expressions, all of which are recited in a chanted rhyme or poetic fashion.
AFRICAN ORIGINS

THE AFRICAN ‘GRIOT’

Yasin (1999) attests that the spoken word inherent in African-American music can be traced back through various musical forms to the music of Africa, this tradition being prevalent for several centuries before the origins of the slave trade. “African traditions deliberately treat songs as though they were speech utterances. They are societies in which solo poetic recitations, both spoken and song, have become social institutions.” (Neketia Kwabena, 1974: 177). In traditional African societies, the bard is a storyteller-singer and above all a historian who chronicles traditions and more through performance. Far from being an art form indigenous to the United States, rap’s roots are easy to trace to African expressive culture, and are grounded in African history. Many rap music performance practices which foreground African-centred concepts are seen by Keyes (2004) as cultural revisioning. In West Africa, griots, the guardians of orally transmitted culture, deliver ancestral epics needing only their voice. A complicated social etiquette governs them, and, although respected and needed, they have low social status. Making music is reserved for their caste and any outside interference is most unwelcome. The griots fall under an immense amount of social pressure, and form an endogamous caste, meaning most only marry fellow griots. In the past they have been associated with a village, but today the griot is an increasingly independent ‘gun for hire’, who combines the functions of living history book and newspaper with vocal and instrumental virtuosity (Toop, 2000). According to Oliver (1970) the griot has to know many traditional songs without error in addition to also having the verbal ability to extemporise on current events and chance incidents combined with possessing a devastating wit and a formidable knowledge of local history.

Writing in 1981, Chambers states that these West African tribal singers are the musicians who seem to have come closest to what we know as a blues vocalist. “They are from tribes that had many people taken to the southern states as slaves, and they usually sing alone, accompanying themselves for the most part on plucked string instruments” (Chambers, 1981: 1). Although they have been popularised as ‘praise singers’ (which is their traditional role), griots also expand into the realms of gossip, satire and political comment, vocalising tales of births, deaths, marriages, battles, hunts, affairs and hundreds of other folktales. The West
African song of ‘allusion’ is where the subject pays the singer not to sing about him. This has links in the West Indies via the political calypso in Trinidad, in New Orleans via the ‘signifying’ song (see Gates, Jr., 1988), and in the Southern States of America generally via ‘the dozens’.

SLAVERY AND WORK SONGS

In the 15th century the slave trade began, initially directed towards Europe and later towards the Americas and the Caribbean. When captured and forced into slavery, Africans were stripped of both personal and social identity. “From a variety of ethnic backgrounds, they were forced to develop a new language and to accept new folkways and mores, which became the traditions of slavery. The foundations of many of these folkways and mores were a blending of West African and European traditions” (Yasin, 1999: 203). Throughout slavery these new modes of speech remained paramount to African people in the New World, helping them to describe and make sense of their everyday experience. Indeed, when Africans arrived in America the art of storytelling and reflection came too (Cone, 1972). Essentially, “the communication system that evolved among the Africans (in America) stemmed from their creativity and their will to survive. Language quickly became not only a means of communication but also a device for personal presentation, verbal artistry, and commentary on life’s circumstances. In effect the slave was...a poet and his language was poetic” (Barber 1987: 78). Spencer (1991) relates that this vocal style with its beginnings in African orature first resurfaced in North America as ‘pattin’ juba’, a patting and rapping ‘good-time’ enjoyed by the enslaved in the mid-nineteenth century which has indeed continued to the present day in the myriad manifestations of black street-talk. “The ‘underground’, or ‘counter-cultural’, nature of black music in America first surfaced in the work of the slaves…the work songs did provide a kind of cohesion, though, in an otherwise decimated society in that they provided some outlet for group activity which was not wholly controlled by the white man’s influence” (Sidran, 1971: 16).

The revolutionary aspects of vocalisation, in a call and response manner, were central to slave songs. During times of great cultural oppression, music was an act of physical, emotional and social commitment (ibid). The echoes of songs forged in slavery can still be felt today as
“hard-core rappers follow in a tradition dating back to the liberation spirituals and antislavery songs of the nineteenth century” (Spencer, 1991: 3). As mentioned, slavery ensured that communication between different ethnic groups was difficult, but the almost universal African regard for the power of the spoken word aided the creation of other forms of communication such as the development of African-American vernacular (‘black English’), sermons, and the spirituals. Asante (1970) sees that it is precisely the power of the word (both in music and in speech) within contemporary black society that authentically speaks of an African past.

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN TRADITION

BLUES

During slavery, various expressions emerged out of secular or recreational pastimes including storytelling and song forms such as work songs which, as I have said, were certainly precursors to the blues. The spiritual, a form of religious song that conveyed the same feeling of rootlessness and misery as the blues, is another important antecedent (Southern, 1997). Although the ratification in the Third Amendment ended the institution of slavery (Emancipation) in 1865, African-derived phrases and music forms forged during the bondage of slavery continued to survive and evolve into newer modes of expression. “It has always been obvious that there were certain elements in the blues - in the singing style and in the rhythmic structures - that weren’t traceable to anything in the countryside of the American South. These things...might have come from a distantly remembered African background” (Charters, 1981: 1).

Goldman (1999) claims that blues was the first music of free African-Americans, this music marking the end of slavery. “The first black solo musician on the scene was the blues singer” (Sidran, 1971: 25). The earliest blues-like music, although not well documented (and is often dated between 1870 and 1900, when slavery was replaced by sharecropping) was a “functional expression, rendered in a call-and-response style without accompaniment or harmony and unbounded by the formality of any particular musical structure” (Garofalo, 1997: 44). This pre-blues form of music had been adapted from ‘hollers’ and field shouts
performed during slavery, which were in turn expanded into “simple songs laden with emotional content” (Ferris, 1993: 229) when slavery was abolished. In the age of slavery black male and female sexuality was not their own (often the ‘best slaves’ were used to procreate to make money for the slave-owner from any offspring), and once they were free they created a genre that spoke in the first person about all types of situations to do with love and relationships. Blues incorporates the range of emotions that African-American life may include, and all of the most significant forms of African-American articulation last century have been developed from this blues idiom, such as tales of a broken heart and financial hardship. The blues is much more than just a depressed state of mind; it encompasses high and low and everything in between (Boyd, 1997). “This intensely personal nature of blues singing is also the result of what can be called the Negro’s ‘American Experience’” (Jones, 1963: 66). The blues, in its current format, is a musical style based on a European harmonic structure and the African call-and-response tradition (Charters, 1981), which was developed by a southern black ex-slave population through acculturation with their Scots-Irish neighbours.

The call-and-response format of blues (which would later be found in hip-hop also), and its use of melismatic vocalisation, suggest a strong connection with the music of West and Central Africa. However, one of the most compelling examples of an African diasporic tradition within the blues are the similarities between the ‘akonting’ (a three-string gourd instrument) used by the Jola tribe in the Senegambia region of Africa and the American banjo used in early African-American blues. The akonting music of the Jola also serves the same social role as African-American folk music such as folk-blues. It is played to the whole tribe for mutual enjoyment, singing and dancing (the Jola are a non-hierarchical tribe without a caste system). The akonting is also extremely close in construction and playing style to the banjo. This direct correlation is most likely due to vast numbers of slaves originating from that region. “From 1445 to 1600 about one million Africans were taken from the West African region, particularly from the Senegambian region” (Jatta, 2007 (URL). Jatta makes a strong argument concerning the African origins of the banjo and sees it as a folk instrument that was used “by enslaved Africans in the new world to fulfil their social duties as they used to do in Africa before they came to the new world and not an instrument they developed in the new world because of ‘abject poverty’ in the plantations as many people in the new world were made to understand the instrument” (ibid).
As Charters (1981) has observed, African-American music does not bear much relation to kora music (which is played by a professional caste of praise singers for the rich and aristocracy in The Gambia, and is predominantly used by the largest Mandinka ethic group), and instead reflects a pre-Islamicised form of African music. It is thus no coincidence that the Jola were the last ethnic group in the Senegambian region to accept Islam. The Soninke-Marabout war from 1850 until 1901 (between the Islamic Marabout and the indigenous kings of the Mandinka - the Sonike) ensured that ‘animist’ beliefs were replaced by Islamic ones, although the Jola were the hardest tribe to convert and most still perform ‘animist’ practices today. This group in Africa has retained a musical culture closest to that which arrived with slaves brought to America from that region hundreds of years ago, this culture being preserved through the existence of traditional rituals. Kubik (1999) attests to the essential Africanness of many key aspects of blues expression, including the vocalisation and rhythm inherent within the music.

In turn, rap is seen by Kubic (ibid) as the contemporary embodiment of blues music. In fact the personal narrative of Eminem, according to him, resembles the introverted and even paranoiac blues of Skip James, Robert Johnson and others. According to Spencer, “rap is the blues of the twenty-first century” (Spencer, 1991: v). Dyson (1991) sees that blues functioned for another generation of blacks similarly to the way rap functions for young blacks today: “as a source of racial identity, permitting forms of boasting and machismo for devalued black men suffering from social emasculation, allowing commentary on social and personal conditions in uncensored language, and fostering the ability to transform hurt and anguish into art and commerce” (Dyson, 1991: 18). Aside from the obvious differences, rap’s historical, political, social, cultural, and theoretical frameworks are similar to those of its progenitor, the blues. Cone (1972) calls the blues a condition of the ‘burden of freedom’, with its associated racism and its side effects of poor housing, inadequate education and limited job opportunities. This can clearly be compared to the ghettoisation that still persists in inner-city housing in large poor areas, such as the Bronx, which spawned hip-hop. Both genres are arguably artistic responses to the ‘absurdity’ of life (ibid). Blues artists also created new identities that spoke to a grand sense of self, much as rap artists have always done, thus McKinley Morganfield became Muddy Waters and Chester Burnett became Howlin’ Wolf for example (George, 1998). This relentless desire for self determination is a proven African-American tradition.
THE DOZENS AND JIVE

Both message-based and protest raps have an ancestry in the savannah griots, whereas the bragging, boasting and verbal abuse based raps are inspired by the black American word games known as ‘signifying’ and ‘the dozens’ (Toop, 2000). Abrahams (1970) who collected tape recordings of toasts, jokes and verbal contests in the predominantly black area of Camingerly, Philadelphia in the late 1950s and early 1960s explains the importance of ‘good talkers’ in African-American (particularly male) society. Proverbs, turn of phrases, jokes, and almost any manner of discourse are used as weapons in a verbal battle. ‘Snapping’ or ‘the dozens’ equate to trading insults as entertainment. Linguist William Labov, who studied verbal ‘shoot-outs’ in Harlem in the 1960s, sees that ‘the dozens’ are the “oldest game for exchanging insults” (Labov, 1972: 274).

The game involves a verbal duel or a lyrical interplay between two opponents, the attacks ranging from direct personal put downs to insults in which statements are made mainly about the other’s family members, especially the mother. This semi-ritualised battle continues with insults back and forth until one or the other finds the going too extreme. This is more or less a direct antecedent of street corner freestyling battling in today’s day and age (for evidence of this refer to the film ‘8 mile’ starring Eminem). In the Jamaican example, an equivalent tradition goes back to the early 1960s in the genre of ska and other related Jamaican musical styles. Anthropological research has shown that asserting superior social status via verbal prowess is a deeply entrenched black tradition extending back to the griots in West Africa and has long been sustained in the New World through such conventionalised contests or games as ‘signifying’ or ‘the dozens’ (Shusterman, 2000).

‘Jive’, originating from the English word ‘jibe’, was prevalent among black people around the early 1920s, where taunting, scoffing and sneering were among aspects used to make a sarcastic comment (Burley, 1981). Jive is most commonly known as a competitive tool, a way of establishing one’s ‘rep’ in the streets (Keyes, 2004). Jive words such as ‘cat’ meaning male, ‘chick’ meaning female and ‘crib’ meaning house still find themselves centred in rap music today. Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown in the 1920s and 1930s flirted with black vernacular, black pride and street themes within their work. Hughes, most notably, released
books of poems such as ‘The Weary Blues’ in 1926 containing what would become his signature poem, ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’.

TOASTS (AND SIGNIFYING)

One storytelling tradition that provides a structural model for rap is the ‘toast’, which is a long narrative poem composed in rhymed couplets and recited in a humorous manner. As a main rule, the effectiveness of the toast lies in its style of delivery rather than in its content, along with the facial movements and hand gestures made. “Salient features of the toast include the use of exaggerated language, metaphor, expletives, boasting, repetition, formulaic expressions and mimicry. Several verbal forms are also structurally interwoven in the body of toast tales, such as the dozens and signifying” (Keyes, 2004: 24). This is a long and cherished oral tradition. Toasts are a performance medium, and can be heard in many private and public places in black America. Toasts are a form of narrative poem (told mostly amongst men) which can be violent, misogynist, scatological, and obscene (Toop, 2000).

‘Signifying’ occurs when one makes an indirect statement about a situation or another person; the meaning all too often being allusive and, in some cases, indeterminate. ‘Signifying’, another element of black language that appears in rap, is distinct in African American culture from ‘the dozens’ “largely for its suggestive and subtextual critique, and expression of cleverness rather than overtness” (Perry, 2004: 60). The most famous toast is the ‘Signifying Monkey’- a story which has many versions, detailing the victory by trickery and deceit of the physically weaker monkey over the lion. The monkey’s verbal skill makes up for its lack of strength and size. Gates Jr. (1988) sees, within oral tradition, that the monkey functions to redress an imbalance of power, achieving occupancy in the desired place, rewriting the received order by exploiting the Lion’s arrogance and inability to read things other than as the literal. The figure of the lion as having brute power, as opposed to the intellectual nuance and trickery of the monkey, can be read as an attack on white supremacy. The art of ‘signifying’ is alive and well in today’s rap music:

When Dr. Dre lays lyrics of gangster destruction over mellow soul, his composition signifies on that earlier music’s interpretation of black experience and yet it uses it as
a vernacular for creating the contemporary meaning he articulates. When Biggie Smalls first came out, he was an East Coast signification on West Coast forms of storytelling, language, and celebrations of wealth and death...The signifying in rap far exceeds a simple reference or response- it is engagement with other texts and their traditions in the midst of one’s own piece, using the former as part of the ultimate creation of the latter (Perry, 2004: 63).

The most distinctive feature in the toast is the diction: “it is vernacular poetry made from street language. The toast often contributes new phrases or words to the vernacular, as well as recording those that already exist” (Cross, 1993: 11). These stories are mainly concerned with the prisoner, and tales of ‘the life’, which is understood as the occupation of ‘hustlers’ or to be more specific, men who make their living and live a lifestyle related to illegal and semi-legal activities, such as prostitution, gambling and drug dealing. ‘The life’ represents an underworld existence (Goldman, 1999). This is certainly a pre-cursor for what would later become known as ‘gangsta’ rap:

The most likely candidate for a direct forbearer of modern rap is the toast, the rhymed monologue, an African-American poetic form that typically recounts the adventures of a group of heroes who often position themselves against society as so shrewd and powerful as to be superhuman, or so bad and nasty as to be subhuman (Szwed, 1999: 8).

Toasts, like most oral folk traditions, have become absorbed into commercial entertainment. For example, the story of ‘Stakolee’, a bad guy figure familiar in many early blues songs (and in the white tradition with artists such as Woody Guthrie), was resurrected by Lloyd Price in 1958 as ‘Stagger Lee’ for a number 1 hit in America. Dick Clark, a US television personality at the time, insisted on toning down the violence inherent to the song's story line for the squeaky-clean ‘American Bandstand’ audience, accounting for the two different versions of the song to be encountered. Below is a transcription of the uncensored version.

The night was clear, and the moon was yellow
And the leaves came tumblin' down

I was standin' on the corner
When I heard my bull dog bark
He was barkin' at the two men
Who were gamblin' in the dark

It was Stagger Lee and Billy
Two men who gambled late
Stagger lee threw a seven
Billy swore that he threw eight

"Stagger Lee," said Billy
"I can't let you go with that
"You have won all my money
"And my brand-new Stetson hat"

Stagger Lee went home
And he got his .44
He said, "I'm goin' to the ballroom
"Just to pay that debt I owe"

(bridge)
Go, Stagger Lee

Stagger Lee went to the ballroom
And he strolled across the ballroom floor
He said "You did me wrong, Billy"
And he pulled his .44

"Stagger Lee," said Billy
"Oh, please don't take my life!
"I've got three hungry children
"And a very sickly wife"

Stagger Lee shot Billy
Oh, he shot that poor boy so hard
That a bullet went through Billy
And broke the bartender's bar

Go, Stagger Lee, go, Stagger Lee!
Go, Stagger Lee, go, Stagger Lee!
(to fade)

The character was again revived for a ‘shoot-out’ by the Isley Brothers in 1963 (Toop, 2000). But perhaps the greatest toast on record was the 1973 album by Jalal ‘Lightening Rod’ Uridin, a member of the Last Poets, who recorded the solo album ‘Hustler’s Convention’. Moving slightly away from the political poetry that was found in his lyrics with the Last Poets the album features a series of boasts using fictional ‘badman’ characters that had been in toasts for years previously. ‘Hustler’s Convention’ was thus recognised by many (especially early rap artists) as a prototype for rap music. Gil Scott-Heron, most notably with his song poem ‘The Revolution Will Not Be Televised’ from his 1970 album ‘A New Black Poet: Small Talk at 125th and Lennox’, captured the essence of rapping through his poem’s language, rhythm, and technique of indirection.

BO DIDDLEY

One of the clearest links between present day rappers and the rich vein of tall tales, tricksters, boasts and insults is Bo Diddley. More broadly speaking, he is often cited as a key figure in the transition of blues into rock ‘n’ roll, by introducing more insistent, driving rhythms and a harder-edged guitar sound. But one of the most notable things about his work is the rap-style boasting of ‘Who Do You Love’, a deliberate wordplay on hoodoo (which is a traditional folk magic which originated in Central African cultures and migrated to the United States during the slave trade), which used many striking lyrics from the African-American tradition of toasts and boasts. Toop (2000) relates that this song was the story of a satanic ‘badman’ which is like a toast in itself, using lines almost identical to the fable of Stackolee - for instance he wears a “cobra-snake for a necktie”.

I walk 47 miles of barbed wire
I use a cobra-snake for a necktie
I got a brand new house on the roadside
Made from rattlesnake hide
I got a brand new chimney made on top
Made out of a human skull
Now come on take a walk with me, Arlene
And tell me, who do you love?

Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?

Tombstone hand and a graveyard mine
Just 22 and I don’t mind dying

Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?

I rode around the town, use a rattlesnake whip
Take it easy Arlene, don’t give me no lip

Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?

Night was dark, but the sky was blue
Down the alley, the ice-wagon flew
Heard a bump, and somebody screamed
You should have heard just what I seen
Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?

Arlene took me by my hand
And she said ooowee bo, you know I understand

Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?
Who do you love?

His ‘Say Man’ and ‘Say Man, Back Again’ have both been connected with rap, because of their self-assertive bragging, but actually feature the insults known as the dozens: "You look like you been in a hatchet fight and everybody had a hatchet except you". This extract is from the aforementioned ‘Say Man’ released in 1959.

(alternate lines spoken by Bo Diddley and Jerome Green):
Say man
What's that boy?
I want to tell you 'bout your girlfriend
What about my girl?
Well, you don't look strong enough to take the message
I'm strong enough
I might hurt your feelings
My feelings are already hurt by being here with you
Well, I was walking down the street with your girl the other day
Ah-ha
And the wind was blowin' real hard
Is that right?
And the wind blew her hair into my face
Ah-ha
You know what else happened?
What happened?
The wind blew her hair into her face
Yeh?
And we went a little further; you wanna hear the rest of it?
I might as well
The wind blew her hair into the street!
Ok; since you told me about my girl, I'm gonna tell you about yours. I was walking down the street with your girl
Yes?
I took her home, for a drink, you know
Took her home?
Yeh, jus' for a drink
Oh,
But that chick looked so ugly, she had to sneak up on the glass to get a drink of water!
You've got the nerve to call somebody ugly; why you so ugly the stork that brought you in the world oughta be arrested!
That's alright; my momma didn't have to put a sheet on my head so sleep could slip up on me!
(Bo Diddley, ‘Say Man’, 1959)

His own songs have been frequently covered, one example being Newcastle’s own, The Animals, who recorded ‘The Story of Bo Diddley’. Rhyme is obviously integral to several African-American expressive traditions, the blues singer Furry Lewis going as far as saying: “If you don’t rhyme it up, you don’t understand nothing and you ain’t getting nowhere” (cited in Titon, 1994:47).

**JAZZ**

Sidran (1971) relates that jazz is a product of a peculiarly black voice (direct from the blues) in a particularly white context (over a western harmony). Jazz became prevalent in the 1920s, and was also the first black music that was enjoyed by white people, as the music began to incorporate more and more western harmony, yet it was also overtly devious in this era.
Perhaps for reasons of self preservation, but no sooner had some whites learned the special techniques of this black music then these were immediately changed and updated to maintain purely and exclusively black idioms. So both exclusivity from and popularity with whites was achieved, as is generally the case with contemporary rap music. Boyd (1997) emphasises the similarity between jazz and rap, in particular the ability to be able to create a personal form of expression within both genres. The emphasis is not necessarily concerned with being original, but rather with attaining one’s own articulation.

As jazz improvises, rap in turn emphasises the freestyle, this being an impromptu lyrical explosion that is defined by its spontaneity. Toop (2000) makes the connection between rap and jazz’s ability to create a high speed collageing of musical fragments that leave the listener searching for reference points by displacing familiarity: such as Charlie Parker in the 1940’s carving up signature jazz tunes such as ‘I Got Rhythm’. On ‘Parker’s ‘Mood’ Eddie Jefferson and King Pleasure added words, and this can be seen as one of the direct antecedents of rap - namely ‘jive’ lyrics superimposed on a dislocated version of a popular tune of the day (in rap the dislocated version is usually a collage of samples). “During the 1930s through the 1950s, southern expressions were transplanted in the urban context, fostering a new way of speaking: jive talk” (Keyes 2004: 38). Jive was nowhere more apparent than it was in jazz culture. To communicate to other jazz colleagues, exclusive idiomatic expressions were used: ‘jam’ (having a good time) and ‘bad’ (good) are just two examples that still find their way into contemporary African-American vernacular (Keyes, 2004).

PERSONALITY JOCKS

The art of jiving to music over the airways was introduced in the 1940s by African-American radio disk jockeys (Spalding, 1981). These eventually were coined ‘personality jocks’. Certain techniques utilised by these personality jocks are ‘talking through’ and ‘riding gain’- ‘talking through’ means that the disk jockey lowers the volume of the music and continues to talk as it plays, and ‘riding gain’ involves the disk jockey boosting or lowering the volume on the audio board to accent various parts of the record (Williams, 1986). These techniques, including jive rhyme, were emulated by early hip-hop DJs and MCs. Douglas ‘Jocko’
Henderson, one of Philadelphia’s bebop deejays, would commonly use a rhyming introduction as a fundamental part of his show:

Bebop, this is Jock, back on the scene with a record machine  
Saying, hoo-popsie-do, how do you do?  
When you up, you up, and when you down, you down  
And when you mess with Jocko, you upside down  

Jive became so well known that major sports personalities in the 1960s incorporated it into their bravado. This is evidenced by the fact that Muhammad Ali would taunt his opponent before a fight with his boasting being applied through rhymed couplets (Keyes, 2004). By the late 1960s, jive talk, because of changing conditions of African-American life and through the power of African-American political nationalists, was reincorporated by urban speakers as ‘rap’ (Taylor, 1977).

**SCATTING AND DOO WOP**

Cross (1993) relates that the tradition of scatting (which was supposed to have been a substitute for words when a singer forgot his/her lines) was expanded into an art-form in its own right, creating a new language that reflected the urban scene (made famous by Louis Armstrong). Slim Gaillard, a young guitar player and vocalist (who started out during the 1930s), created the language of ‘vout’ in the 1930s and 1940s, and was one of the key figures of 1940s jive in hipsterism. Scat was a continuation of a tradition that was already old (previously found in African tribal chanting) when the first West African slaves set foot on US soil. Scat is a way of using the voice as a pure instrument, but there is also another tradition of scatting which, just like rap, took street slang and transferred it into a musical style. Cabell ‘Cab’ Calloway is one of the cornerstones of jive scat. Always resplendent in a capacious zoot suit, he glided across the stage in a move that pre-dated Michael Jackson’s moonwalk by 40 years. Through his medium of being a band leader in New York from 1930 to 1948, Cab was a conductor who sang, danced and provided a focal point for the audience.
Calloway mixed up various call-and-response scatting (especially on his song ‘Zaah Zuh Zah’).

Doo Wop originally started out as the black teenage expression of the 1950s and rap emerged as the black teenage ghetto expression of the 1970s. Bobby Robinson, the music mogul who was behind many of these Doo Wop recordings, relates that the doo-wop groups in the street, in hallways, in alleys and on the ‘corner’ (street corner) would basically “gather anywhere and, you know, doo wop doo wah dad dad a. You’d hear it everywhere. So the same thing happed in ’76 or so. All of a sudden, everywhere you turned you’d hear kid’s rapping. In the summertime, they’d have these little parties in the park” (cited in Toop, 2000: 84).

SOUL TALKING

“Soul music was a composite of several earlier black musical forms - blues, jazz and spirituals - and it brought forth a more potent style of black cultural consciousness” (Berry and Looney, 1996: 265). By the late 1960s, ‘soul rap’ emerged as a distinct song style all of its own, via certain soul artists such as Ray Charles, James Brown, Aretha Franklin and Lou Rawls. These artists integrated short rapping sections in their music to establish a rapport with their listeners, usually taking the form of a monologue that celebrated the feats and woes of love, along with party-oriented themes (Keyes, 2004). Barry White, Isaac Hayes and Millie Jackson had all had fairly underwhelming careers before they turned to the raps and monologues that gave them their notoriety. Isaac Hayes had a prolific ear for talking soul, before hip hop/rap as we know it was a recognised entity. On ‘By the Time I Get to Phoenix’ the compelling story was built with a cinematic scope and perspective more familiar with white producers such as Phil Spector and Brian Wilson. His talking soul can also best be seen on ‘Hot Buttered Soul’ from 1969. Millie Jackson’s extended ‘soul raps’ became the focus of her stage show, most notably on soul ballad number ‘If Loving You Is Wrong I Don’t Want To Be Right’. This song detailed the pros and cons of having an affair with a married man. Following this was ‘All I Want Is a Fighting Chance’ in which Millie confronted the wife in a playlet. Ultimately, she found it incredibly difficult to return to more conventional methods of making music, and was never able to fulfil her talent as a singer as the raps became closely identified with her music.
Raps in the more modern form continued to grow out of the gospel-drenched melodramas of deep soul in the 1970s. Barry White did his talking to make up for a lack of vocal range (as he was a producer prior to becoming a front man in the 1970’s); he simply growled and rumbled his way through romantic epics such as ‘Love Serenade’. But undoubtedly the most direct connection between soul testifying and Bronx poetry was James Brown. Brown cut many early soul-based rap records such as ‘Rapp Payback (Where Iz Moses)’ and ‘Brother Rapp’, his voice operating in a unique vocal space somewhere between speech and scream (Toop, 2000). An honourable mention must also go to the funk artist George Clinton and his groups Parliament and Funkadelic who were also considered popularisers of this ‘feel good’ rapping style, which operated a laid-back and moderate tempo. By the 1990s Clintons’ music would become the driving samples implemented in West Coast ‘gangsta’ rap.

**BLACK POETS AND FUNK**

The tradition of the toast was expanded by black poetry being spoken to music. The most significant artist to pursue this genre up until the late sixties was Amiri Baraka, who blended street poetry with jazz in a way that transformed and reclaimed for new generations of African Americans age-old poems such as ‘Work Song’ and as mentioned, ‘The Signifying Monkey’ (Cross, 1993). During the late sixties and early seventies many artists emerged who have subsequently taken the art of poetry set to music to an elevated level. As well as the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, these included Brer Soul (the guise of actor Melvin Van Peebles), Nikki Giovanni, Stanley Crouch and the Watts Prophets. Notably the Lost Prophets have invoked the traditional call-and-response format, making an ancient practice work within contemporary popular settings. “With their politically charged raps, taut rhythms, and dedication to raising African-American consciousness, the Lost Poets almost single-handedly laid the groundwork for the emergence of hip-hop” (Ankeny, 2008). These black poets of the 1960s, according to Negus (1996), brilliantly captured the nuances and rhythms of African-American speech by placing particular emphasis on the ability to rap.

Funk was an answer to the jazz culture of the 1950s, with a style that countered the perceived coldness, complexity and intellectualism introduced into the music by bop, cool, West Coast and third stream jazz (Shaw, 1986). By the late 1960s, James Brown reformulated the term to
denote an earthy and gritty sonority characterised specifically by Brown’s preachy vocal style and his horn and rhythm section which created rhythmic grooves. This style was later adapted by Sly and the Family Stone and Kool and the Gang in the 1970s. George Clinton’s Parliament-Funkadelic manipulated many of Brown’s techniques, owing to the fact that he had enticed many of Brown’s former instrumentalists to join his band. Many commentators have noted that funk can be defined as ‘sped up’ blues, thus further keeping my original notion of the ‘black chord’ open as a continually fertile musical resource.

**THE CARIBBEAN CONNECTION**

**CALYPSO**

The tradition of the griot was reinvented during the 1930s and 1940s with the emergence of recorded calypso music in Trinidad (its origins stretch back to the late 19th century). As a form of topical storytelling, calypso connects Caribbean, rap and West African traditions. According to White (1993), the meaning of ‘calypso’ in the Caribbean is ‘like a newspaper’, and so, calypso rappers would get a record out to comment on an event, and in many cases this would be faster than the newspaper could hit the streets. Calypso artists satirise everything, particularly the government, and appreciation of this is felt island-wide. These calypso songs are dissected by the listening public who are as eager to analyse as sports fans are when their team is playing (Goldman, 1999). Donald (2004) argues that boasting, sexual innuendo and mocking commentary on a wide range of topics including social issues, racism, economics and politics have existed in Trinidadian calypso for at least sixty years, and long before the first recorded rap record.

“Trinidadian calypso, with its high level of improvisation and verbal dexterity requirements, was the most influential musical form in the English-speaking Caribbean until the early 1970s commercial emergence of Jamaican reggae.” (Donald, 2004: 515). Indeed, a line can be drawn from griot to calypso to reggae (and then on to rap as I will show). “In the mid 1970s Jamaican bands began experimenting with and integrating calypso’s verbal improvisation into their music” (ibid). Some observers have argued that Jamaican mento is nothing more than a Jamaican imitation of calypso (Chang and Chen, 1998). “Whatever its
origin, mento was the dominant music of Jamaica from its first appearance in the late 19th century up to the 1930s, and was especially popular in rural areas...mento represents music of dance, with songs mixing narrative and topical commentary” (ibid: 13).

SKA

Through the mid-1960s Rastafarians (under the guide of a Rasta musician named Count Ossie) started to record Burru Drumming - an African art that had survived from the days of slavery and had come to the Kingston ghettos after slavery was abolished, and thus, was part of the Jamaican culture. Count Ossie was recruited by Prince Buster (one of the first Jamaican toasters) to play drums on the Foulkes Brothers ‘Oh Carolina’ which marks the first entry of Rastafarianism into music. Deejays, the Jamaican term for rappers/toasters, would later mimic the play of the Buru ‘repeaters’ (the ‘on’ beat) over reggae instrumentals (Chang, 2005). In Jamaica short wave radio (via transistor radios in tenement yards and wooden diffusion radio boxes mounted on the walls of rum shacks) would pick up American bebop and New Orleans R&B during the fifties. This occurred as local radio stations in the 1950s were not playing the R&B that the locals wanted to hear therefore the logical conclusion was to look for other sources. Southern US R&B stations like WINZ in Miami were listened to, but only at night, and clear reception was not always possible (Chang and Chen, 1998). These sounds were thus appropriated, and ska subsequently arrived, based on New Orleans boogie-woogie and Southern R&B. It was named ska because of the choppy offbeat nature of the rhythm guitar. Upon Jamaican independence from Britain in 1962, the fizz of ska captured the exultant moment of the neighbourhood (as in Jimmy Cliff’s ‘Miss Jamaica’) as new possibilities for the country beckoned (Goldman, 1999).

SKA ‘GRUDGE SONG’

A good example of an early ‘grudge song’ is Prince Buster’s ‘Black Head Chinaman’, released in 1963, containing a very personal attack on his fellow ska pioneer, producer Leslie Kong. A former protégé of his, Derrick Morgan, had a falling out with Buster and started working instead with Kong. When Morgan and Kong started releasing singles that lifted their
melodies from Buster’s own recordings, Buster fought back by recording an indictment of Kong, ‘Blackhead Chinaman’. This fierce musical feud quickly spilled over among their respective fans, and disputes between the two camps became so heated that leaders of the newly formed Jamaican Government were forced to intervene, calling a cease-fire and bringing the two performers together for publicity photos to bury the hatchet.

You done stole my belongings and give to your China man
God in heaven knows
He knows that you are wrong
Are you a China man are you a black man
It don't need no eye glass to see that your skin is black
Do you prefer your China man to your fellow blackman?
Speak up friend it's plain to understand
It won't be very long
They'll have a change of plans
To use you and use you use you, use you and refuse you
Cuz you're the first black head China Man
I did not know your poor parents were from Hong Kong
Every man has a right to where he belongs
So declare yourself and tell me where you are from

Cuz you're the first black head China Man
I did not know your poor parents were from Hong Kong
Every man has a right to where he belongs
So declare yourself and tell me where you are from
So declare yourself and tell me where you are from
Since you'll be known right now the first black head China Man
REGGAE TOASTING

Toop (2000) asserts that reggae toasting (not to be confused with the African-American toast rhyme, though culturally similar) was a form of music-making that was strongly influenced by American jive talking radio disc jockeys and MCs. Dick Hebdige (1977) has described reggae as polymorphous, a music of many fragments where no one element is dominant. American R&B sounds were overlaid with syncopated rhythms derived from Africa, and the patois of Jamaican street talk. Although reggae was relatively unknown to most black Americans in the early 1970s, the link between New York and the Caribbean is particularly strong (for example, in the 1930s, almost one quarter of Harlem’s residents was from the West Indies). African-American rap and Jamaican music have very close connections indeed. The toasters (deejays) expressed their emotions “in the staccato vocal patterns and vernacular language of everyday Jamaican conversation, and this gave the music unprecedented emotional immediacy” (Chang and Chen, 1998: 78). This new phenomenon was to have international repercussions. Once deejaying was established Jamaicans began to transport it abroad “and more than most immigrants Jamaicans bring a part of home to their surroundings” (ibid).

DUB MUSIC

In Jamaica, ‘dub’ refers specifically to bass-heavy instrumentals created by mixing out other instruments in the original mix and leaving the drum and bass only. It reached its height of popularity in the 1970s (ibid). It had been discovered by accident in 1967, when engineer Byron Smith forgot to pan up the vocals on the Paragon’s hit ‘On the Beach’. A ‘selector’ (sound system operator) took the acetate to a dance anyway, and proceeded to mix between the vocal version and the ‘dub’ which sent the crowd wild. The vocal-less version caught on because production costs in the studio could be cut by half or more, and so one band session could produce multiple ‘versions’. “Dub’s birth was accidental, its spread was fuelled by economics, and it would become a diagram for hip-hop music. A space had been pried open for the break, for possibility” (Chang, 2005: 30). Jamaican reggae and its ‘spacey’ sister dub began by expressing their local experience but ultimately this echoed globally (meaning what
started out as local sentiment became a global phenomenon). The same process occurred with American rap music.

Rap built upon Jamaican sound-system culture, beginning as underground minority music by and for a materially disadvantaged crowd in the Bronx. Indeed, the block parties of the 70’s were closely similar to sound systems in Jamaica. Much as dub is economical music for an impoverished island by its enabling of one track to be recycled over and over again, rap music coincided with funding cuts in the school system’s music budgets. Children who no longer had access to studying a musical instrument began utilising record decks to create sounds (Goldman, 1999). There are numerous unmistakable similarities between Jamaican dubbing and sampling (as employed within rap music (Chang and Chen, 1998). Ross Kenner claims that “there’s no denying that the basic concept of deconstructing a familiar track, and then chatting over this remixed version to make something new- rap music, by any other name- started in Jamaica” (Kenner, 1999: 353).

**DJ KOOl HERC AND HIS SOUND SYSTEM/TOASTING**

Sound systems are essentially large, mobile discotheques playing at dances, house parties, fairs and nightclubs. Rap music in its current format began when DJ Kool Herc (born Clive Campbell) originated a style of speaking over the records that he played. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Herc was a Jamaican, from the same area that Bob Marley had grown up in, who had arrived in the south Bronx in 1967 at the age of twelve. As Herc himself declares: “Them said nothing good ever come outta Trenchtown...Well, hip-hop came out of Trenchtown!” (cited in Change, 2005: 22). Herc’s style was directly modelled on the Jamaican toasting and sound system culture he had seen as a child. “Herc wanted to summon the same kind of excitement he felt as a pickney down yard” (Chang, 2005: 78). The Jamaican sound system culture has had a monumental impact on rap’s development: “One amusing aspect of rap’s beginnings is how closely it paralleled the early days of Jamaican sound systems” (Chang and Chen, 1998: 72). Jamaican toasting was itself influenced, as I have discussed, by the rhyming style of DJ’s and announcers who broadcasted on the huge AM stations out of the southern United States that could be heard in the Caribbean.
“The crucible of 1970s rap was the Bronx’s Rock Steady Park - as it’s now known - ruled by DJ’s like Kool Herc, a laconic Jamaican brother with a valuable knowledge of Kingston Sound System runnings” (Goldman, 1999: 142). The giant speaker boxes were an essential component in the world of Jamaican sound systems (which are still central to the reggae scene) and Herc in turn stunned the Bronx audience/opposition with his volume, distortion free sounds and shattering frequency range (Toop, 2000). Herc played artists such as James Brown, Sly Stone, Rare Earth and rare finds such as the Incredible Bongo Band’s ‘Apache’. Due to the fact that a lot of American blacks at the time were not getting into the reggae of his home country, he chose to do Jamaican toasting over American and Latin records and break beats instead. Herc would do ‘shout-outs’ from the microphone, and scream ‘rock the house’ and other urban slang from that period of time. He noticed that the toasting was greatly enjoyed as something in these verbal broadsides touched a chord (Chang and Chen, 1998). The microphones were connected to a Space Echo box, ‘yard dance style’ (Chang, 2005).

Herc soon began leaving the toasting to his MC, Coke La Rock, whilst he concentrated on mixing. The records in the mix were highly sought after and so he soaked off the labels ‘Jamaican style’ on the advice of his father, just like all of the sound system selectors before him had, this tactic having been practiced by Clement ‘Coxsone’ Dodd in the 1950s, for example. This was the first concrete formulation of what would later be called rap music and hip-hop culture. Instead of playing entire songs, Herc opted to instead play the best segments of the song, which was often just a 30 second ‘break’ section - when the drums, bass, and rhythm guitar stripped the beat to its barest essence. A particular section or break was run from one record and this was cut into the same section of the record on another turntable (a technique called ‘the Merry-Go-Round’). The pleasure was therefore made to last.

“Not only did they use toasters to give dancers a live feel, but they would often have sound system battles where rivals set up near each other and tried to blast the opposition with superior wattage - shades of Tom the Great, Trojan and Downbeat in the downtown Kingston 1950s!” (Chang and Chen, 1998: 72). As rival DJ, and fellow hip-hop originator Afrika Bambaataa recalls:

Herc knew that a lot of American blacks were not getting into reggae. He took the same thing that the deejays were doing- toasting- and did it with American records,
Latin records or records with a beat. Herc took phrases like what was happening in the streets, new sayings going around like ‘rock on my mellow’, ‘to the beat y’all’, ‘you don’t stop’ and just elaborated on that...he would call out the names of people who were at the party, just like the microphone personalities who deejayed back in Jamaica (cited in Chang and Chen, 1998: 72).

Rap music’s development from Jamaican deejay music is most apparent. If we look at the Jamaican link, aligned with the similarity of musical methods and deejaying’s unquestioned chronological precedence, the conclusion that rap evolved from deejaying is undeniable (ibid).

Of course some would say that Jamaican deejay music evolved from the southern black R&B radio disc jockeys who in turn developed their style from jazz scat singers. And they may be right. But it was the Jamaican deejays who first turned chanting/toasting/scatting into a commercial musical form that stood on its own and pushed all accompaniment into the background- where people bought the records because of the rhythmic talking...Deejay music in Jamaica was going through countless changes in style and form years before rap music was recognised as anything more than a novelty (ibid).

Perry (2004) also notes that the R&B melodic form influenced reggae, and that rap was influenced by a form of Jamaican deejaying that would eventually develop into a black American version in the United States. “The blues had Mississippi, jazz had New Orleans. Hip-hop has Jamaica...Reggae, it has often been said, is rap music’s elder kin” (Chang, 2005: 22-23). Perry also states that another direct Jamaican influence within hip-hop culture has been the specific practice of using mainstream, and particularly white, heroic figures in the process of self-definition. “This likely resulted from the appropriations of second-run cinematic images to shape postcolonial identity” (ibid: 14). Although Perry accepts that the ‘outlaw’ language in hip-hop is often traditional black American language, conversely “the use of identities such as Dirty Harry or figures from the Godfather movies likely derives from Jamaican enjoyment of such imagery” (ibid).

Any art-form, however new it might seem, always has antecedents. No musical style develops in a vacuum, but instead draws on a number of previous styles and genres in
arriving at some new syncretism or discovering a catalyst for new departures. This raises the
difficult question of how much continuity and how much discontinuity may be apparent in
the development of any new form of music. This is not a question that can be answered
succinctly as it is always a matter of particular cases, and specific lines of development.
There can be a danger of romanticising a pattern of musical continuity and lineage, charting
one mutation to another in an apparently seamless trajectory. So, arguing against what I have
already shown, Perry goes on to criticise what she deems a romantic ‘Afro-Atlanticism’. She
accepts the external influences that converge at aesthetic crossroads and have helped to
define hip-hop, but questions whether there is an African-American cultural unity that has
been instrumental in its development. Hip-hop, for her, has been a victim of
mischaracterisation because of its attractiveness as an object of study for postcolonial
criticism and theory (Perry, 2004: 17). Perry argues that too much credence is given by
postcolonial critics to international and transnational identities “emerging from the so-called
postcolonial condition” (ibid). Indeed, “hip-hop is far more concerned with region and local
specificity. In many ways, it is arrogantly American” (ibid: 20).

While this view is obviously true in certain ways, rap is not a new-found fad. Americans
often like to see their own cultural forms purely in the light of innovation, so ignore the
multi-stranded roots on which they have drawn and from which they have emerged. The
same applies to rap. Rap did not suddenly appear in the 1970s out of some historical
nowhere. Although it seems apparent that the roots of rap music can be traced back to the
African bardic traditions, as I have argued, its immediate line of descent lies in black oral
expressive forms of the South and their transformation in the urban North, as well as in the
vibrant Jamaican connection. Reggae toasting (or deejaying) and rapping are both an
extension of the West African oral tradition of the griot and of Caribbean styles of sonic
performance (Chang and Chen, 1998).

Rap in its historical context, as well as its recorded context, has taken bits of black music
history and oral tradition and appropriated it until ‘old styles’ once again become new and
fresh through a combination of direct influence and a mix-and-match approach to actually
creating the music. In regard to the ‘black chord’, various musical styles and aesthetic values
can be traced back along the tortuous tracks of the African diaspora. These include artistic
independence, improvisation, innovation and punctuated rhythm, and it is these which help
provide a sense of overall unity to diasporic black musical history as a whole (Nelson, 1991:}
51). All of these styles and values trade in well maintained African modes of expression and these have been transmitted across the generations in wave after wave of cultural continuity and discontinuity (Royster, 1991).
CHAPTER 5
NEWCASTLE: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DECLINE

BACKGROUND TO NEWCASTLE’S WHITE APPROPRIATION

Newcastle upon Tyne “is a predominantly white, working-class post-industrial city in North-East England” (Bennett, 1999b: 6). Indeed, a government official on secondment to Newcastle City Council, at a conference in 2006, claimed that: “Newcastle is, to coin a phrase, hideously white” (Larcombe, 2006: 36). It was further claimed that attitudes to modern day immigration were holding back the region, with Hollands (1995) finding that Geordie culture can be seen to be somewhat exclusionary. The North East, unlike many other UK areas containing prominent port cities, was historically less reliant on colonial trading links (Nayak, 2006) because of its local mineral-based economy of coal mining driving the flow of capital instead. Uniquely among large UK industrial areas, the region is on a European-facing coast, and although tramp ship bulk carriers took coal worldwide, the maritime trading routes from the Tyne were predominantly European in nature: “the maritime routes from the Tyne in liner services were European” (Byrne, 2002: 282).

Immigration was extensive during the period of industrial boom; indeed in the second half of the 19th Century, 30% of adult males in neighbouring County Durham were immigrants and one fifth of Northumberland’s population had been born outside of the area. However, these were peasants from peripheral localities in Ireland, Scotland and the Northern Isles and white Europeans from Scandinavia, Germany and the Baltic (ibid). The aforementioned explains why there is a minimal proportion of ethnic minorities in the area’s racial make up. Although small Asian, Chinese, African-Caribbean, and African populations do exist in Newcastle (largely as a result of the two universities situated in the city), their influence on the local music and club scene, and the city’s cultural environment as a whole, has been minimal compared to other British cities with a higher ethnic minority population (such as London and Birmingham) (Hollands, 1995).

The hip-hop scene inside Newcastle, and around its surrounding areas (such as Gateshead, Cramlington, and South Shields), is dominated by white, predominantly male enthusiasts. As
Bennett (1999b) suggests, white appropriation of African-American music has a long-established tradition in the North East region. The Animals achieved international success with a style of music based closely on African-American blues during the 1960s, and other local bands, such as the Junco Partners, also achieved regional success during this time, appropriating soul and blues. Pearson (1998) relates that young white working-class men (his focus being primarily on Newcastle) in 1950s industrial Britain deliberately turned to a fully acknowledged use of a specifically black American form in order to express their sense of self. The form used, R&B, was in itself the black American response to the experience of industrialisation, encompassing the great migration from rural South to industrial North, Mid-West and West. Bennett (1999b) stresses that this tradition of white consumption has continued, through the ‘Northern Soul’ nights of the 1970s (an all-white ‘underground’ soul scene playing rare black soul imports), to the present-day appropriations of rap music. Black ‘association’ in the North East is “something which is actively constructed, and to some extent idealised by white youth in their appropriation of black music and style, rather than as a structurally determined ‘given’ of such appropriation” (ibid: 9). To gain a better perception of the area, I need now to go beyond the music and look at its social and economic make up. I will start on a UK wide level initially, and then look closely at Newcastle itself.

**ECONOMIC DECLINE IN THE UK**

The transition from a fordist to a post-fordist economy produced a radical restructuring of industry and the labour markets. Since the mid 1970s, economic restructuring has led to the decline in the heavy manufacturing employment base of Britain, and has largely been responsible for the bulk of full-time, male job losses, in large industrial cities. The de-industrialisation of the UK's manufacturing base coincided with the growth of service sector employment, which placed greater emphasis on non-manual labour as the primary consideration for the majority of the labour market. The decline in the opportunities available for manual workers, or those with few qualifications, resulted in large-scale unemployment, nowhere more so than in Newcastle.

It has been established that at regional, local, and intra-urban scales the most marked increase in concentrations of people out of work has been in the large cities, particularly the inner
districts of large conurbations. The relative and absolute decline of employment in these areas has not diminished in the last two decades, and this has led to increased rates of poverty (Turock & Edge, 1998), the deepest decline is especially evident in the northern half of the country (Green, 1998). Those locations identified as having high levels of unemployment are the areas with few highly qualified people, and those with large proportions of rented accommodation (HMG, 1998). Employment growth is now centred on professional and managerial positions, which are often inaccessible to the majority of those who suffered blue-collar job losses. Economic restructuring has not only increased unemployment and social inequality in the period since the mid-1970s, but has also had major impacts on patterns of residence within UK cities (Lee & Murie, 1999). The operation of the labour and housing markets interact so as to produce spatial concentrations of people with similar social and economic characteristics. As a result of these negative changes, particular households and communities are disproportionately affected, “and have different environments, opportunities, resources and needs” (Lee and Murie, 1997: 9). Arguably, the pattern of housing change in the UK has reflected a less generous welfare state regime and the growth in home ownership has increased social polarisation.

Social exclusion is an everyday reality for a growing sector of society whose dislocation from the labour market is directly connected to their marginalised status and experience. Evidence has stipulated that the cause of this increasing phenomenon is attributed to the loss of traditional male employment through deindustrialisation, and the lack of relevant employment opportunities. It is apparent that there is a prevailing and ever-increasing body of the population who are persistently jobless and who are concentrated into the poorest housing. Also, a distinctive north/south divide re-emerges, with the industrial heartland of the north suffering most from massive job losses, as in the 1930s, and the South-East of the country remaining far more prosperous, relatively speaking. The consequence of this uneven development is an inherent feature of the post-fordist capitalist economy that Britain has embraced. A major characteristic of post-fordism is that patterns of inter-related social, economic and spatial divisions increase and there are considerable variations in the standard of living between population groups and areas.

Working-class boys and men continue to take on masculine identities within which they see themselves as dominant to women, indeed as their controllers, without the traditional ‘bread winners’ role to serve as a platform. The construction of masculinity means that males have
to prove that they are ‘real men’, which can involve many varying features. In socially deprived areas, activities such as joy riding, burglary and arson are examples of this. “Some argue, such vigorous gender restructuring in the labour market is connected to displays of ‘hyper masculinity’ reflected in increased male crime and violence in the community, as well as an atmosphere of ‘machismo’ in the night-time economy” (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001: 7). As we shall see, within Newcastle, this reclaiming of masculinity in the face of social upheaval can also mean outward affiliation to Newcastle United F.C., with all of the associated ‘rituals’ that come with the territory. These people often being labelled by students as ‘townys’ (Nayak, 2003a). In addition to this, working-class male youth express sexist, homophobic and explicitly racist behaviour (Dixon, 1996). This ‘new lad culture’ stems, as mentioned, from the decline in male or male-oriented jobs, as the economy becomes ever more reliant on the services sector. Overt masculine posturing is therefore an attempt by the working-class to attain or regain a positive male self-image. Middle-class male youth, on the other hand, adopt what Abbott (2000) calls ‘intellectual masculinity’.

Despite the ‘traditional domestic bargain’ (ibid), there has been a steady increase in women’s participation in the labour market in Britain, especially since the Second World War. Married women in part-time employment have shown the most dramatic increase, with time taken out for childcare being reduced dramatically as a result. High male unemployment rates, especially in the North, are coupled with the participation rate for women in the labour market increasing. Thus, despite the gendered roles employed by women in the labour market, women still wish to work, and this allows economic independence and increased status and social contacts (Martin and Roberts, 1984). This story is even more explicitly evident in the social and economic decline that has occurred in my target area of Newcastle.

ECONOMIC INSTABILITY WITHIN NEWCASTLE

No one who has been there can fail to feel the body warmth of the most pungent regional identity in Britain. In the bustle and racket of the centre of Newcastle, on the quaysides of Gateshead and the river towns, people chatter, acknowledge each other, behave like a community, talk readily to strangers and show none of the deadpan, dystopian anonymity of other conurbations, especially London. And they are
proud...of the canny place they live in, a warm, coal-lit corner against the shell blast of an east wind blowing off the North Sea (Moffat and Rosie, 2005: 9)

This extract paints a very picturesque image of Newcastle and Gateshead, using romanticised language of a time centered around the late 19th/early 20th century. The ‘pungent’ regional identity may still remain in doses, but the ‘bustle’ and ‘racket’ of the centre of Newcastle is now that of a ‘party city’, as opposed to one of industry. The North East of England is a region that was built upon an industrial platform consisting of mining, ship-building and heavy engineering; indeed as late as 1961 the region employed double the number of workers in these industries compared to any other place in the country (Nayak, 2006). In the 6 decades preceding 1914 the shipyard workers and the pitmen of the North East were among the highest paid workers in the world, 20 million tons of coal being exported from the Port of Tyne each year at its peak, with over 40% of the ships in the world being produced in the North East alone (Atkinson, 1980). The expansion of the railway system meant that the iron, steel and shipbuilding industries were all stuck in a mutually beneficial blend. The coal relied on the railway networks and shipping for its distribution, and to sustain these schemes, iron and steel was needed to provide the necessary materials, which in turn needed coal for its own process (ibid).

Coal mining, or ‘carboniferous capitalism’ (Byrne, 2002: 279), in particular, was the primary resource that drove the industrialisation of the area (indeed, at one point a quarter of the nation’s coal came from the Gibside district alone (Nayak, 2003a). The importance of mining helped to create the well-known phrase, "like carrying coals to Newcastle", which means spending an inordinate amount of energy on something useless, fruitless, or redundant. This idiomatic expression arose in the 15th century because Newcastle was known throughout the country as a major exporter of coal. The North East, which at one time had powered international, economic and commercial success in Britain (ibid), saw its last operational coal mine close in 1994. Ironically, despite the aforementioned phrase still being in common usage, in 2004 Newcastle began importing coal from Russia. The loss of the ship-building industry, most notably exemplified in the temporary closure of the Swan Hunter shipyard in 1993, and ultimately its final closure in 2009, also reflect the change in the region’s economic make-up.
Despite times of bleak economic recession in the period between the First and Second World Wars (due to diminishing opportunities and a lack of ‘industrial diversification’ which was needed in order to progress within a changing economy), during the 1950s unemployment levels decreased as low as 3% in a new period of economic boom (Robinson, 1988). However, from the late 1950s onwards, cheap imports of oil from overseas meant the final demise of Tyneside’s ‘Golden Age’, and by 1970 over one hundred coal mines had been closed in the North East, making way for the deindustrialisation of the region. By 1999 the unemployment rates in North East England had reached 10.1% compared with just 3.7% in the South East. Despite economic restructuring and the implementation of service and leisure sector jobs, this figure still stood at 6.9% in 2006, the highest out of any region in the UK. Over 80% of people in work are now employed in the service industries, with less than 10% now being employed in manufacturing and construction (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001).

The recent history of the North East represents a shift (via deindustrialisation) from a traditional industrial base to a new ‘condition of postmodernity’ (Harvey, 1990). Employment within the traditional manufacturing economy decreased from 40% of all employment being within this sector in the early 1970s (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001) to less than one third by the 1980s, which served to increase the already widening north/south divide (Robinson, 1988), and is still apparent for all to see. An over-reliance on industry meant that deindustrialisation hit the North East harder than most, losing 38 percent of its jobs in the years 1978-1984 (Nayak, 2003a). This trend of economic deprivation continues to this day, as census records from 1998-2000 indicate that somewhere in the region of 3000-5000 people leave Tyne and Wear on a yearly basis, the majority being from highly skilled backgrounds (Nayak, 2003b). “This process of economic restructuring was instigated by the demands of a competitive global economy, poor management, disinvestment and overcapacity in the market” (Nayak, 2006: 816). In addition: “it was also tied to a ruthless New Right agenda to shut down pits, quash the old Labourite NUM (National Union of Miners) and invest in business rather than manufacturing” (ibid).

The loss of local manufacturing, mining and shipbuilding jobs did not just affect those who were made redundant at that specific time, the complexities involving this have impacted upon future generations too. There is no longer a reliable working-class life, transitional bridge into adulthood, or rite of passage into labour mapped out for young men. Cultural worlds which would once have been shaped through training schemes, modern
apprenticeships and ultimately hard labour are now devoid of structure; young people who would once have flourished within jobs in industry are now viewed as unskilled, unemployable and redundant (ibid). As mentioned, economic restructuring has elevated women’s participation within the local workforce, with nearly half of the work force in the region now being female, even as male employment continues to fall. One of the biggest indicators of the changing job market is the rise of telephone call centres with ‘feminised’ attributes such as communication proficiency and keyboard skills now being seen as vital (Nayak, 2003b). Expectations of life-long employment in industry have now been replaced by long term unemployment, unskilled part-time jobs on a minimum wage, fixed-term contracts and so called ‘flexible’ forms of employment (ibid). This is a generation that has been described as being characterised by “risk”, uncertainty and labour market insecurity” (ibid: 306). Nayak (2003a) observes that young people within the area enact ‘localist’, ‘survivalist’ and ‘globalist’ responses to ongoing transformations.

‘Localist’ strategies encompass the overt affiliation to Newcastle United that is characterised by what Nayak (2003a) coins ‘Real Geordies’, who utilise all of the same cultural rituals as their fathers and grandfathers, therefore helping to keep industrialised working-class ideologies and behavior patterns alive in a post-industrial climate; the sentiments forming and constructing this ‘way of life’ are labeled an ‘industrial structure of feeling’ by Byrne (2002: 279). This supports Colls (1992) claims that the region’s past heritage of hard manual labour and heavy drinking were a key element in formulating a Geordie identity. ‘Survivalist’ strategies are those shown by the ‘Charver Kids’, petty thieves who live on run-down sink estates. Most of the ‘survivalist’ economy operates in and through the illegal black market. Arriving beside these relatively bleak ‘structural’ perspectives in recent years has been the more colourful ‘cultural’ accounts of young lives, characterised by a willingness to embrace contemporary transformations (Nayak, 2003a), this can be seen in the research surrounding ‘new ethnicities’, ‘glocal’ cultures, hybrid identities, and diasporic movements (Jones, 1988; Back, 1996; Bennett, 1999b, 2000). This ‘globalist’ response is the one I am most concerned with, white youth taking on and appropriating black culture from across the Atlantic. These have been termed ‘B Boyz’ by Nayak (2003a).

One of the outcomes of economic uncertainty and instability in the North East is cultural isolation. The large systems of railways and roads, largely built during the growth of the area in the boom period of the coal and mining industries, link to the rest of England, and the
wider ports of Europe. However, even so, the region is wholly an isolated entity, with a unique culture and social sphere. “While Newcastle is eager to display an image of a modern vibrant city, it remains beset by problems of visible decay, social polarisation and deprivation from its industrial past. These problems are confounded by continued population loss in Tyneside” (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001: 8). As the divide between North and South grows and deepens, the factor of Newcastle’s unusually isolated geographical location also comes into play to compound this feeling of alienation. As I stated in the introduction, being the only major city between Leeds (approximately 90 miles south) and Edinburgh (approximately 120 miles north) has had a vast impact on the levels of cultural development in the area. However spatial isolation provides a source for local solidarity and local participation within various cultural scenes.

Since the 1970s, as mentioned, the North East has experienced decline and deindustrialisation, the political project since the Thatcher years being the erosion of established masculine pursuits. The image of labourist cities strongly connected to their industrial past has dissolved. What has replaced it is a focus on private/corporate capital, ‘feminised’ and middle-class employment opportunities, knowledge-based activities, and a greater economic role for leisure, retail and consumption as opposed to production (ibid).

‘NEW’ NEWCASTLE: FROM COAL MINING TO CLUBBING

Irrespective of the North East’s economic decline, the area is still associated with possessing a heavy sense of local identity. Indeed, a study showed that almost 40% of North Eastern people placed regional identity over national identity compared to only 7% in the South of the country (ibid). Many inhabitants, as mentioned earlier, continue to adopt a traditional identity, which reflects a once vast industrial heritage, however this is now applicable to the arena of consumption (through the night time ‘party’ economy and football supporting) as opposed to production. As Nayak (2003a) suggests, “young people are constructing a new sense of place from the rusting metal carnage of de-industrialisation that at once draws upon, but imaginatively reconfigures, former traditions” (ibid: 72).
Over the last decade there has been a definite attempt to radically manoeuvre focus away from Newcastle’s industrial past. The ‘Party City’ notion is fully embraced and endorsed by the local council, they have ‘re-branded’ (ibid) the area via a heavy promotion of the leisure opportunities available in the city, with a focus on the preponderance of nightlife venues and the social consumption of alcohol. The joint Gateshead and Newcastle bid for European City of Culture in 2003 emphasised the area’s vibrant night life through the slogan ‘feel the buzz’ (ibid). The hype surrounding the city’s carnival style atmosphere reached dizzying heights when US travel consultants Weissman Travel rated Newcastle as the eighth best party city in the world. In addition, there has been a deliberate attempt at a culture-led regeneration of the area to reverse the trend of economic depression left by the loss of industry. The BALTIC, which opened in 2002, is a £50 million conversion of a disused 1950s flour mill into an international centre for contemporary art; the Sage Gateshead is a £70 million music and performance centre located on the Gateshead Quayside; and the Gateshead Millennium Bridge is the world’s first tilting bridge at a cost of £22 million. As well as numerous flagship projects and various other developments, the NewcastleGateshead initiative seeks to promote a series of cultural events under the guise of its ‘Culture’ programme.

The relatively recent consumption-led practices of Newcastle have enabled the development of new youth, niche and lifestyle markets to flourish (Nayak, 2003a). This has resulted in identities being fashioned beyond the old geographical limits of the immediate area. Indeed, not only is there a group of individuals idealising a bygone age of manual labour and drinking practices, there is another who fully embrace the globally created youth identities that a consumer culture has endorsed. A “global circuit of cultural production” (ibid: 106) has allowed multicultural practices to be fused upon local white identities, creating a hybrid persona that is both Geordie and global in equal parts.
In studying white appropriations of hip-hop, I have taken a qualitative ethnographic approach. The purpose of any ethnography is to ultimately “explicate the whole gamut of norms, values and rules that govern and give meaning to behaviour within the group” (Edgar, 1999: 133). Most of the best work in an ethnography based approach “starts not with a text or theory, but with a social group – bikers, schoolboys, housewives – and observes their use of commodities and messages to produce culture, meanings and interpretations” (Batsleer et al, 1985: 145). Blaxter et al (2001) relate that many research projects do not become focused until both data collection and analysis are well advanced, and Birley and Moreland (1998) advise that many plans of work are not always going to be cast in ‘tablets of stone’. This has certainly been true in my case. My research has followed an ‘unfolding’ research process, as my evidence was accumulated throughout the course of my work. In fitting with this ‘unfolding’ process, any ethnographic research should have general open-ended questions, data that is not pre-structured, and has a flexible, loose design (Punch, 2000). This approach was the basis for my methodological work.

As mentioned in the first chapter, I utilised 3 qualitative modes of methodology to obtain my data: focus groups, depth interviews and participant observation. I conducted four focus groups (a group discussion led by myself with 5 local, white, hip-hop followers in each, totalling 20 respondents). These lasted roughly an hour each time, and were recorded digitally. I also individually interviewed members who had been particularly responsive and enlightening in the focus group situation and those who were unable to attend or were not involved in the focus groups. I conducted, in total, 54 interviews. In addition, in order to give validity to Newcastle’s black music antecedents for a sense of local and historical precedents, and to attempt to try and trace any emerging patterns, I interviewed 6 people who have had direct experience of the 1960s and 1970s Newcastle blues scene (both fans and artists), most
notably exemplified by The Animals (thus hopefully attaining around forty years of local music history that has a black influence when coupled with the hip-hop findings). I also underwent a series of participant observation excursions, which involved me studying the hip-hoppers on their familiar ground at various local ‘hang out’ areas within Newcastle. This was to obtain a better understanding of the respondents’ viewpoints. 12 excursions in total were made to local hip-hop/R&B orientated clubs where there was a hip-hop contingent present.

My participant observations, with one exception, were all carried out within Newcastle, 2 being at a popular nightclub called Digital, which caters for more mainstream R&B tastes, 3 being at an independent (eclectic) nightclub called World Headquarters, which is the first black owned nightclub in the city, 2 at a pub called Bar Fusion which catered for the local hip-hop crowd at the time of writing, 1 at an independent (and again, eclectic) bar – The Head of Steam, 1 at The Mushroom bar which was holding a North East hip-hop event, and 1 at a nightclub called Mood, which again caters for more mainstream R&B tastes. I also attended a gig at the Newcastle Carling Academy to see a guitarist called Robin Trower so I could chat to more blues enthusiasts, and also attended a seminar followed by a club night (with local ‘grime’ and hip-hop performances) at The Sage Gateshead. Aside from the Robin Trower gig, which I went with my Dad to see, I was accompanied by friends to the aforementioned places. When it was an R&B night, I would occasionally see someone familiar, but all in all it was more covert and I could observe interactions a lot more, whereas when I attended a hip-hop specific night, the attendance was much smaller and I was completely conspicuous because of my music endeavours being known to the local scene, and thus I was only as observational as one could be amongst familiar faces. On 5 of the occasions I went out with my digital voice recorder (to a hip-hop event held during the week at Digital, to the event held at The Mushroom Bar, to the Robin Trower gig, The Sage Gateshead, and once to The Head of Steam). At other times, any random sound-bites I could obtain I would record on my phone.

My experiences of data collection were all positive, as hip-hop and blues enthusiasts readily talk about their passion for their respective genres. In terms of the hip-hop scene, as mentioned, I am something of a known quantity, so people could see behind the ‘face’ of academia, and knew that it was somebody who also does the music, and knows about the culture from a hands on approach. Thus, no gatekeeper of any kind was needed, as would be
the usual case for a normal academic because I was already on the inside somewhat, being a known artist originally from that area, but one that has admittedly moved around to several areas in the UK, and someone who hasn’t consistently been an active participant in that particular scene (I have been more of an active participant in hip-hop generally, making music non location specific, however the Internet negates a lot of that, as local people have been able to keep up to date through various social networking sites that I use to promote my music). Although I was embraced by the local scene, I was still disconnected/ disassociated enough to tackle the thesis with an unbiased, unaffected approach, with no danger of glorification taking place. I was involved, but not too involved as to have my judgement clouded. I found organising the focus groups more or less straight forward, and since I wanted 5 respondents in each, I had a reserve list of several people I could call upon if somebody pulled out at short notice, which happened on 2 occasions. The focus groups took place twice during a week day, and twice during a weekend. In terms of locations for focus groups, I used a quiet bar twice, a coffee shop once, and somebody’s house for my final one. Depth interviews took place in several different locations, including my own house, the respondent’s house, out socially, and even via the Internet. In terms of blues enthusiasts, my Dad acted as the bridge for that, and made initial contact on my behalf with the people I later interviewed (as he himself was in a several bands in the 60s, 70s and 80s and had several good contacts), and then the interview was arranged and conducted by myself. All but 2 took place at the respondent’s house, with these remaining 2 taking place in a quiet bar convenient to their location. The 3 interviewees who feature the most in the fieldwork chapters all have short biographies in the appendix section of this thesis.

Interview techniques allow the researcher to achieve a more personal account of respondents’ ideas and theories than other, broader, responses within ethnographic research allow. Specific attributes can thus be focused upon as opposed to simply collecting information about a large pool of subjects, which is bereft of personal interaction. Since the questionnaire is specifically designed to fit the needs of the researcher, there is therefore greater control over the nature of the data collected and a more specific focus given to the topic at hand. In addition, Moore (1987) relates that the process of probing and prompting affords the interviewer greater control over the responses received, allows the interviewee to consider all the possibilities when answering and enables a more detailed answer to be given. Depth interviews therefore enabled me to gather detailed information about the particular experiences of each chosen participant on a one-to-one basis. As it is more personal than
other methods, it further allowed the participants to fully articulate their thoughts and frame their individual experiences in the way that they wished.

The group interactions and dynamics inherent in focus groups are entirely fitting for the study of youth cultures. Unlike other methods of data collection, focus group interviewing creates a conversational group that facilitates participant observation like interaction on a topic whilst allowing the researcher to simultaneously interview the respondents.

In essence, the strengths of focus groups come from a compromise between the strengths found in other qualitative methods. Like participant observation, they allow access to a process that qualitative researchers are interested in: interaction. Like in-depth interviewing, they allow access to...the attitudes and experiences of our informants (Morgan and Spanish, 1984: 260).

Clearly, focus groups do not allow the observation of interaction to be held under a naturalistic environment as participant observation does, and the interviewing technique is not as direct, or strong, as it is in a one-to-one basis. However, with these two goals combined, it can be argued that focus groups represent the best of both worlds. As a result, focus group interviews allow researchers to observe a large amount of interaction in a relatively short space of time, with the range of responses being widened due to the larger number of people involved than would be the case in individual interviews. The synergy of the group can enable a much livelier debate than would be possible in a one-to-one interview situation, and it is less likely that the respondents will be ‘led’ by an interviewer (Birley and Moreland, 1998).

In my focus groups three main stages were of vital importance: entry, involvement and possible exit. The questions in both the focus groups and depth interviews were structured around these. For example, in terms of entry, my questions focused on any period of learning about the culture, time spent gaining credentials/or a ‘rep’ and any ritual processes involved in joining the scene. The degree of current level of involvement was looked at in detail, and finally any disaffection and disillusionment within the scene was analysed. I was looking to find out whether any of the participants had been dissuaded in any way and why, or if they know of any other people that this was applicable to. Therefore a structure for comparison emerged. These three topics (entry, involvement and possible exit) were vital, and supersede
questions pertaining to mere detail. The same technique was applied to my depth interviews. Thus, knowledge was co-produced through dialogue rather than extracted. Where relevant, the analysis offered here will be supported by things that I noted as I conducted my participant observation, during visits to local hip-hop and R&B nights. My main focus was on both the depth interviews and the focus groups, however, my data will be supplemented by some observational findings also. This helped me to relate further to the respondents opinions and to obtain an insider’s view at selected venues.

‘Purposive’ sampling was implemented instead of ‘random’ sampling in order to select respondents. To ensure that the focus groups ran smoothly, people from a similar background and a shared experience were selected, the most vital thing being that all were young, white, hip-hop fans who lived in, or originated from, Newcastle. I therefore selected the necessary people who slotted into my criteria shape. My recruitment strategy was to simply ask respondents, and as I am known somewhat within the Newcastle hip-hop scene because of my own music connections, a secondary gatekeeper was unnecessary as I had direct access to many of the main protagonists. My father has also been extremely helpful with getting respondents from the blues scene, as he was a drummer in the North East’s most popular band in the 1970s (most notably achieving an appearance on ‘New Faces’).

I feel the methodological techniques that were used had the advantage over more controlled and experimental approaches in terms of the richness of qualitative detail that they yielded. The fact that I am a known ‘presence’ on the local scene, and a white rap music producer originally from the area to boot, helped me gain the trust and respect of the respondents, and I feel this fact has validated responses, and diminished the likelihood of my informants altering sensitive issues to ‘save face’. The fact that I myself could empathise with the respondents has certainly helped me to tackle sensitive topics with a bunch of potentially ‘difficult’ respondents. As I will show, authenticity is of the utmost importance to ‘hip-hoppers’, and so to get them to open up and expose a variety of areas of their own personality is no easy feat by any means. I have ensured to the best of my ability that my methods have produced reliable, valid and meaningful data (De Vaus, 2001), and have produced data relevant to the research questions, that provide illumination on the topic at hand (Birley and Moreland, 1998).
I have analysed my data from interview responses, and focus group transcripts, using coded categories. The variations of responses to my questions were indexed in this way to make it manageable for interpretation (Bloor et al., 2001), index codes enable the researcher to “bring together all extracts of data that are pertinent to a particular theme, topic or hypothesis” (ibid: 63). From there, the responses to questions/topics were read across, and similarities and differences were duly noted, pattern coding has then been used to identify common themes (Punch, 2000). I found that similar responses were apparent time and time again; the same questions were asked to members of both blues and hip-hop scenes in order to attempt to draw out longitudinal distinctions/comparisons of Newcastle's black music following fraternity. Overall, various themes were prevalent throughout my focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews.

**A LONGITUDINAL APPROACH**

My longitudinal fieldwork approach aims to shed light on why youth have been drawn to engage in black cultural practices within this outwardly isolated city (isolated not only in terms of culture/lack of ethnic diversity but also due to geographical location). Picking both the blues and hip-hop genres is deliberate, as there are distinct correlations between these two art forms artistically and stylistically, and both have had burgeoning, small-scale but dedicated scenes within the city, starting with the ‘blues boom’ in the mid 60’s and followed by the introduction of hip-hop in the early 80’s. Both are the result of black Americans who have synthesised a musical style that gave voice to their disenfranchisement. In the first half of the twentieth century this was encapsulated in the blues and in the later twentieth century, with the playing field still not level, another generation of black Americans used the medium of hip-hop culture and more specifically rap music for similar purposes. Both musical forms are passionate and engaging and not without controversy, and both have championed a musical form that is so compelling, the message so universal, that they have been able to transcend their specific origins and connect with people all around the world. The links between blues and hip-hop are definite and clear, and it will be interesting to see whether there is any variation in the dynamics surrounding the level of appreciation/participation/inclination both between the two art forms and within them.
In the UK blues and rap music have been fuelled by loyal enthusiasts, in their role as performers and consumers. Both have had largely underground audiences and both musical styles are relatively easy to create/perform. In terms of the blues, Brunning (2002) relates that “the deceptively easy structure of the genre, with its reliance on the simple twelve bar formula, has allowed musicians everywhere to express their feelings through the songs, which return again and again to the themes of oppression, sadness, poverty and educational deprivation” (ibid: 9). This direction is easily translated into hip-hop terms also, with a voice for the oppressed still being one of the originating and fundamental key elements to the music. However, this particular involvement appears to have attained a much greater depth than that which preceded it. “White teenagers and college students move beyond the music and exhibit their fascination with African-American culture through the clothing and accessories that they wear as well as through the language and styles that they adopt and nonverbal expressive codes that they effect” (West, 1994: 121). West (1994) refers to this as the ‘Afro-Americanization of white youth’, which not only happens in suburban America but on a worldwide level also. As powerful as this trend seems to be today, similar manifestations of white emulation of black culture were evident among the minstrel performers of the nineteenth century, the jazz hipsters of the 1920s, the beatniks of the 1950s, and the rock and rollers of the 1960s and 1970s (Lott, 1995), as I discussed earlier. Thus, as is apparent, it is nothing new at all; the only alteration perhaps being the excessively pedantic nature of dedicated hip-hop fans in their quest for authenticity and acceptance.

THE AIMS OF MY FIELDWORK

Ultimately, I want to ascertain what circumstances are prevalent to enable this ‘white’ hip-hop participation in the almost exclusively white city of Newcastle. The following fieldwork chapters aim to discover just what made local young white people become involved in such outwardly alien cultures as the blues in the 1960’s/1970’s and hip-hop in the 1980’s through to the present. I will look at whether Newcastle has any ‘special conditions’ which have enabled this participation and what affect this has had on individual consumption of black musical cultures. The local dynamics behind white appropriation will therefore be explored. I will be concerned with the notion of identity, which is central to cultural studies, and will examine the contexts within which and through which individuals construct, negotiate and
defend their identity and self-understanding in relation to rap music. I intend to find out the meanings and values which underpin such behaviour (Bounds, 1999). I will be doing this, like Krims (2000), as someone who is actively involved in the music “but who is by no means close either to hip-hop’s cultural existence or to rap’s current source of authenticity” (Krims, 2000: 7). Social conditions, the mass media, identity formations and lifestyle rituals will also be explored in due course, as well as questions surrounding authenticity and the negotiation of colour boundaries.

As mentioned, from the very start, my main intention is to ascertain how the hip-hop movement has strongly affected young white hip-hop consumers in Newcastle, the focus being on the reasons behind why these respondents have been influenced. The answer is not so simple, considering that Newcastle is 90.5% white, with an insignificant 1.1% being defined as ‘black or black British’ (Neighbourhood Statistics, 2005), this figure decreasing even further in surrounding areas. This means that no emphasis can be put on an influential or notable black community to act as a reference guide. There is also no immediately proximate black hip-hop culture which could serve as a model for venting frustration against oppression. My findings will show nevertheless how local white youth’s behaviour, values, and attitudes have been constructed around hip-hop culture and shaped by its codes and practices. My theoretical framework, as set out in Chapter 1, is based on the concept of ‘new ethnicities’ expounded by Les Back (1996). These ‘new ethnicities’ are hybrid and simultaneously local, multinational and transcultural, creating new cultures that cross race, class and geographical lines. The specific ‘new ethnicity’ on which I focus derives from the intersections of Geordie culture and Afro diasporic culture. From what follows, I hope to be able to conclude why these individuals have become immersed in black culture in an area such as Newcastle throughout the past half-century or so. I will then move on to discuss notions of social class and ethnicity, followed by questions of authenticity in the final fieldwork chapter.
Within this chapter, I want to explore the dynamics behind the engagement of local white youth in a culture alien to their own. As mentioned previously, there is no notable local black population to act as an immediate reference guide; therefore the reasons behind an involvement in black culture will be different in a predominantly white area, such as Newcastle, compared to more multi-cultural areas, such as London. I will be looking primarily at the collective factors that have encouraged and promoted this white participation in the contemporary hip-hop scene of Newcastle, but I shall also look at the reasons behind local participation in the 1960s blues scene in the hope of displaying certain longitudinal connections and differences across the course of time.

**EASE OF THE MUSIC TO PLAY**

John Steel, former drummer of The Animals, describes the sense of natural progression from listening to the music to performing it:

> We were fans listening to this stuff and rather than just sit listening to them doing it, we thought, ‘Why don’t we do it as well?’ It’s not a big deal because everybody in the country seemed to be doing the same thing at the same time. It seemed like a spontaneous thing. I’ve always said it was skiffle that did it. When Lonnie Donegan recorded ‘Rock Island Line’ that’s when everybody realised that ‘I can do that’. Three chords on a cheap guitar. And when Elvis came out with ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ and sounded so black, that’s when everybody realised, ‘Well fuckin’ hell why can’t us white kids play blues, play rock and roll? (cited Egan, 2001: 13).

The blues was certainly a way into music for many young people in the 1960s eager to pick up and play music with relative ease. Learning a simple 12 bar structure on a guitar, for example, was often enough to provide the credentials for joining a band. For those in Newcastle on a mainly limited budget, band instruments proved inexpensive compared to,
say, the brass percussion instruments needed for jazz. The blues had a bare, stripped-down element, with a raw edge that appealed to the predominantly macho sensibilities of the Geordie working-class male. Ronnie, 64:

A lot of lads into The Shadows just didn’t comprehend it because it was going back to basics I suppose. They didn’t like it and couldn’t see the subtleties. I was actually starting school at Rutherford Grammar whilst Hank Marvin was in his final year and I distinctly remember him with guitars in the playground. He was 5/6 years older than us. He was a skiffler.

Skiffle was certainly a precursor to the blues, as seen by the comments of both John and Ronnie. However, as mentioned, blues took it ‘back to basics’ and was looked down upon by prominent musicians in other genres, ignoring its resounding message and power to evoke emotion. Steve, 57:

I liked blues cos of its simplicity, and stripped-down bareness. When you first start playing, you’re probably not that confident, so if your gonna play a simple 4/4 rhythm like Mick Fleetwood and just whack it out, it’s far easier to start playing than having to listen to complicated time patterns from somebody like Yes! or Emerson Lake and Palmer which would take you 3 weeks to learn a song. You could learn a John Mayall or Fleetwood Mac song in 10 minutes.

Steve makes the comparison to punk music, which itself had a very stripped-down ‘garage band’ element, and then on to rap music, both following in the tradition set down by blues:

Punk musicians would say ‘well we’re not great musicians, we just want to go out and do it, we’re not preaching to people. We’re people from the street and we can play the simple form of music cos we’re not really musicians’. And that’s again similar to rap as well. I don’t like snobbish purists. The blues, punk and rap are stripped-down, accessible, it's immediate, and it’s minority music. If you wanted to take up playing some sort of music, the quickest music you could take up playing would be rap today; you could do it with beats. The quickest music I could take up playing, pick it up, get running, get on stage with was blues. And if I had started playing in the 70s it would
have been punk. It’s quickness, accessibility, and catch-the-ball-and-get-running music.

Ronnie, 64, draws the distinction between participation and actual competence: ‘You just knew you liked that sort of music and the fact that you could actually play it and it was fairly basic helped, but to do it well you had to know what you were doing ye kna’.

**IMPORTANCE OF SOCIALISING**

The concept of clubbing in Newcastle is nothing new. The impact that the ‘Club-A-Go-Go’ had on Newcastle in the 1960s was immense, and all of the blues music enthusiasts of the relevant age-group who I interviewed spoke about it in reverent tones. It was the starting point for The Animals, and their manager Mike Jeffery (who owned the club). All of the best bands from a variety of genres played there. Although the impact of the club and related clubs (such as ‘The Downbeat’) is marked, other individuals took a different path. A different type of experience was encountered by Bill, 55, as a youth:

When I was younger, probably the first scene that I got involved in was the skinheads. And through that they had a big culture of black music, both soul and reggae. We used to go to a club called ‘The Playground’ on Westgate Road who had a very locally famous black American DJ called ‘Big Phil’ and he introduced me to the music of James Brown and a lot of the Stax type of record labels and the funk music at the time. I was buying import records from Callas Pegasus in Newcastle who had a great record shop on Northumberland Street, and the lad who ran that was also a DJ at Julies nightclub on the Quayside. I got into the rarer soul scene even further through *Blues and Soul* magazine. Me and my girlfriend then started travelling and we would pick up the rare stuff which was then classed as the Northern Soul scene which was soul music which had that Motown drive but a harder edge. We started going away to Wigan Casino and Blackpool Mecca, which was massive up until the late 70s.

Prior to the ‘blues explosion’ in the UK, which, as mentioned, brought promoter Mike Jeffery and his band The Animals to the forefront in Newcastle, black music enthusiasts in the North
East had to travel further afield to get their fix. This was the case with Maurice, 63: ‘I travelled to the ‘Twisted Wheel’ in Manchester, and ‘The Attic’ in Sheffield. Both played early soul and late 1950s American imports. They also had bands on, up until 1962 they were playing trad jazz with occasional blues, and then Alexis Korner brought the blues properly to the UK’.

Sarah Thornton (1995: 16) has suggested that “the widespread significance of dance clubs to growing up may be unique to Britain” and that the importance of “going out dancing crosses boundaries of class, race, ethnicity and sexuality” (1995: 16). In the clubs and bars that I visited, it was clear that this culture of socialising was one of the things that ‘bonded’ particular hip-hop crews. At Newcastle’s ‘Fusion’ bar on Friday nights there are regular ‘freestyle’ sessions, where locals can get on stage to rap improvised lyrics live to the audience. Crews would spend their whole week preparing for this event, where winning the crowd’s praise was of the utmost importance. Mike, 18, related: ‘It’s where local artists like us can get noticed you know. In Newcastle there isn’t much on, so if you want to get local respect, you have to drop it right on nights like this’. Members from Newcastle’s (predominantly African) small black community are notably absent from nights such as these, and are to be found in the more mainstream (popular) nights and clubs. Mike continues: ‘All they want to do is go to those big expensive nights and show off, chasing lasses’. The difference between the ‘glitzy’ big commercialised nights, and the introverted scene of the underground (usually to be found in battered pubs or poorly attended bars and clubs) is extreme, and an underbelly of resentment is apparent among the die-hards.

‘Stig’, 28, further expands upon this:

In the hip-hop scene that I’m involved in, which is the, quote unquote, ‘underground’ scene, the vast majority of those subscribing to it are white. That’s not because they are attracted to it more or that blacks are excluded, it’s that, like you say, the majority of the population is white. Therefore, the majority of people in to any scene are going to be white. However, if you look at the more money-making side of hip-hop, the more pop culture side of things, then I would say it’s more 50/50 if not more leaning
towards black people at nights like ‘Lovedough’\textsuperscript{1}. It started out as a hip-hop night and turned into a massive commercial venture. It plays the sort of music I don’t like, hip-hop’s answer to the school disco in my eyes. Lots of people go there, they listen to the lowest sort of denominator hip-hop, pay overpriced money and get drunk. But it is massively successful. And that just goes to show the commercial value of hip-hop.

In relation to this is the apparent ‘exoticism’ of black men for white women in commercialised clubs. Newcastle’s small African population descend on generally the same clubs on the same nights, and white women are there in abundance. Strangely enough, not many black women attend these clubs in Newcastle. This is often due to the cultural demands of their upbringing, where it is sometimes frowned upon for women to be seen drinking outside of family gatherings. On one of my participant observation jaunts into the city at a commercialised night, one Anglo-African local informed me that in London he is just another face, but in Newcastle he is a big fish in a relatively small pond, with the same faces attending these nights.

As referred to earlier in the thesis, I attended one of the ‘biggest’ underground hip-hop nights in Newcastle history for local acts, which incorporated a line up of all the local ‘big’ names in one night. The club used was only open on one floor, and it was at much less than half capacity even then, yet this was heralded as a ‘big turnout’ and ‘everybody who is everybody in the scene’ was apparently in attendance. I noted one mixed race girl, and perhaps 5 females in total out of around 80-100 people (at a rough estimate). The distinction between the two ‘nights’ is huge. Simon, 34:

Most of the black kids that I see about town, like kids from Nigeria and all the rest of it, all listen to 50 Cent, it’s pop music they’re listening to, R&B [the new variation] bollocks. It used to be that the mainstream Americans were Nas, Jay-Z, Biggie, 2pac, Eminem, and I could kinda handle that cos they’re fucking good, not bad rappers, and if that’s the mainstream then good, but now….It’s fucking terrible.

Klaire, 34:

\textsuperscript{1} This is the name of a very commercially successful ‘urban’ night that has more of a mainstream music policy and thus more mass appeal
It’s usually the lads who drag us to Envy [another very commercial ‘urban’ club].
That’s the problem with Newcastle, if you wanna go clubbing after somewhere, that’s
the kind of choice you end up with. I’m just generally frustrated if anything. There’s
no-place to go! [laughs]. There is a growing ethnic population now, a lot of people
coming from West Africa, and there’s a big Asian community, it’s just a different
scene. They go to Lovedough or Envy instead. The commercial nights.

Clubs have also been used to form crews and hip-hop relations, as mentioned earlier. This
was the case with Nicole, 18: ‘When I started going out with my ex I got involved with the
local club scene and met various local hip-hop collectives, it’s then that I started to get
heavily into UK hip-hop’. ‘Stig’, 28, relates the positive aspect of this social element:

In Newcastle there’s quite a large drinking culture and it’s generally a big social area.
I’d say hip-hop in Newcastle, the vast majority of it, while obviously people do
explain their daily struggle in life, hip-hop in Newcastle just tends to have a better
vibe than elsewhere. It’s got that local spirit, that northern spirit, it might be gritty,
like Newcastle is, the people are, it’s a mining city.

He goes on to define ‘local spirit’:

The local spirit is welcoming, it’s mild mannered but at the same time it’s
unforgivingly Geordie. It’s a case of, we have an identity, which is rooted in history;
we are big drinkers, big socialites, we are known as social people, and that transcends
into everything we do, especially the hip-hop. So, in the hip-hop, the scene is
welcoming – everybody is welcome as part of the scene and there’s a lot of party style
hip-hop, and party messages going out. But all of this is encompassed under the same
sort of northern grittiness, like I say, working-classness. Unforgivingly Geordie.

As I will show, the scene is not so welcoming for some as ‘Stig’ would have us believe, but
then again, I have already noted that people within the scene view it differently (and perhaps
with ‘rose tinted’ glasses) compared to others who aren’t made as welcome. But the idea of
Geordies as ‘party people’ is hard to escape as both universities and the local council actively
encourage it in their brochures and prospectuses. The drinking culture is big business and
drives the city’s economy the way that mining once did. Jon, 30, stresses the distinction
between North and South in terms of socialising: ‘Southerners, I am one, are more bothered about image and all of that, Northerners are more interested in being themselves and having a good time’. As mentioned, this is reflected in the local rap music output.

Newcastle’s club and bar culture is of the utmost importance for generating local interest in urban music, and by hosting events such as ‘freestyle’ tournaments, keeping that interest going. Hip-hop can also be used as a form of glamorous escapism, full of money, women, and glitz, and as a form of reaffirming masculinity through hip-hop’s ‘dangerous’ element, through imagining life ‘on the edge’. The power of the mass media is one of the central elements in encouraging local white participation in Newcastle, hip-hop culture is accessible at a fingertip, it has became a smartly produced package just waiting for individual consumption. I will return back to the above soon, but first the undeniable element of socialising needs further elaboration.

The importance of this social bonding becomes ever more evident via other respondents. ‘Comedian’, 28: ‘I battle rap at a local club and a group of about 7 of us called the ‘yak pak’ drink beer, fuck women, get high and write lyrics basically. Hip-hop definitely bonds us’. ‘Mistarick, 32, conveys his local hip hop ‘credentials’:

I attended every ‘Force’ night at Newcastle University, and most of the big gigs in the past 10 years in Toon, most memorably at the old Riverside club, I forget what it’s called nowadays, where I also played my first gig ever. I was also regularly emceeing at ‘Turbulence’ up until about 2 years ago. I’ve just been to the all dayer at Fusion bar; it was a wicked day the whole scene practically was there.

This takes us back again to the ‘scene’, a small introverted band of white working-class males who assume the mantle of representing hip-hop culture in Newcastle, be it justified or not. ‘Mistarick’ moves on to explaining how he was accepted into the fold: ‘I moved to Newcastle in 1995 and started going to any hip-hop night I could find. I eventually got on the mic in ’97 for the first time outside my bedroom and that night met and spoke to a lot of regular faces from the scene’. This would indicate that it took around two years from the respondent ‘starting out’ to being inducted into the ‘scene’. Displaying his rap skills appears to have been the predominant factor to enable induction, despite two years of previous groundwork. Eddie, 28: ‘I go to ‘Speakeasy’ mainly and now Fusion bar, I’ve been to the ‘Sammy Dee’ show, go
Digital infrequently and Newcastle Uni when there is something of interest on, ‘Turbulance’ and ‘Arcane’ mainly. On a surface level this would appear to be a healthy amount of nights, but ‘Speakeasy’ runs infrequently, the ‘Sammy Dee show’ at the time of writing had ended, Digital is one of the alleged ‘glitzy’ overpriced commercial nights, and the Newcastle University nights are also infrequent. This makes the collection of individuals present even more likely to be familiar with one another.

**ABUNDANCE OF PLACES TO PLAY**

The band later to be known as The Animals, and still called the Alan Price Rhythm and Blues Combo (and before that the Kansas City Five), helped nightclub owner, and future manager, Mike Jeffery decorate the ‘Downbeat Club’ located on the top floor of an old warehouse. As a result, the art school graduates were rewarded with a regular Friday night gig there, and as a result of a sizeable following over a short period, they moved to the more prestigious ‘Club A-Go-Go’. ‘In between September and December of ’63, we just became the hottest thing in Newcastle,’ John Steel recalls.

Everywhere we played was absolutely jammed. It was in this period that we discovered that we had an audience and it was like, ‘Wow’. Those Saturday night sessions at the Downbeat and the A-Go-Go were absolutely steaming. We’d do two or three hours at the A-Go-Go, then go and play at the Downbeat from midnight ‘till three in the morning. We were absolutely drenched but it was such a buzz. The audience were absolutely great (cited Egan 2001: 28).

According to Steel: ‘The big turning point was that by this time the A-Go-Go had a policy of putting on some really good R&B. We backed Sonny Boy Williamson and John Lee Hooker and stuff like that and also the visiting bands’ (ibid). Fellow ‘Animal’ Eric Burdon echoes these sentiments about the Newcastle scene at the time:

The Newcastle music scene was wonderful. Almost every night of the week at some club or pub there was music going on, from folk to jazz. Life was pretty simple back then. With some spare change in my pocket, I’d jump on a westbound bus, read the
Evening Chronicle to find out where the action was, and head for the chosen gig of the night. Live jazz music: there’s nothing like it. Plus it attracted the best girls. At a pub called the Corner House, I’d often see Mighty Joe Young’s Jazzmen. Halfway through the night I’d get to feeling so good I’d slide up next to the musicians on stage and tug on the trombone player’s jacket. “Hey Ronnie, can I sing a blues tune?” (Burdon, 2001: 34).

Burdon himself sings the praises of the legendary ‘Club-A-Go-Go’: ‘Second only to the Cavern in Liverpool, it became the home of northern music. The Stones, John Lee Hooker, Sonny Boy Williamson, Graham Bond and Cyril Davies all came through Newcastle and played at the Club-A-Go-Go. Often, we’d get the gig as the backing band’. (Burdon, 2001: 35). The Animals even went so far as recording an album track called, unsurprisingly, ‘Club-A-Go-Go’.

The major difference between the 1960s blues scene in Newcastle and the hip-hop scene there today is due to one factor: the sheer number of places to play live music in the 1960s, compared to the dire lack of places open to underground hip-hop enthusiasts today. There is an abundance, as I have shown, of ‘urban’ commercial clubs, but for local enthusiasts who want to actually participate in things like an ‘open mic’ it really is like clutching at proverbial straws. This at least partly explains the disparity between now and the halcyon past described by people like Burdon:

The blues became my passion, and I looked upon nights in the clubs as sacred. It didn’t matter where the gig took place: local halls, clubs, student common rooms—they were all part of the new church. Then the fever hit: Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran. It was the singers that excited me the most. I remember seeing Jimmy Witherspoon with the Buck Clayton band in 1959. The way Witherspoon got the band to groove was a pleasure to witness. He was a man who could really show off the power of the solo human voice (Burdon, 2001: 151).

Ronnie, 64:
The most famous club we played is probably the Club-A-Go-Go, we directly followed the Animals and all that ya know. The Downbeat club too, and there was the likes of the Bluenote in Sunderland, just other pubs, didn’t play in the social clubs though cos we would have went down like a lead balloon. Just wasn’t appropriate, they wanted pop music. It was 1964ish when we started playing, mid Summer 1964, playing Jimmy Reed songs, Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, Fats Domino, people like that, all black artists, then the soul thing came in, Otis Redding and people like that. We played Whitley Bay, up to the Club-A-Go-Go and then The Downbeat all in one night several times. When we were full time musicians we were always allowed to rehearse in the Club-A-Go-Go and became the house band after The Animals left for London. I can’t overemphasise its importance to the local blues scene in the 60s and 70s, it was the place. The Club-A-Go-Go as an entity, undoubtedly switched people onto the blues. It was instrumental in developing people’s cultural appreciation of the blues. Places like that were dotted all over the country, like the Squire club in Sheffield, in most places there was always one little spot, a little bastion of the blues. The blues started in smaller places in and around the area until it developed big enough to be at the City Hall.

Ronnie relates the climate of the times in greater detail:

In Newcastle, The Animals were one of the first playing blues music definitely, prior to that it was jazz and maybe stuff that was in the charts. A lot of Shadows stuff got played too; they were highly influential, at the time. The Shadows got a lot of lads started and then some went down the R&B path and others didn’t. In Newcastle, the arrival of The Animals was more or less the start of the R&B scene. Prior to that at places like the Mussel Inn bands played Chuck Berry songs and that’s the closest you would get. Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Fats Domino and stuff like that. If someone came along in 1960 and tried to play Jimmy Reed stuff it would have bombed. It wouldn’t have happened. The time had to be post-Beatles really. The stuff we were doing just happened to coincide with the popular tastes of certain sections of young people.
And there was certainly no shortage of takers, or places to entertain them in. All very
different to the often empty, struggling, introverted hip-hop scene of today. Steve, 57, strikes
home this distinction:

In the 60s there was a lot more venues for bands to play, people would expect it. The
Quay club in Newcastle, the Bay Hotel, Club-A-Go-Go. Everywhere had a band on
though. Bands weren’t just restricted to clubs; there were also schools, church halls,
youth clubs, and open air venues. Not many working men’s clubs however as they
didn’t like the music we played they just wanted chart music like Love Affair, The
Tremeloes, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones. Although the Stones were a blues band
who graduated into writing their own songs. Now there are some venues, but nowhere
near as many. For blues enthusiasts there was the Tyne Theatre which has closed, The
Carling Academy has some on, or the Cluny in Newcastle which has started to have
blues bands on. Also the Blackbull in Blaydon. The general public don’t want live
music the same way they did. There are a handful of enthusiasts for this type of music
but generally people don’t bother. Kids at school now don’t have live bands on; we
always had one on from where you were 11. When I was young in the 60s every
venue had live music.

It would appear that media consumption has seriously affected live music in general, and now
even ‘proper’ bands (not just rappers) find it difficult locating a place to perform in
Newcastle. The Riverside, which used to be a bastion of many live bands in the area, closed
to be replaced by a nightclub, as did the Mayfair, which was replaced by an entertainment
complex. The boom of the 60s and 70s is now surely seen as bust. So what once gained
people’s attention, and drew them in, the sheer capacity to see bands and the many venues to
see them in, is now a thing of the past, but one which people around in the 60s will never
forget.

THE MEDIA

As Jones (1988) has noted, the more commercially mediated forms of reggae extended well
into predominantly white only areas, which was often their only point of contact with black
culture. Newcastle’s hip-hop scene is entirely derived from the mass media, as without it, they would not have been exposed to such a culture in the first place. Thus, things like the ‘Radio 1 Rap Show’ with Tim Westwood, MTV, and global publications such as ‘The Source’ are all consumed on a large scale by virtually all of the respondents that I interviewed. One theme which ran strongly throughout my discussions is that respondents are quick to play down the commercial nature of their present-day media consumption. ‘Truth’ 22: ‘I heard some commercial shit on radio, like Puffy or Ma$e or something, when I was like 8, and then searched it more, made all the mistakes and misunderstandings of the culture until I felt the comfortability of it and what I wanted’.

“White youth consumption of forms of popular culture created primarily by blacks, such as rap music, appears to be an apolitical trend of consumerism that is devoid of any other sociological implications.” (Yousman, 2003: 370). This is what bell hooks (1992) described as ‘eating the other’, or the tendency for cultural difference to be commodified “as a source of titillation and pleasure for White consumers” (ibid: 378). None of this is more evident than in media consumption. I will first touch upon the media’s impact on Newcastle’s ‘black music’ scene back in the 60s when Eric Burdon heard upon the grapevine that a new change was afoot. “They’d [The Animals] already had inklings when Burdon had made a pilgrimage to London to investigate the flourishing R&B scene, of which word had reached Newcastle. ‘Eric had gone down to Alexis Korner’s club to check that out,’ Steel explains. ‘He’d heard the story, read it in the Melody Maker, NME. So we knew what was going on, Eric more than anybody else” (cited Egan, 2001: 30). Burdon reiterates the huge significance the media had on him:

I’d come a long way from Newcastle, and I was finally chasing the dream that had haunted me since early teen hood: America. Shit, I wasn’t even a teenager when I discovered jazz, courtesy of movies and television. Because of my father’s work as an electrician, we were among the lucky few to have a TV early on. Cliché or not, it brought the real world into my living room. Clips from America became my obsession, particularly anything to do with jazz or blues. I even took up trombone (Burdon, 2001: 50).

The great source of inspiration for British musicians, both in blues and rap respectively, has always been the rich and bottomless well of talent to be found on the other side of the
Atlantic, where the giants of the blues have been singing and playing since the beginning of the last century, and the giants of hip-hop began making waves in New York in the mid-70s. “It is inevitable that every blues musician in Britain derived his original motivation by listening to his American heroes” (Brunning, 2002: 9). However, this is not true for all. Many ‘second wave’ and subsequent generations of blues players did not draw their inspiration from old American imports. The Geordie harmonica player, Paul Lamb, is but one: “Like many members of the new generation of blues players, Paul’s first influences were not actually American at all, but British: ‘I got into John Mayall, enjoyed that, but then I started looking at the song writing credits, and one of them led me to my all time hero, Sonny Terry” (cited Brunning, 2002: 272).

Ronnie, 64, issues his take on the emergence of the blues phenomenon:

The blues scene didn’t just come out of nowhere, ya know, I mean when I was at school we used to listen to songs by Leadbelly, that was in the jazz society, that would be 60/61, that was before the blues thing kicked off in this country. But jazz always had a blues sort of section ya know, we listened to stuff like that anyway. Chuck Berry I think was crucial, cos he bridged the gap; he fused blues and rock together. But the scene didn’t come out of thin air. As for needing a black community for guidance, that point is totally irrelevant, you listen to things on radio, and you can get it from all over the place. In early 1963 The Beatles made me want to play, I sing and play harmonica, I was only 17/18, but they were actually doing a lot of cover versions. They were doing Chuck Berry, The Shirelles stuff, mainly cover versions of black artists and that’s what sparked it off for me.

Steve, 57:

I think the only way you can know of the existence of a certain type of music is to hear it on the radio or maybe read about it then want to listen to it cos I can remember reading about certain bands in the *Melody Maker*. And don’t forget the *Melody Maker* and *New Music Express* go back to the 50s, 40s even, so they would say ‘there’s this great new band ‘blahdey blah’, and you’d say ‘I want to listen to them’ and I think they sort of started popularising black artists. People have to be influenced by the media to some extent, just to hear something, or else you’d never hear anything.
In Nayak’s study (2003a), the ‘White Wannabes’ were white school youth deriving from middle and working class backgrounds whom it was alleged ‘wanted to be black’. As a cross-gender subculture they comprised basketball-playing youth (‘B Boyz’), hip-hop fans, skateboarders, wiggers (supposed ‘white negroes’) and other young people who engaged with black culture via the media to varying degrees. The ‘Real Geordies’ and other youth declared that the ‘B-Boyz’ and their ilk were aptly named since they represented that most contentious of social groups, ‘Black-Boyz’ (ibid). Unlike ‘Real Geordies’ and ‘Charver Kids’ who were negotiating global change through a fervent politics of the local, the ‘White Wannabes’ actively embraced these transformations. The globalisation of culture and its spread through new media technologies, Nayak contends, meant ‘Wannabes’ could adopt a transnational perspective that drew heavily upon the multiple signs of ‘blackness’ and its influence in the fields of youth culture, fashion, music, sport, dance and film (ibid). Even so, this engagement with a global multiculture could only flourish through dialogue with the ‘local’, supported by basketball clubs, a growing local hip-hop scene (Bennett, 1999a), skateboarding zones, friendship circles and other cultural practices and events. I now want to turn my attention to finding out just how much effect the media has had on Geordie hip-hop. Bearing in mind that there is little or no black population to refer to, the answer to this question, on a surface level, would seem fairly obvious.

Surprisingly, ‘Stig’, 28, dismisses the media: ‘It hasn’t been an influence, there hasn’t been sufficient for it to’. When questioned on where exactly Geordie hip-hop would have got such an inspiration, bearing in mind that without the media people in Newcastle wouldn’t necessarily know too much about the art form, he contends: ‘But I don’t think they do know that much, other than about the artists getting exposure in America. What have the locals got to take inspiration from? Just each other, which is what I said is both good and bad’. ‘Stig’ is clearly forgetting that these same American artists getting exposure are the ones that have set the precedent the world over for local scenes to emerge. However, drawing inspiration from within a local collective is a valid point, but not the point at which the majority of participation would have emerged. Most respondents fully accept the influence of the media on their own participation. ‘Mistarick’, 32: ‘I got into hip-hop about 1990, mainly through *Yo! MTV Raps* when me dad won a sky dish in the *News of the World*’, Stephen, 30: ‘By the mid 90’s when I got into hip-hop it was growing in popularity at the time, at its creative peak, it was influencing more…it was on the telly more. It was more attractive. Dance music was dying as far as I could see’. Rachael, 21: ‘Newcastle, apart from the city centre isn’t wealthy,
it’s undergoing regeneration, but as a culture it’s underdeveloped. Media, radio, entertainment are the only inspirations up here; we are very multicultural back home in London and Newcastle is like a culture shock to me, because of its lack of culture so to speak’.

An interesting debate on the media emerged from one of my focus groups, and I now offer a brief transcript of this:

David, 32: ‘What they’ve got in America is a full culture, and we have lent from that, and we owe a lot. We owe everything really like because we can’t deny that we’ve been influenced by certain American rappers who we all loved’.
Adam, 32: ‘I still love American hip-hop’.
David, 32: ‘Then again now I can look at all the London MC’s that are kicking off and everything, I can be influenced by all of them now’.
Johnny 33: ‘Coming from London yeah when I started 14 years ago, I can say that I didn’t know another white MC, blatant, and it took a good 3 years before I even came across one and that was Skinnyman and that was way back in the day…So, looking at Newcastle, I’ve been coming up here every year of my life cos I was born up here, up until about 7 years ago I’d never seen a black person in Newcastle, not at all, so how is there hip-hop culture here in a 99% white area?…’
Simon, 34: ‘We can say you’re just as much influenced by telly, like I said we weren’t around the city anyway, and you’re influenced just as much off the telly and off everything else, MTV videos, Top Of The Pops, whatever, you’re influenced off that more than by who’s walking around’.
David, 32: ‘Like 20 years ago I was like 12 and there was kids round my school, no black kids at all, not even any Asian kids or nothing, and they were all like walking around with fluffy Kangol hats on and big ghetto blasters like kids from my school. There was a few beatboxers there wasn’t no like ciphers [gatherings of rappers taking a turn each] going around for MC’s or nothing like that but the odd kid could beatbox in school and other kids would be reciting lyrics like from NWA…And they’d be stealing like the VW signs off cars like the Beastie Boys…Even though we weren’t in the city, in the North East of England it still sort of touched everywhere and that, it was all over the place’.
Johnny, 33: ‘Yeah that was through the media’
Simon, 34: ‘And I played basketball as well and stuff, and also watched Def 2 on BBC2 with Normski and he’s got like The Black Sheep, I mean like Derek B was on TOTP in 1986’.

David, 32: ‘Stereo MCs too as well, you had people like that as well on the Manchester Indie scene, kicking about, and you like can’t deny that The Stone Roses had a hip-hop vibe’.

David, 28: ‘The reasons I started liking hip-hop when I was younger, at school was because I was quite into American sports, basketball and stuff, that brought out the hip-hop side of that’.

Dan, 23: ‘Well I got into rappin’ before anything else, Ant and Dec ready to rumble, was the first cassette I bought, which got me into that style of music. Then I went on to buy Puff Daddy, Ma$e, 2Pac. This was when I was like 10, I didn’t understand it was hip-hop at all, I just heard them rappin’ and thought it was cool. That is really what happened, it wasn’t until I started painting [graffiti], that I realised there was more to hip-hop. And it spiralled from there, the commercial stuff grabbed me and then I got deeper into it. The Internet has definitely helped out my development, yeah definitely forums and MSN messenger, I get to talk to new people and find out new things. Also, I think its people who stick to forums, who kinda get influenced with the London scene’.

Neil, 20: ‘I grew up listening to 50 Cent; I listened to him like, and Tim Westwood. I then met a few heads in the UK scene and then tried out the UK stuff’.

The usual ways for the media to influence hip-hop participation are amply described in this transcript. Usually a young person will hear a commercial song on the radio, or see a video; they will then indulge in the commercial side of the culture before finding or being introduced to a more discerning underground music (often treading back into ‘old school’ hip-hop to learn more about the culture and recover lost ground). The same can be said for blues fans who had only initially heard Eric Clapton or John Mayall, who then read their sleeve notes and got into artists such as Robert Johnson through that. The Internet is the single most crucial aspect for holding consumer’s attention and dedication to hip-hop. It has made a once remote art form into a one-stop shop for all needs and provides the ‘virtual communities’ that bring people from around the country, and indeed the world, together. Strange enough, as the local scene is so word of mouth, there is not much evidence of local rap acts bands actually on the Internet. ‘RooFio’, 16: ‘The people I have met over the Net from forums and stuff encouraged me to get into the UK scene more, well I only talk to them on the Net, not met them yet, but there’s no-one around my area who appreciates it the way others do. If it wasn’t for the Net I would have no reason to carry on trying to get better’.
‘Bonzo’, 24: ‘The net is a bigger thing for hip-hop than many people realise, if it wasn’t for
the net, I wouldn’t be doing what I do at such a high level either’, ‘Danyo’, 20: ‘The Internet
is the main reason why I wrote as much as I did, being set up with a battle gave me a reason
to come online, and spit something fresh’, Eddie, 28: ‘Newcastle is isolated because people
don’t see past the post code, I’m involved in this via the Internet and have established
working links with people in London, Sheffield and Nottingham via the same medium’.

There are two distinct groups of participant in Newcastle hip-hop, the Geordie ‘die-hards’
who by their own admission struggle to see ‘beyond the post code’ so to speak, and London
influenced ‘fakers’ (a term attributed by these ‘die-hards’ to this group) who are distanced
from the local scene. The Internet keeps up the latter’s participation, as without it they would
have little desire or motivation. ‘Virtual communities’ are thus increasingly important in hip-
hop participation rituals. The Internet as a tool has expanded hip-hop’s reach dramatically,
for as late as the early 90’s hip-hop was a rare commodity in the North East (and the UK as a
whole). It had to be diligently searched out, instead of it being as accessible as it is now.

From personal experience, after getting into hip-hop in 1988, I spent up until the mid 90’s in
a comparative wilderness. I bought whatever I could in the shops, but rap music (firstly tapes
and then CD’s) was not in plentiful supply in Newcastle and I had to make do with whatever
imports finally landed in the city. There was no cable TV, and therefore no videos to be
viewed, no Internet, virtually no rap music on radio (apart from the occasional song now and
again) and I attended a school full of predominantly white dance music enthusiasts. The
advent of the world’s first rap monthly magazine *Hip Hop Connection*, the appointment of
Tim Westwood to host the first UK wide rap show by the BBC in 1994, and more
importantly, the availability of satellite TV (which was an expensive commodity when it
initially arrived) along with the Internet from the mid 90’s, had a huge impact on my ability
to consume the culture. The Internet in particular allowed me to escape the relative shackles
of my environment, and build upon my love of the culture with people from around the
world. ‘Virtual communities’ are enabled by tools such as message boards and instant
messenger, and in the past few years social networking sites such as myspace and facebook.
GLAMOROUS ESCAPISM

The fact that black hip-hop leisure practices are so different to ‘normal’ English leisure activities is profoundly attractive to certain sections of white youth in Newcastle. The difference provided by this lifestyle (‘beamed’ direct from the US) is vast, and holds an element of mystery and fascination for the respondents. Rich, 20, emphasises the exclusivity surrounding hip-hop: ‘The first thing that attracted me was the glamour, fuck all people I knew listened to hip-hop’. In this instance the ‘glamour’, meaning the often fabricated lyrics of money, violence, women, cars and jewellery, accompanied by the images in the videos, were the immediate attractions. This is an obviously well-trodden path into rap music and hip-hop culture for adolescent boys. The differences apparent in this new found ‘world’, and the fact that other peers in the area are not fans, adds to its air of mystique and exclusivity. ‘Truth’, 22, echoes these sentiments of ‘glamour’: ‘Bling bling…hmmm I guess at one stage for a very short time it influenced me, all the jewels, and the flash cars. Yeah I wanted to be a pimp like that!’ Again, the materialistic element is crucial in this respondent’s early activity in hip-hop culture. This is very much an element of one wanting what one can’t necessarily have (for instance the sun-kissed skies of California are a world away from post-industrial Newcastle), and so they indulge in the fantasies that are being enacted by their musical heroes across the Atlantic.

Bullet wounds and even death itself have proven to be somewhat of a marketing tool to be exploited by record labels to entice vulnerable young minds. 50 Cent, who claims to have been shot 9 times, has the highest selling rap album of all time. In the cases of the Notorious B.I.G and in particular 2Pac, they are bigger in death than they ever were in life. 2Pac has had several more posthumous releases than he put out in his 25 years and is now in the Guinness Book of World Records for being the highest selling rap act of all time. ‘Bonzo’, 24, expands:

I was in the US when ‘Pac got shot. I'd always been one of those wannabe rappers as a kid, you know the glam and bling, but I saw all the hype and media attention surrounding ‘Pac and it hurt me to see a talented young black kid get shot so young. I researched into his shit, CD's, books, poems and everything. I got into the music a lot more from then and realised there is a lot more to it than the glam and bling, that was when I realised I had a passion for something, his music evoked so many emotions. I
started to evolve my life around rap, school time was spent on writing lyrics, school reports were on rap and hip-hop, and since then I've broadened my views to accommodate the growing hip-hop scene throughout the world, but that’s basically how I got into it.

Craig, 29, rejects the serious approach that some take to hip-hop culture, furthering the notion of hip-hop being consumed for its ability to be aesthetically pleasing to the eye as opposed to anything deep and meaningful: ‘Why must you have a deep understanding? Why can’t you just enjoy the music and use hip-hop as a form of escapism?’

Escapism, such as the voyeuristic type experienced when viewing action films, is a huge factor on initial participation for many adolescent boys, with mainly the ‘gangsta’ rap element appealing to burgeoning masculine identities. In the ‘glossy’ commercialised nights, this ‘bling bling’ approach is highly influential, yet is far more played down for purely underground hip-hop nights. Basketball jerseys adorned by flashy chains, caps or bandanas and baggy jeans coupled with expensive trainers are the dress of choice for the commercialised club nights (sometimes even flashy copies of suits that rappers have adorned), but a plain inexpensive tee-shirt, normal jeans and averagely priced trainers (admittedly often this attire comes with a hip-hop ‘touch’) are to be found in underground nights. Hip-hop may have inherited local sensibilities within Newcastle (the underground nights), but the dress of urban America, and the glamour that goes with it, are still influential (the commercialised nights). The distinction between the two kinds of ‘night’ is marked, and as mentioned earlier, the underground nights attract a small, almost entirely local white male audience, whereas the commercialised nights attract the small, black African and Asian populations in the city (predominantly male from both), white women and to a lesser extent white males, with a large proportion of the audience being students originating outside of Newcastle.
A BADGE OF EXCLUSIVITY: WANTING TO BE DIFFERENT/ SENSE OF ALIENATION

The Animals soon carved out their own unique niche within the Newcastle scene. “They avoided the popular Shadows-like sound of the day and instead catered for those who would prefer Ray Charles: ‘There’s always that stream of kids who won’t go in that pop direction. They want a bit more meat to it’ remembers drummer John Steel” (cited Egan 2001: 22).

Hilton Valentine, Animals guitarist, goes further into this notion of exclusivity:

There was some kind of purity…The kind of stuff we were doing at the time (whilst in Newcastle at the start of their career) was not in the charts. Most people didn’t know who Jimmy Reed or John Lee Hooker were. They knew about Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry ‘cos they had hit records. That’s why we were playing in front of beatniks and arty students. The rest of the bands up here were playing the stuff that was in the charts…I don’t think there was really any competition, not with the kind of stuff we were doing (cited Egan, 2001: 22).

Lead singer Eric Burdon expands: ‘America’s black music had became the new secret underground teen language. It seemed to us the best of American culture, and though American’s seemed determined to ignore or discard it, we were happy to pick it up, dust it off, and give it a new twist’ (Burdon, 2001 :14). As I will show, this desire for difference is also applicable to hip-hop.

The oppositional symbols of black youth culture exert a powerful attraction on young whites. Black forms have played a leading role and have acted as paradigms of resistance for these individuals (Jones, 1988). Hip-hop acts as a transmitter of oppositional values and liberating pleasure to young white fans. The collective language symbolism of rebellion has proved resonant to their individual predicaments, often in an imagined way. In the case of my respondents, they have taken the oppositional nature of hip-hop, and instead of resistance against a dominant culture, it is resistance against the local ‘towny’ culture that is employed. Hip-hop is worn as a badge of exclusivity. ‘Truth’, 22: ‘Following it kind of distinguishes me from the rest, shows that I am interested in hip-hop, I suppose that’s demonstrated through the clothes, kind of like a statement you know, I can show that I am interested in this’.
Keisha, also 22, backs up this view: ‘The dress did kinda influence me in the sense that I thought it looked so cool cos no-one else was dressing like that, so I did it’. I shall return to further notions of dress later.

Just as the difference of hip-hop’s ‘gangsta lifestyle’ has attracted certain respondents, others have adopted hip-hop culture in the hope to be different themselves. I have witnessed this first hand, whilst walking through the streets with certain associates who outwardly show their affiliation to hip-hop, as they were subject to ‘deflected racism’ (with calls of the disparaging term ‘wigger’ from locals), which only made them more determined to keep up this exclusivity (being different to the ‘normal’ local population was of immense importance). The benefits of exhibiting this ‘risky’ stylistic homology was one that the respondents felt was worth taking despite the underlying threat of verbal and sometimes physical abuse. A defiance had arisen in the face of what Nayak deems a perceived disloyalty to the “triple signifiers of locality, nationhood and whiteness” (Nayak, 2003a: 317). Self-inflicted lifestyle choices leading to verbal ‘racism’ were thus seen as a small manageable price to pay in the chase for exclusivity, and in the unyielding desire to be the ‘minority’ of the city, or to be ‘black’, personal and social costs were invariably deemed worth enduring in order to make ‘new ethnicities’. Culture was seen as fluid, interchangable, and unrestricted as opposed to being a structurally determined entity. The fact that the city had a small, easily recognisable ‘scene’ with participants being on a name friendly basis because of its small size added to any notions of exclusivity.

Hip-hop consumption leads to the creation of autonomous leisure spaces (Jones, 1988). Black styles have operated as the cohesive forces that have unified young people within these alternative spaces (Back, 1996). “Youths who adhere to the styles, images, and values of hip-hop culture (in which a distinct social sector displays relatively coherent and identifiable characteristics) have demonstrated unique capacities to construct different spaces and, simultaneously, to construct spaces differently” (Forman, 2002: 23). These spaces are fiercely defended and even regarded as having an influential change on the respondents’ ‘mind state’. Nicole, 18: ‘I think being exposed to this kind of culture changes your views, opinions and state of mind, and allows you to see things differently’. This is an interesting phrase, with the culture seen as being responsible for a change of thought. This respondent is referring to American culture opening up the limitations of cultural space to be found in a small post-industrial predominantly white city such as Newcastle. These ‘views’ and ‘opinions’ will be
more globally orientated than if the culture had not been consumed, and local sensibilities have been replaced by an overpowering sense of globalisation in things such as language used, style of dress and general demeanour, which further enhances any notion of exclusivity. Those that encroach upon this exclusivity are attacked, Dan, 23, claiming: ‘Skate boarders have jacked [stolen] our style…it’s a weird hip-hop Goth mongrel…I can’t believe it man, it’s pathetic’.

Hip-hop, up until the mid 1990s, was much more of an underground culture, before the media recognised its full saleability. Hip-hop producer James, 34, details how this exclusivity was of the utmost appeal due to its ability to allow him to be different to the ‘norm’:

Hip-hop is a culture and I think what I was attracted to as a young person was black culture, and everything associated with it. I was just magnetised to it, I wanted to be involved in the culture, the dress, the breaking, the graffiti, I wanted to be involved with all of it. It’s very different now, hip-hop culture to how it was then, because back then it was a black culture, whereas now it is very diversified. When I first going to hip-hop dances around the country, as a white person, you knew your place. You took a back seat and you were quiet. I was just magnified to black culture. Now I’m older and when I look back on those years I can relate my political feelings to that, because I recognise that I was disinterested in society and I realised that the norm wasn’t what I was interested in.

In some instances the sheer lack of social choice throughout the years in Newcastle has helped to instigate further involvement. Craig, 29: ‘Back in 1998 - I had to look hard to find hip-hop nights in Newcastle - but that made it all the more fun!’ Pursuit of an unknown quantity is deemed as desirable. One of the fundamental dynamics within the topic of exclusivity is the perceived ignorance of outsiders. Hip-hoppers are no different to any other subculturalists; they are fiercely territorial, and constantly refer to their experiences against the ‘townys’ or other ‘oppositional’ outsiders. There is a great solidarity within the local hip-hop culture, and there is a feeling expressed that others simply ‘don’t understand’. Stephen, 30:

Most people around me when I was growing up were mainly into dance music. Newcastle and Gateshead are dance music areas with their ‘chav’ music. Nobody
liked my music apart from one or two friends until I discovered the local scene. I was told ‘turn it off, I don’t like it, I hate that nigger music’. I don’t like to fit in with the norm, I mean what is ‘normal’? The more people who tell you that your music is shit, the more you want to rebel.

‘Dismal’, 19: ‘Rap has been good in helping me to set myself apart from everybody else, teaching me individuality, as when it comes to music up here most of the youth are into the dance and rave scene. I get slagged off by ignorant people for liking it simply because it isn’t a ‘bouncing’ rave tune. They’re clueless’. Chris, 16: ‘Yeah, I often feel like I should be really ashamed of emceeing and making beats when I speak to people’s parents, teachers and things. But I’m not going to give up something I love just because people are racist or are set in their ways’.

Hip-hoppers, as mentioned, are continually referring to a significant ‘oppositional’ other, which are not authentic in any way, to prove their own authenticity. Rich, 20: ‘For the wannabes hip-hop is more sexy and party orientated, for me it’s a lot deeper and fascinating’. Rob 18: ‘Some people don’t have a true understanding of the culture or even a deep knowledge of the music, like a lot of people will listen to 50 cent, 2Pac, and other well known main stream rappers, and to them, because they are the most known means they are the best ever to live, that annoys me, the fact is they listen more to the beat than the rapper’. The ignorance of the public at large and their failure to recognise white rappers is also derided. Dan, 23: ‘I think a lot of white people listen to rap but stupidly still can’t cope with white M.C’s…it still seems wrong to them’. ‘Bonzo’, 24: ‘I’m comfortable with people calling me wigger, I’m comfortable with people telling me white people can’t rap, I don’t have to prove anything to them!’ Rob, 18: ‘I suppose people don’t exactly come at me cos I’m white, but they always expect you to be shit, or if you’re good they start comparing you to Eminem, but fuck that’. A lot of this negativity is attributed to the failure of Vanilla Ice, who 19 years after his demise, is still blamed for making people think white participants are similar to him: ‘Fez’, 25: ‘Vanilla Ice didn’t exactly help things in getting white people accepted in hip-hop circles, he fucked everything up for white M.C’s, we were all ‘Vanilla Ices’ after that. To me the whole wigger shit stems from him.’
DRESS

“Hip-hop fashion is now estimated to be a $2 billion a year business…with companies like Rocawear and Ecko each claiming sales of over $300 million a year” (Kitwana, 2005: 97). Nayak (2003a) refers to this as the ‘global branding’ of black style. His investigation into the corporeal consumption of the ‘B Boyz’ in Newcastle found that they thought that a ‘white’ dress sense was conservative, whilst simultaneously grappling self-consciously with white ‘self-hood’ to reconstruct boundaries of whiteness (ibid.). This choice of ‘different’ clothes in Nayak’s study revealed that an alternative repertoire of style to the ‘mainstream’ of Geordie youth was being met with harsh condemnation by other locals. “Big and baggy’ is in stark opposition to the Modish appearance favoured by the ‘Real Geordies’. The dress code being symbolically expansive and transnational” (ibid: 109). David, 19:

I think the dress sense helps distinguish the difference between genres and styles of music, it's like the music talks on each sleeve, pant, and boot that people wear, it talks individuality... so of course dress sense is important, but I feel you don’t have to dress hip-hop to be it. I think if you have skills and dress normally that’s what matters the most. I suppose the style of dress is sort of a uniform, I think people follow the trend but try to be different at the same time, which is hard to do.

Even in a relatively routine dress code, such as exists in hip-hop culture, David appears to be staking a claim to retain as much individuality as possible. He acknowledges the need for some outward affiliation dress wise, but the ultimate respect/achievement in his opinion is that you have ‘skills’. This is ambiguous, and apart from music ability, the inference could be knowledge of the music and culture itself. Emma, 28, a fashion designer:

Dress, yes...my music taste has an effect on my fashion sense, day to day I would say that I dress in some way in a hip-hop styling whether a sports brand, baggy jeans or trainers, which are all influenced by the MTV generation. The people who I admire musically do dress in a certain way so although I wouldn’t say I aspire to be like them I do subconsciously pick up on certain trends because of it. But my style is influenced by the scene.
When asked if it was possible to be involved in hip-hop without dressing in a hip-hop style, Emma was adamant:

No, there’s way too much pressure from society. You can’t be ‘down’ and not look the part in some way, shape or form, it wouldn’t work. I mean hip-hop dress sense covers a massive scope; you could be wearing a suit but have Timbs on (Timberland boots). People will feel inclined to at least show some outward support as hip-hop is now a brand.

Again, there is a concession to possessing some kind of hip-hop style to be affiliated with the culture, but in a more subtle way, and not necessarily ‘full scale’ from head to toe. ‘Dismal’ 19:

In the fashion stores I was always attracted to the hip-hop style of low and loose trousers. My tee-shirts, my flat caps, timbs, Nike converse and all that shit. When I went out to New York it was the perfect opportunity to get myself some Rocawear shit and what not. And I just think the clothes look funky and that’s how I feel, so it goes with my attitude, the style.

There is clearly a direct correlation between attitude and style. A stylistic choice is informed by an embracement with blackness and the desire for an element of rebelliousness to battle society’s imposed definition of being ‘white’ and pressure to tow the ‘colour line’. ‘Fleet’, 23, plays down any notion of going too ‘far’ however:

As for clothes well I kind of dress in a more casual pseudo hip-hop style, no bright yellow and green tracksuits for me thanks! The clothes get worn cos I like them, that’s it really. If someone ever said something about the way I dress I’d just laugh.....but people know how I am, I'm very straight forward, usually. I mean I say ‘yo’, and my clothes are a bit baggier than usual, but I’m not a fucking clown [laughs].

As in the case of Emma, as loose as ‘Fleet’s connection to dress appears on a surface level he still maintains the correlation between dress and participation or being ‘genuine’: ‘People who are into hip-hop always have some reference to the culture in their clothing, there is always a connection’ (‘Fleet’, 23).
Tom, 21, relates that the clothes are an expression of how he feels and where his allegiances are:

It pretty much was just the music that got me into it. I liked the style of it. It just gave me a good feeling and I thought, I wanna do something like this. I never used to dress hip-hop, now I dress with baseball caps and chains and shit like that, not because I want to fit in or anything it’s just because that’s how I feel. I kind of feel like a hip-hop guy now and the clothes are a way of expressing it.

There are numerous examples of almost ‘defensive posturing’ about dressing in a hip-hop fashion, focusing on the need to do it on one’s own terms without seeming to be a clone, which is something of a contradiction in terms. Mitch, 19: ‘If it’s cool I'll wear it, but I don’t try to emulate Jay-Z or nothing like a lot of kids do’; ‘Truth’, 22: ‘I guess at one stage for a very short time it influenced me, I still rock [wear] big tee shirts, and baggy trousers and all of that, but that’s more because it’s more comfortable and it hides my skinniness’; Dan 23: ‘Basically I like this stuff through preference, not cos they're cool’; Stephen, 30:

I wear some Fubu as the label looks good. I like it, it’s an attractive label, it even sounds cool. Urban wear is just more appealing than the designer stuff you get in the shops, Calvin Klein and that. I don’t want to be like everybody else. I don’t wear ‘urban’ wear or hip-hop wear to show my affiliation, I buy the records to show my affiliation. It’s a genuine stylistic choice, I like the baggy stuff.

‘Mayhem’, 21, stresses that the culture of hip-hop and in particular the associated ‘urban’ wear are open to abuse:

I know loads of people who dress in urban wear, for example, tracksuits, loose clothes, wearing cornrows in their hair. Some people aren't in the right mentality and exploit the fact that they have been part of a struggle, which they have never been part of. Glamourise it you could say. They dress in street clothes and only know 50 Cent, 2Pac and Biggie. A lot who haven’t had it that bad try to act as though they have by wearing hip-hop clothes.
This respondent clearly feels that hip-hop is still for the ‘streets’ even bearing in mind the multi-cultural, transnational monster that it has became. This view, especially in Newcastle, is in the minority. This particular respondent had family in London, and knew more black people than the average Geordie, so this could explain the more militant viewpoint put across. However, this viewpoint is seemingly outdated, as when hip-hop became mainstream in the mid 90’s its politicised message was more or less lost for good.

What hasn’t been covered yet is the media’s influence on dress sense, which one would expect would go hand in hand, yet there were seemingly more responses about ‘expression’ and ‘individuality’ than any admission of brain washing. Some did make allowances for it however. RooFio’, 16: ‘Now I think about it I started wearing this stuff really just because I saw rappers wearing them on TV and they looked good’. ‘Mistarick’, 32: ‘When I first got involved in hip-hop I was definitely copying what I saw in magazines and on TV, I was wearing LA raiders gear, baseball caps, stuff like that. I was wanting to emulate these dudes whose music had such an effect on me. I’ve toned it down a bit these days but I still rock my jeans a little baggy, wear hip-hop associated clothing labels and dope ass trainers.’

This appropriation of what’s ‘hot’ in the media is of course is nothing new as we will see. Maurice, 63: ‘In terms of dress I just copied the mod scene’. Bill, 55: ‘I think the skinhead thing was definitely a dress thing. It was ye kna ‘look at us we’re standing out from the crowd’. Ronnie, 64:

In my younger days we had the mod thing and all sorts. We looked like mods but played the blues, and had a significant female following in a primarily male-dominated music. The music and fashion were distinct and separate really. The Rolling Stones were crucial in that, they didn’t wear a uniform, ye kna, whereas, The Beatles wore uniforms and bands before them.

Steve, 57, makes a quite interesting point, how almost wearing no uniform, in itself became a uniform:

I just dressed the way that my peers dressed, tee-shirts and Levi’s. The bands who played the blues didn’t have a set dress code. In the early days, The Beatles and other bands used to come on stage in suits, blues bands came out instead in jeans, tee-shirts,
and fags hanging out of their mouth. I liked blues musicians because they didn’t care what clothes they wore. They dressed down if anything, and I wanted to be like that.

THE POPULARITY OF THE ARTFORM

From my interviews, a common theme existing throughout was that initial participation began via commercially successful forms of rap music. As commercially viable music is the farthest reaching, this acts as the doorway to a deeper participation existing further down the line, so a relationship with more obscure artists and cultural tools can develop as a result. ‘Fleet’, 23, explains: ‘I’ve been interested in hip-hop for years, since I was 10. It started out with mostly commercial stuff like 2Pac and Biggie and then went on to the old school KRS-One and stuff like that. Starting commercial is the usual route, because it’s all I could get a hold of when I was 10 and living in a bloody dance culture!’ This respondent shows how two of the best known and most popular rap artists since the music’s inception were the initial spring-board for his participation, but this ultimately led to a more refined taste as time progressed. Stephen, 30, relates his own, similar, experience:

Pre-1995 there was no hip-hop stuff going into the charts and then Coolio and Snoop Dogg and people like that came through. Even Top Of The Pops started recognising hip-hop around that time. It also started to be advertised more. Coolio’s track ‘Gangsta’s Paradise’ was one of the turning points for my involvement, which got to Number 1 I think in 1995. All the first music I bought was commercial, which helped me to get into it. From there I just progressed with it, learnt more and dug deeper.

Popular forms of rap music create the awareness to enable initial consumption; however, these same forms are rubbished later on as participation becomes gradually more specific. Tom, 21: ‘The commercial music is what me got involved really, but then I got sick of it, so I dug deeper into the underground. I went through stages where I’d hate to hear anything that was commercial, now I’m not so bad. I definitely went through a stage of hating stuff just because it was successful.’ ‘Mistarick’, 32: ‘I got into hip-hop, as many do, through the commercial stuff. Now though, I dislike the way US hip-hop has been ‘raped’ for commercial success, that’s what pushed me towards the UK scene in the first place. I think they blatantly
make tracks for the charts in the same way Simon Cowell does’. These commercial forms of
rap music are now seen as tainted, fake, and contrived or as music that ‘wiggers’ would
enjoy. It is seen to be the music of trend followers, and so my respondents are now at pains to
distance themselves from the commercial side of rap music that was once their own first port
of call musically.

THE APPEAL OF THE MUSIC ITSELF

One of the biggest appeals of rap is the unique structure of its sonic output. For many, this
was the most important reason for the initial and continuing involvement in the scene. David,
28: ‘When my friends had tapes they would pass them around. When I first heard a rap track
it was like nothing I’d ever heard. One of the things that really stuck out was the beat and in
particular the sampling, the fusion of old and new’; Lee, 28: ‘The sound of the old school,
which got me hooked, had a unique difference compared to today with the classic sampled
sound and wicked scratching and mixing techniques used then. This is all alongside the
rhyming, which has definitely decreased in lyrical output these days. You have to really look
hard to find it now.’ Emma, 28: ‘I would say that I can’t put my finger on it, something
within the music just speaks to me. The lyrics, the beats, the vibe, basically just the X factor
of the music got me into it. The edge that it has really appeals.’ David, 19: ‘I think the lyrics
have always been the strongest selling point of gaining my attention. Eminem for example,
displays humour and emotion in his tracks in equal measures. The amount of rhymes he can
put together is immense.’ ‘Mistarick’, 32:

I just found it fascinating that you could use the best bits of a record and recycle it. I
started writing rhymes almost straight away, discovered UK hip-hop in 1991 through
Blade, Hijack and Hardnoise [legendary UK acts] and really related to the British
accents, perspectives and cultural references. For some reason the music just spoke to
me, made my adrenalin pump and sometimes pulled at my heartstrings. It is lyrically,
possibly, the most visual of music forms in the way the pictures and images are
depicted using words. With me also being a big movie fan, the storytelling aspect just
appealed to me. I have always tended to like soulful music.
The above respondents, between them, find the unique approaches to instrumentation and lyricism inherent within rap to be of particular appeal. The plundering of old samples to create new sonic soundscapes, the exact science of rap lyricism with its heavy focus on word-play, story telling, imagery and punch-lines, and rap’s often edgy, no-holds-barred outlook are all highly desirable elements, fundamental to primary involvement and current participation within the scene. The allure of the musical style as being the motivation for joining the local rap scene is a vastly important one, irrespective of the wider ranging social dynamics that I have already explored.

REBELLIOUSNESS/ATTITUDE

Hip-hop presents the purest form of rebellion on the market, especially for suburban kids. “Through rap music, suburban teens can experience the excitement of ‘thug life’ and feel like they are part of an oppressed group without having to live in the neighbourhoods from which the music emanates” (Brown, 2001 (URL). As previously discussed, hip-hop exudes an overt uncompromising masculinity and by virtue of this is likely to be attractive to adolescent young men, looking to establish or legitimise their male identity, often at the subordination of women. ‘Stig’, 28:

Basically when I started listening to rap it was on one of them walkmans that only have stop, play and rewind. The rebelliousness, bravado and attitude of the music just caught me, plus it was nowt like I’d heard before. I then started aspiring to be like my idols, in dress sense and shit. I was never one for thinking I was a ‘gangsta’, but I still had a bit of a cocky bravado outlook, which was fuelled by hip-hop. Again though I was already like that, hip-hop just for me kind of validated it. I suppose hip-hop helped me to find myself.

Others have used rap as protest music, to connect with a form of counter culture that goes against the norms of society, enabling them to indulge their disillusionment with their environment. James, 34 continues:
Certain generations may have used rock ‘n’ roll to rebel against the system, but for me, it was hip-hop. To me black culture was like ‘fuck the system, we ain’t down with this, we ain’t trying to work in a bank, or talk properly and dress properly, we don’t give a fuck’. I wouldn’t be able to put it this clearly when I was younger, but later, looking back, now you get white kids talking black and acting in certain ways, it’s because they’re pissed off with society, and they don’t wanna grow up to be like their parents, with bullshit jobs and living in this bullshit system. They recognise that hip-hop culture is outside of society, something that’s not trying to be down with the state and the system, and that’s why they run to it so fast, and that’s what it was for me.

Ewan, 33, although more conciliatory in tone, still emphasises the same idea of rebellion as illustrated above:

If being from New York is hip-hop, then fair enough, it’s alien to me, because I was born in Scotland and grew up in Newcastle. I’ve only been to New York a few days in my life, so why did I adopt it? Maybe because being young and rebellious likes taking on new ideas, stuff that’s alien. When chimpanzees turn adolescent, they get turfed out of their group and go off to look for other chimps from other localities. This helps spread the genes, and helps them learn to fend for themselves. I think it’s a similar deal for adolescent humans; we’re kinda built to not get on with our parents just as we get sexually active. If bumping [playing] NWA helps with that then maybe I was genetically disposed to seek out whatever annoys my parents the most. It’s cool music, white teens want to be cool, and black folk are cool. I think it’s because they’re good for a bit of rebellion. White parents might be racist, maybe, so it’s a good way to piss them off perhaps. Also, black is other if you’re white. Other, at least to me, has always been fascinating or at least a good way to expand your ideas pool, and maybe thus helps you to be cool.

Aside from rap being used for the reaffirmation of masculinity, and a tool to voice contempt for contemporary society, it has also been used solely for a form of vicarious thrill-seeking.

Lee, 28:
When Ice-T and Snoop Doggy Dogg were being aggressive and violent it became dangerously entertaining for a 13 year old, like me, to be told off for listening to music. I loved the fact Snoop Doggy Dogg’s actual murder case was portrayed through his live performances and Ice-T was being hassled over his anti-police propaganda. Young people are way more easily influenced than anybody else; you just have to make it sexy, depressing or violent to appeal to them.

Stephen, 30:

The swear words and attitude and also the Ninja skits used by Wu Tang Clan on their albums was like nothing I’d ever heard before. It all sounded really fresh. Seeing ‘parental advisory explicit content’ on the cd box made me want to buy it. I loved hearing stories about stuff I often dreamt of doing but never had the balls to do. Like the aggression, attitude, crime or whatever. I suppose it was like a film to music, playing out every teen boy’s fantasy of being a rebel not to be messed with.

‘Living on the edge’ is a theme that has run throughout the entire subcultural assessment by the researchers at the CCCS, and with hip-hop, it is not so different. Craig, 29: ‘To begin with I was interested in the criminal image that went with ‘gangsta’ rap, it was like nothing I’d ever seen or heard before. It appealed to my darker side so to speak’. The lyrics within rap music are like an education for some, as ‘Truth’, 22 explains: ‘Hip-hop did teach me to be rebellious I suppose. It told me to not just do what everybody expected of me, to please myself and not worry about pleasing others. To stick two fingers up at society if need be.’ ‘Gangsta rap’ is the main culprit for the attraction of those who like an ‘edge’ or element of rage to their cultural consumption. The rebellious nature of inner city America is as much an influence on white youth in Newcastle as it is on America’s suburban white youth: ‘The bad language was always cool to me, I suppose it was a form of rebellion, and the lifestyles appealed to me back then. The ‘gangsta’ life-style was fascinating when I was young. I don’t necessarily relate to white middle-class artists at all, even though I’m white and middle class myself. It’s all about having a free mind, people different to you are often more interesting’ notes Rich, 20. As in the case of glamorous escapism, the ‘dangerous’ uncompromising aspect is seen as something to admire, and in some circumstances, to emulate.
Not surprisingly, this enthusiasm for rebellion is not just reserved for hip-hop. Youth in the 1960s also used black music to escape the comfortable normality of society. Ronnie, 64: ‘When you’re younger the sort of thing the blues brought to the table, like the attitude and glamour, were totally opposite to Cliff Richard. It was sort of anti-establishment; the blues did have a certain romance to it’. Blues also embraced the ‘other’ as hip-hop does, was full of the same machismo, and helped to aid youthful local rebellion.
CHAPTER 8
CULTURAL ISOLATION AND LONG DISTANCE BLACK BONDING

CULTURAL ISOLATION

In his story about The Animals (the first and most famous blues band to emerge from Newcastle), Sean Egan starts off by stressing the isolation that Newcastle experiences from the rest of the UK. It is a “part of Britain where being poor has always bitten deeper” (2001: 10). He goes on to suggest that Newcastle’s Geordie inhabitants in many ways “have more in common with Scots and Scandinavians (with which they have strong historical connections) than with their fellow Englishmen” (ibid). John Steel, former Animals drummer, says that “the North East corner where we come from is a bit isolated from the rest of England” and when he and his contemporaries were growing up “it was still a very, very industrialised, heavy industry-type area where people still remembered hard times from the Thirties. No different from a lot of the north of England but there’d always been a strong coal mining tradition, ship building - all the big dirty jobs” (as quoted in Egan, 2001: 10).

As detailed in Chapter 5, the modern history of the North East has essentially been a story of industrialisation and its aftermath. The ‘identity’ of the region has indeed been bound up with industrial work. European working-classes historically have drawn on the solidarity and strengths which come from regional cultures. “Indeed it is sometimes helpful to speak of the ‘ethnicity’ of white people. For if migrants have defined themselves in cultural terms, then so have white workers. Indeed of all Britain’s working populations, few have possessed as strong a sense of regional identity as the people of the North East” (Renton URL). There is a sense of ‘regional particularism’ and self-identification in being classed as a Geordie, the use of regional dialect being a memory of a class culture formed by industry. As mentioned before, Nayak (2003a) identifies a group he calls ‘Real Geordies’ as being the archetypal white, working-class young men who are attempting to negotiate the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy “where the effects of globalization are manifest at economic, social, political and cultural levels within the locality” (ibid: 72). As I have already
shown, since the 1970s, the North East has relinquished its strong industrial base and has adapted to a new condition of postmodernity characterised by a rapid decline in the traditional male-dominated manufacturing core and the ever-expanding service sector economy in which women’s employment has increased significantly and led to the ‘de-masculinising’ aspect of current trends in labour. Rich industrial traditions of the North East region are however not easily dislodged from the socio-cultural economy of young lives, hence the creative reworking of local labouring traditions in a period of industrial inactivity and the re-enactment of a ‘breadwinner’ identity through an exaggerated display of white industrial masculinity (ibid). This is nowhere more evident than in the support of Newcastle United football club where it becomes an embodied activity stretching from donning the shirt to having NUFC emblems tattooed on the skin. It attains ritualistic significance with the pre-match drinking, terrace chanting, and clashes with rival supporters. This subculture has “recuperated older forms of an industrial white masculine culture through collective rituals related to male drinking, fighting, football and sexual conquest” (ibid: 68). The ‘anatomy of labour’ has been displaced into other cultural activities with the legacy of a waged labour culture proving highly resistant to change (Hudson, 2000).

Despite this spirit of white localism deployed by de-industrialised football supporters, there has been an emergence of hybrid multicultural exchanges displayed by certain sections of the city’s youth. Globalisation is displacing outdated notions of whiteness with the allure of black culture, with local culture no longer immune from international cross-fertilisation and multicultural influence. This has meant that even in a mainly white area such as the North East, it is possible for some young people to draw upon the signs and symbols of multiculture in order to refashion their ethnicities beyond the spatial limits of the local. In “the absence of a substantial, visible minority community in the North East, a cluster of white youth knows as the B-Boyz were establishing a subculture of their own which was directly implicated in the transatlantic, global circuit of cultural production” (Nayak, 2003a: 106). Despite being subject to reverse racist taunts of ‘wigger’ (white negro) from the ‘Real Geordies’, these youth are serving to break down boundaries of cultural isolation in the area via engagement with an imagined or figurative global blackness. Nayak (ibid) strives to draw clear distinctions between the dance music-loving, hard-drinking, football-obsessed working-class combative subculture of the so-called ‘Real Geordies’ and the basketball-playing, baggy clothes-wearing, hip-hop-listening, middle–and-working-class tolerant worlds of the supposed ‘B-Boyz’. The lines are more blurred than he would have us believe. It is certainly
not uncommon for a foot to be in both camps and to take the best from both subcultures. He also makes the assumption that globalisation has just begun to create these new multicultural spaces, but I argue that this has been going on since at least the 1960s. To dismiss the underground blues scene and the eventual move into hip-hop (although not seamless) would be folly. Nobody can argue against the fact that Newcastle is culturally isolated, especially in terms of ethnic makeup, but a hardcore of local people both proud to be Geordie (with all that is expected to go with it) and willing to embrace black culture, has been prevalent for four decades. Although there is a feeling of detachment both culturally and geographically, this has in many ways encouraged scenes to emerge within the city autonomous of major black insider influence, and able to put their own unique spin on music that originated in black America. However, as I will make clear, Newcastle is and has been by no means an easy city in which to practice these pursuits.

The blues music scene in Newcastle during the 1960’s has been classed by Egan (2001) as being distinguished by its ‘incestuousness’ because of the city’s small size and population, with the same names going from one band to another. Although the beat scene was vibrant in Newcastle, it wasn’t as large as the music scenes that were developing in other areas in Britain (such as Liverpool and London), and many of the young musicians would find their paths crossing repeatedly as they drifted in and out of the same groups. There is and always has been a distinct lack of a music industry in Newcastle. For The Animals to succeed, like almost every other band of their (and subsequent) generations, going to London to be seen by talent spotters was the only way to ‘make it’. Their first visit to the capital in December 1963 was a pivotal moment for the band, starting them on their path to commercial success. “One minute we’re the hot band in Newcastle, next minute we’re down playing all these London venues. These were days when London was a different country, almost. There was a different culture, a different lifestyle. All things were new” (cited in Egan 2001: 32). The Animals moved to London permanently in January 1964. In recent years, things have stayed the same. Paul Lamb, a Geordie blues harp player who made his name in Newcastle with the ‘Blues Burglars’ in the late 80’s, says the move was inevitable due to the music industry being entirely London-centric: “I had to move really, for the music. We’d had quite a lot of success with the Blues Burglars in the Newcastle area and if I wanted to extend the geographical areas in which the band could work, I had to come to London. I couldn’t have got signed or worked with the producers and agencies I did just staying in the North East” (Brunning, 2002: 272).
After the original Animals had disbanded, Eric Burdon and the New Animals in 1968 recorded an album track ‘The Immigration Lad’ - written by Burdon - which uses the (then) muddy waters of the Tyne as a metaphor for separation from a woman and riches, with references to the bleak coal-mining element of the city which was certainly one of the main sources of unskilled employment back in those days. This fades into a pub conversation between a Geordie (played by New Animals tour manager Terry McVay) who has moved to the capital in search of work and a native Londoner (New Animals guitar player John Weider). The Tynesider is shocked at the racial melting pot he finds in the city, and the Londoner tries to explain (in the un-P.C. like manner of the time) that living and working with ‘wogs’ doesn’t seem so bad after a while (Egan, 2001). This one song only serves to perpetuate the racial and cultural isolation that Burdon found existed in his home city at that time, Burdon himself being from a young age completely obsessed with American black music and culture (as we will discover in greater detail later), first jazz then blues and later onto funk and back to blues again. The idea that Newcastle is like a different ‘country’ within a country is not an uncommon conception, but far from this being a bad thing, many Geordies take pride in this fact and use it to build extra solidarity as a result. So regardless of the lack of ethnic diversity and a local music industry, the underground continues to remain resolute. As one local hip-hopper, Adam, 32, recognises: ‘I think that isolation is good, because everyone’s developed in little crews that have worked together and all that, but everyone’s pretty introverted in the way they make their own stuff, and they come up with good stuff.’

Ronnie Barker, 64, was a founding member of The Junco Partners, the biggest band in Newcastle after The Animals moved onto pastures new. They became resident band after The Animals at the ‘Club-A-Go-Go’, had a single out on a major label, and supported many major touring blues artists such as Howlin’ Wolf and Jimmy Reed. Barker remarks on Newcastle’s isolation, albeit one that wasn’t as bad as many may assume: ‘Being up here is a bit of an outpost really. I wouldn’t say it’s like Liverpool, but it’s sort of an industrial bloody place and it’s big enough to have enough people to be interested in it (the blues at the time). Ye kna, if you were out in the sticks somewhere you’d be listening to Cliff Richard. We’d go to the New Orleans Jazz Club and listen to some jazz - it was all a bit….cool [laughs]’. The displacement felt by Newcastle didn’t deter members of the blues (formerly the jazz) scene, as Newcastle has always been the meeting point (the ‘capital city’) for all other areas in the North East so it had (and continues to have) a more vibrant appeal than places such as Northumberland or cities such as Sunderland or Middlesbrough. ‘Out in the sticks’ refers
primarily to rural areas outside of Newcastle, and a case can be made for Newcastle’s cultural isolation not being as bad as other less fortunate areas in the North East who were and are more than one step behind. Compared to other cities such as Leeds, Liverpool, Bristol, Birmingham, London and Manchester, though, the gulf remains huge, and Newcastle still looks every bit the culturally desolate area many will describe below. For a city, it certainly still lacks the injection of multiculturalism that it sorely needs, but on the flip side, this fosters a new breed of individual who participates in their own take on black culture in the absence of any locally proximate blackness.

The ‘capital city mentality’ was further discussed in one of my focus groups. Adam, 32, spoke of ‘that whole isolation thing that the whole of Newcastle’s got cos we’re more cut off from the rest of the UK. Every crew from around here is usually from a different part of like the North East, all over, and they come together in Newcastle and sort of meet in the city’.

His mates continued:

Simon, 34: ‘Like people from Durham and stuff”
David, 32: ‘That’s the thing. Cos there’s still like some MC’s who aren’t from the city and that, so you had time to sort of cultivate your own style before you sort of got together in Newcastle and that so everyone grew up a few years sort of rapping how they thought you should rap, and no-one else had heard this’
Simon 34: ‘Aye, so you had more time to just do your own thing, you weren’t in the city’

The prevailing whiteness of the North East has meant that black people have also experienced cultural isolation in the region. Chris Mullard’s Black Britain (1973) was one of the first works to express the anger of the ‘second generation’ of post-war black Britons. Published in spring 1973, his study was perhaps brashly described as the first ever book published by a black writer, born and raised in the United Kingdom. He stated that the problems of his own generation were different to those faced by their parents, who had arrived in the 1940s and 1950s. “A black man born in Britain is a shadow of a man”, Mullard wrote, “A form but no identity” (Mullard, 1973: 13-14). Part of Mullard’s politicisation was bound up in his decision to leave home (he was born in ‘sleepy’ Hampshire in 1946), and to settle in Newcastle where he studied and worked on the buses as a conductor in the mid 1960s after a brief spell in London. As one would imagine, this was a strange choice. London was the
political home of British black radicalism and Mullard “could be seen to have simply exchanged just one condition of isolation for another” (Renton URL). The 1961 census for example had shown just 732 West Indian people living in the entire North East (plus Cumbria), compared to 101,385 in London (Peach, 1968: 67). The most interesting thing, in terms of this thesis, is that while writing such a seminal piece, Mullard was living in Newcastle and had been for several years, employed as a full-time officer of the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Community Relations Commission (CRC) which had been established under Labour, which was part of a network of other CRC’s that reported to the national body. These had grown to nullify the popular racism that had emerged from Enoch Powell’s infamous April 1968 ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, which warned of the violent consequences that would follow unless migration was halted. Mullard contrasted his knowledge of Black Power movements from North America with his experiences of the moderate North East. To have such an influential black activist, especially in the climate of the 1960s, living and operating in Newcastle is surprising. In 1967, Mullard established an office at his home on Tyneside and bought a typewriter, acting as a one-man lobbying organisation, representing the region’s small ethnic minority community and working with them in locally-based campaigns (Mullard, 1975). Mullard’s appointment to Newcastle’s CRC actually sparked a bureaucratic row between the city council and the CRC in London, when Mullard’s militancy and his age (24) were questioned and the London body even withdrew funds from its Newcastle offshoot at one point (ibid). Shortly after his book Black Britain was published he was forced to resign from the CRC, later teaching at Durham University and publishing several more books.

A further example of cultural isolation during the 1960s can be found in an extract from Mojo magazine which details The Jimi Hendrix Experience’s first venture to the North East of England:

A week later came a reality check as the band ventured north for two dates in County Durham, at South Shield’s New Cellar Club and, before an audience of about 200 people, Darlington’s Imperial Hotel. The ‘50s, never mind the ‘60s, had yet to penetrate these far-flung bastions of post-war-austerity. ‘Men still had short-back-and-

2 To balance this out, there had by this stage been a black presence on the Tyne for many decades. South Shields became an important centre for Yemeni Arabs from the early 1900s (Lawless, 1995) and by the 1930s North Shields played a similar role for West African sailors (Collins, 1957). Additionally, there were black characters in Jack Common’s novels of Edwardian Newcastle (Common, 1975). However, historical fact of black settlement in the region aside, Tyneside as a port paled into insignificance compared to other vastly more cosmopolitan ports such as Liverpool and Bristol.
sides haircuts and grey-brown clothes just like their fathers before them,’ remembered Jimi’s girlfriend Kathy Etchingham. ‘We would hear low mutters like, ‘Is that a girl or what?’ none of which bothered Jimi at all. The words ‘pansy’ and ‘queer’ could be heard here and there, as long as they didn’t become threatening, he enjoyed outraging people. The punters in the men’s clubs were far more interested in drinking beer than listening,’ Kathy adds. ‘One or two of the clubs were all beer and sawdust, brightly lit with Formica-toped tables and stackable chairs. The atmosphere was always thick with smoke and the men would sit yelling at each other over the tables with their sleeves rolled up. Some of them even wore flat caps. Jimi would ask them to pipe down while he played. Nobody took a blind bit of notice. I think there was bingo before and after. Outside, the bloody van had broken down and we had to push it in the snow (Snow, 2006: 85).

The above goes some way to validate the perceived lack of culture by those involved in 60’s R&B music concerning working men’s clubs at this time (an argument could be made for it still being the same). Indeed, respondents who I interviewed who performed at the time have said that the blues or black music in general was unacceptable in working men’s clubs in the 1960s, and they would have gone down ‘like a lead balloon’. This was the one type of place that was to be avoided by any band playing cutting edge music, seemingly the only thing the aforementioned consumers wanted was ‘chart music’. We will go back over this matter with first hand accounts later, but another equally interesting extract from the same article details Hendrix playing in Newcastle at the legendary Club-A-Go-Go in 1967, and further cultural isolation being displayed:

Sting, then a 15-year-old called Gordon Sumner, was at a Hendrix show at Newcastle’s Club-A-Go-Go on March 10, 1967. It was the first time he had ever seen a black person in the flesh. Those alive in the war years remembered black US servicemen stationed in Britain, but the wave of Caribbean and Asian immigration that started in the late 1940s was highly localised, so it was quite possible for many young Britons living outside London, Birmingham, Liverpool or Bristol to have never met, still less lived alongside, worked or gone to school with, someone more darkly complected than themselves (ibid).
My father, who is the same age as Sting, has recounted to me the tale of when he ‘bunked’ off school with his friend to attend the aforementioned gig, and waited in the queue the whole day to get in the front row. Apart from anecdotes that he couldn’t hear properly for a few days afterwards due to the volume at the gig, he also agreed that this was the first time he had seen a black person in the flesh. An experience not dissimilar to most attending the gig.

I wish now to focus in more detail on my respondent’s views concerning Newcastle’s cultural isolation, and whether this has indeed impacted on their level of black cultural consumption. Steve, 57, equates isolation with a sense of alienation and couples both with a traditional working-class masculinism. He sees these together as forming the basis for the appeal of black music in the region during the 1960s:

Up here, you see, this area is isolated. Free were more popular here and in Sunderland than in any other part of the UK, and they were from London. It’s the sort of rough, raw, bluesy music just like The Animals. Rough, bluesy bands have always been popular in this part of the world. Well not now, but in the 60’s. People like The Animals, The Yardbirds, Free, Junco Partners - it’s the tough working-class macho image that people liked subconsciously. There’s something about this area that promotes and appreciates minority music. I think it’s the detachment from the rest of the UK and I think the North East is given a raw deal, and the one analogy I would use is the A1 road from Newcastle to Edinburgh which is supposed to be the main link from the Northeast to Scotland and it’s a single lane carriageway, which is very dangerous. I don’t think this would be permitted in the South. I think people in the North East feel isolated and therefore latch onto what they see is minority music, which in my day was blues and today is hip-hop. There’s a definite sense of alienation.

From this respondent, there is a sense that isolation has indeed aided white consumption of black music and culture. As opposed to Nayak’s current theory (2003a) that white working class ‘Real Geordies’ today wouldn’t indulge in black music, Steve appears to be linking this ‘tough working class macho image’ with direct participation in the blues in the 1960s. From the above view, isolation appears key in ‘promoting minority music’. The analogy used for the division between North and South is a strange one, but true factually, and indeed on a recent news bulletin I saw a local news journalist taking MPs to task over just this matter.
There is a definite sense of ‘being hard done by’ but as mentioned, this can significantly increase insular solidarity.

Young people today continue to see huge disparities between North and South. Emma, 28, who relocated to London from Newcastle in 1999, stresses the disparity between London and Newcastle in terms of music promotion and the chances of ‘making it’:

London, that’s just where the music industry is, I mean, as a fashion designer I can’t work anywhere else either. It’s where the jobs and exposure and whatever are, it’s just concentrated in London. There’s more people, so more opportunities. The Newcastle scene is too introverted, they only see Newcastle. It’s never advertised up there let alone down in London so if the scene isn’t pushed you can’t expect people to know about it. London with the industry behind it sells itself. Newcastle by comparison is amateurish.

Rich, 20, talks of the cultural magnetism of the South East: ‘London and the South seem to be focal points for hip-hop - therefore your Northern MC’s move down there and the scene left behind runs a little dry’. ‘Stig’, 28, is another relatively recent arrival in London via Newcastle, having moved down in 2005. He is quite a rising name on the hip-hop scene and shares this view:

It isn’t just hip-hop, every element of media and music is London centric, it’s the capital, it’s where the money and industry is so it’s understandable. It is frustrating, but at the end of the day not the music but the outlook is miles behind up North, in London you can’t walk down the street without someone pushing their EP on you, it’s everywhere, ok, admittedly the audience isn’t as big back home but it’s growing, but people in Newcastle are just as guilty of not looking beyond their postcode as anyone else. Londoners aren’t ignorant to hip-hop elsewhere, in that if you take it to them they will give it a check, but why the fuck would they look elsewhere when they have a thriving scene, we need to take it to them. In Newcastle one or two individuals have been resuscitating a dead scene for years.

So there is a distinct impression of ‘not looking beyond the postcode’. Isolation may promote hip-hop within Newcastle, but does not encourage it to spread wider than its city limits.
Indeed, from my own personal experience, most of the Newcastle hip-hop scene are ‘happy with their lot’ and quite like being the ‘big fish in the small pond’. ‘Stig’ told me that he had ‘outgrown’ Newcastle, just as The Animals had over 40 years previously (and numerous bands have in-between) and so it really is just a case of following suit if you wish to make it in the industry. ‘Stig’ is an anomaly as he is the first Geordie rapper to actually make a substantial mark in the London ‘urban’ media, but only after he actually moved there and started over again. The fact that he refers to a dead scene being ‘resuscitated’ continually does not bode well for any continual expansion, but then again, most inside Newcastle would be happy if it stayed that way, to maintain their local ‘celebrity’ status. Again, this is contrary to Nayak’s (2003a) view that the ‘B Boyz’ of Newcastle promote globalist ideologies. As mentioned earlier, it appears to be more a case of snatching globalist elements and watering it down to the ‘local’, a kind of amalgamation of Nayak’s ‘Real Geordies’ and ‘B Boyz’.

The majority view among my respondents is of Newcastle resting on its laurels in the sense of promotion. There is a direct sense of it being inherently cliquey. Taylor, 22:

I haven’t actually seen any proper recording labels, or anything that gets people in the North East involved, so they have to move. Most people in Newcastle are gonna be your friends and not your fans. Most of the people that listen to your music will probably be your friends or maybe’s on the odd occasion they’ll be prepared to buy your albums cos they’ve heard of ya.

David, 19:

The North East has to start a movement, cos the scene isn't as big as I'd like to see it, the scene is small for the size of the city, I suppose cos of the dance music effect. It’s really cliquey though, when I went to ‘UK Takeover’ [a yearly UK hip hop night in Nottingham] with my friend, a lot of people on the coach knew each other and me and my mate just laughed pathetically at ourselves like ‘damn we're complete outsiders here’.

David himself is from Ashington, only a few miles north of Newcastle in Northumberland, but was still made to feel like an outsider because of his lack of interaction with the city. In bigger cities, scenes are definitely more welcoming and engaging, but Newcastle has a habit
of creating a divisive ‘them and us’ situation, which encourages internal participation on a ‘need to know’ basis. Essentially, it is like an invite-only group, where you must know someone already inside the scene to get the ‘stamp of approval’. It is actually hobbling itself in this way, as those who are made to feel like outsiders won’t bother with further interaction. The wells of the remaining scene will run dryer and dryer. The biggest rap group in Newcastle, The Skruffz, who I also interviewed, are all now in their 30’s and have been at the top of the pile since the scene began to emerge within (and around) Newcastle. Ironically, none are actually from Newcastle originally, but come from surrounding areas. As time has went on, being from or living in Newcastle has became ever more important. One member, Simon, 34, explains:

It’s different altogether now cos I think all the kids who are in crews, hip-hop crews and have been for say ten years or more would be from Cramlington or New Hartley and they’re kind of just out away in the sticks. So we’ve got that different mentality, we haven’t got that city mentality either. And the kids doing it now, who are coming through, who’ve been doing it a couple of years or whatever are more kind of ya Heaton and nearer to the city, so they’ll have more of that city perspective. It started right on the outskirts.

Further examples of an introverted scene are easily come by. Eddie, 28: ‘maybes people in the South don’t look to the North that much because it’s not making that much noise outside its own circles, I think people up here have to see past the postcode’. Jon, 29, sees hip-hop dominance in the South as only mirroring its economic dominance:

Hip-hop is London-centric in the same way that the UK is London-centric, it’s the capital of a relatively small country so naturally it will be the centre for most things, it’s a shame but that’s how it is, resulting in the fact that it is much easier to break through living down there. You have to look hard for hip-hop in Newcastle, and it relies far too much on students. It’s too far north for modern trends to catch on quickly so as a result it’s a few years behind everywhere else.

However, as always, there are those eager to defend notions of isolation. Joe, 20: ‘Newcastle seems isolated. It’s completely isolated so it’s been allowed to grow on its own. There’s no interest from record labels, there’s nothing coming to Newcastle. So people have been forced
to put on their own nights’; ‘Lewie Q’, 20: ‘It’s just raw talent up here, it ain’t no fucking influence from no London thing, it ain’t no Manchester thing, it ain’t no fucking Leeds thing’; Joe, 20: ‘Look at it. Everyone here, like everybody here pretty much knows everybody else ye kna what I mean. I haven’t seen a flyer for this, I haven’t seen any kind of promotion, its word of mouth exclusively, and it’s brought a decent crowd’.

There are clear dangers in developing a one-dimensional view on isolation. As alluded to before, isolation is very much a two-sided coin, and can encourage participation as well as destroying it. ‘Stig’, 28, goes further into the matter: ‘Newcastle has loads going for it, the standard is good, the accent and dialect are poetic, it has an old school touch which is missing in hip-hop, and it’s so distanced from all other scenes it’s fresh and new’. Again the negative is equal to the positive as ‘Stig’ goes on to say:

But at the same time I’m seeing more and more younguns using London slang, and not in context, they are using it as if it’s their own and they feel excluded from the scene because they are biting [imitating] London. On the flip side, I see a lot of other heads defining themselves too much, so they are too much about the Geordie thing which excludes everyone else. It’s almost like they’ve seen the old school heads doing their thing and flying the Geordie flag and they latch onto one thing, which is the defining Geordie tag, then flog it to death.

As ‘Stig’ has pointed out, it really is a double-edged sword in Newcastle. There are the Internet-influenced youth who get most of their knowledge outside of local interaction, possibly people like David, but often this ‘outsider looking in’ status is imposed on them by the so-called ‘owners’ to the gateway of the Newcastle scene. So to have any interaction, which is blocked on a local level, globalist strategies and media intake have to be heightened to compensate. This would be closer to Nayak’s (2003a) ‘B Boyz’.

Conversely, there is the group who could have possibly broken out of the area like ‘Stig’, but decide to ‘live and die’ by their Geordieness instead. This is a mutually exclusive group and as mentioned ‘they are too much about the Geordie thing which excludes everyone else’. This group is perhaps closer to Nayak’s (ibid) ‘Real Geordies’, where strategies of localism are just as important as globalist ones. There is no real flexibility within this group, horizons are far too narrow, and thinking outside of Newcastle appears to be unthinkable. ‘Stig’ is thus
making the point that both groups are lacking individuality and originality, one struck by an internet/London/even American influence and one following the Geordie ‘rule book’.

A strange dilemmatic situation thus emerges: embrace Geordieness and be embraced by the local scene, so becoming cut off from the outside, or try to embrace other ways, in a greater attempt at flexibility, and so become alienated from the local scene instead. DJ, KP, 22: ‘I think with London being the biggest area, there’s more chance of good MC’s coming out of there. The London accent kinda has its own standard now on a beat, so a lot of people use that general flow. With Northern, or Geordie hip-hop, I don’t think it has its own originality yet’. However, another member of the Geordie scene, ‘Mistarick’, 32, takes the opposite view, and blames laziness on anybody adopting a London ‘style’ instead of the local take on things: ‘If you as a fan are prepared to hunt for your music and find new stuff and nights then you can find them in Newcastle, but media wise the majority of coverage is given to London-based acts so if you are spoon fed your music you are more likely to hear of a London based act and adopt their style.’

One respondent I interviewed, Dan, aged 17, was towing the ‘Geordie route’. Ironically he wasn’t directly from inside Newcastle himself; ‘friends of friends’ had invited him in. ‘I'm from North Shields, there is no hip-hop what so ever, it’s all Spanish techno dance music, and charvers (chavs)’. When I put it to him that being a hip-hopper in the North East is hard going, and the ‘scene’ is more of a gathering of friends, he agreed: ‘Yeah, it’s still good though, well I like it, everyone gets on and everyone knows each other. I can imagine it being very hectic in the South and a lot of back stabbing taking place’. I have heard this ‘everyone knows each other’ statement countless times whilst conducting my fieldwork. Perhaps unbeknown to my respondents, this is detrimental for continued growth. Egan (2001), as I referred to earlier, mentioned the ‘incestuousness’ of the Newcastle scene back in the 1960s, and it would appear little has changed. The ‘not looking beyond the postcode’ syndrome creates stereotypical views of elsewhere. Dan imagines ‘down South’ to be full of betrayal and bitterness without ever having experienced it first hand. Fear of embracing anything outside of the North East is evident. ‘Dismal’, 19, offers the reverse perspective. Not being a functioning member of ‘the club’, he feels mild resentment: ‘They try to keep it elite; it’s just one bunch of mates claiming that they’re the ‘scene’, it’s fucked up’.

Further detractors emerge in the following brief transcript.
On top of divisions within Newcastle’s hip-hop scene, members have to contend with the fact that hip-hop actually isn’t a very popular art form in Newcastle (at least not the underground hip-hop practiced by the ‘scene’). Newcastle, and the North East, are traditionally dance music areas and so to be exclusive about hip-hop participation simply adds to the isolationism. As mentioned earlier, I actually attended a gig which had all of the ‘name’ bands in Newcastle present, alongside a following of all of the ‘everybody knows each other’ set, and there was around 100 people present, 90% of whom were male, almost all of whom were white. It was considered a ‘good turn out’ yet only half the nightclub was open, and even the top floor, which was open, was only half full. James, 19: ‘[laughs] Yeah everything round me is fucking dance music, now I’m not against it; it’s just that dance music seems so arrogant’. ‘Padsta’, 28, is also at odds with the dance music element of the city: ‘The scene up here is shit, it’s a hard house city, we always have to scrap for bits that we can find’. The same applies to ‘Mistarick’, 32: ‘If anyone else was listening to hip-hop apart from the Beasties in my area in 1990, I wasn't aware of it. It was all about dance music, and still is, I feel I’ve always been more of a leader than a follower’.
Further geographical/cultural isolation is apparent via the following respondent. ‘Roofio’, 16:

There’s not much hip-hop stuff to do near me, a few of my mates are into hip-hop but not in the same way that I am. I just decided to take up rapping for something to do, been doing it for about a year and a half and haven’t stopped. I’ve been getting more and more into the UK scene via the Internet but up here there’s bugger all opportunities to do much.

This respondent is clearly another ‘outsider looking in’, searching for his own hip-hop identity primarily via the media which, perhaps not surprisingly, many of the Geordie hip-hop scene disregard as being of paramount influence, instead opting to relate it to their location, watering down the globalist element of the art form in the process. Rich, 20: ‘When I did find some people putting on hip-hop nights in Newcastle it was very cliquey and inbred. The student scene won’t mix with the city scene either, so there’s even less choice, as the hip-hop scene here is predominantly students, it’s segregated’. JT, 27, continues in the same vein: ‘Boring boring boring no proper scene at all’. Lack of money and geographical isolation are again pointed to. Keith, 25: ‘That’s the biggest problem in the scene man; no-one’s got any money. The Newcastle scene is isolated in both a geographical and social sense. The Geordies are like a different race. Its a little country here, it really is, and people think of it as a little country ye kna’. An important point, as the local mentality for many is relatively unchanged from its industrial days. The lack of influence from outside culture is telling, and even though the area has a thriving student culture they only remain for a few years and do not contribute very much culturally. Geographically it is also a problem. Klaire, 34: ‘I see the problem as being just as geographical as it is cultural. Loads of big name artists will come from Leeds, and then they’ll skip and go to Edinburgh’; Keith, 25: ‘I think within the music scene itself we’re quite cut off, and it can be a problem, cos I don’t think people further down than Leeds know there’s even rappers who are here’.

One of the aspects of isolation that cannot be ignored is the lack of ethnic diversity within the localised hip-hop scene and within the city in general for that matter. Eddie, 28, sees that the lack of participation in the Geordie hip-hop scene by the small pockets of black people present in the city can be simply defined:
The black people in Newcastle are mainly from outside of the UK, asylum seekers and overseas students, and so won’t understand it. That’s why they go to the mainstream commercialised nights, with all that American pop crap. They wouldn’t grasp the realism within Geordie hip hop.

David, 32: ‘I think we’ve got less of a diversity, really, to be honest like, cos we haven’t got that many ethnic minorities in Newcastle as integrated as a lot of the other British cities’.

‘Aems’, 23:

Up here all the kids listen to ‘new monkey’ [so called ‘charver’ or ‘chav’ music exclusive to the North East] when they’re growing up and that. When I was in the Midlands all the kids who were growing up, cos it is massively black and Asian and stuff like, they’re all listening to garage and grime and hip-hop as kids, so they start off at a younger age so there’s more of them, whereas up here an MC to them means ‘MC Stompin’ [Typical affected ‘new monkey’ name].

Keith, 25, adds an interesting and telling point: ‘A black guy here would feel like a white guy in American hip-hop’.

As I have discussed, the Newcastle scene is relatively introverted, and as many respondents take huge pride in the local scene, this is certainly another facet of isolation that binds like-minded people together. Taking the local significance up a level from previous respondents, Tony, 26, stresses that the localised form of hip-hop is what speaks for him best:

I love Geordie hip-hop cos I’m a Geordie really like! I think Geordie hip-hop comes from the heart, ye kna, it just means something to me like. To hear Geordies on the mic ye kna, keepin’ the Geordie hip-hop scene alive! It’s like live and local, talking about local situations which I can fully relate to. I think American hip-hop’s good reet but ye kna when you hear a Geordie on the mic, it’s like ya roots, and it hit’s ya right in the heart.

As opposed to scratching for meaning between two worlds that are vastly different, that of the white Geordie, and the African-American experience, this respondent simply believes that hearing people with the same accent as him, talking about the things he would definitely
experience on a day to day basis, glues him to the music. Many singers use the run of the mill American accent when singing, which is generally not geographically relevant (especially in commercial music), but as rap utilises talking rhythmically to a beat, the local accent is enabled to come through loud and clear, and as a rapper is more focused on lyrics than a singer, the message is more obviously fore grounded. Intense involvement is characteristic of the Newcastle scene. Klaire, 34: ‘The scene we’ve got here, people are really passionate about it’. Keith, 25: ‘I’ve been doing this for 5 years and I’ve probably lost more money than I’ve earned. I’ve never decided I wanted to do it for the money so it is definitely passion here’.

LONG DISTANCE BONDING WITH BLACKNESS

Although lacking the cosmopolitan make-up of other ports such as Liverpool, John Steel, former drummer of The Animals, states that Newcastle’s poor relation status to other English cities provided the musicians of the locale in the early Sixties with a bond, and a sense of empathy, with their counterparts in far-flung places like Mississippi: “We just had an instinctive emotional identification with black American blues.” (cited in Egan 2001: 11). The lead singer, Eric Burdon, happened to possess a booming, guttural, world-weary voice identical in sound to those of the black musicians he idolised. In an autobiographical Animals song (‘New York 1963- America 1968’) Burdon proclaims: “The negro was my hero- I tried my best to sound like him” (ibid). The first incarnation of their band was called The Pagans circa early 1959, with much of their material coming from a Joe Turner album (with a ‘city blues’ style played by musicians drawn from members of the Count Bassie band) called ‘Boss Of The Blues’ which Burdon had discovered. This had subsequently struck a chord with the young art school musicians. John Steel relates that from there “we were called the Kansas City Five because we were still hooked on the rolling R&B shouting thing that Joe Turner and Joe Williams and people like that were doing. We didn’t think of it as a living or a career or anything, it was just something we wanted to do” (cited ibid: 17).

Part of the reason that people like Dylan and The Beatles were so taken with the musically less gifted Animals was the band’s apparent air of realism. They were steeped in the blues and R&B. While the ‘Fab Four’ mixed up these influences with the pop strains of girl groups,
the Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly, The Animals clung to their ‘roots’ (albeit ones borrowed through the media) with the determination of purists - sounding more uncompromisingly black than any of the countless bands who saw chart action in the wake of the Beatles, including the Rolling Stones. This was of course partly because The Animals happened to be blessed with a singer who sounded like a black man in a white man’s body whereas the Stones’ front man would always sound like a Dartford boy who didn’t really grasp all the double-entendres in the lyrics he was enunciating, and partly because The Stones started going slightly more pop when they began writing their own material (Egan, 2001). The Animals had so much ‘black’ credibility that they were the subject of a five-page feature in the leading black magazine *Ebony*. “The Animal’s unique ‘Geordie grit’ music was as dark as a Newcastle coal seam” (Egan, 2001: 115).

Eric Burdon in his autobiography ‘Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood: A Memoir’ (2001) sheds more light on his bond with black music. He talks of his experience of playing with and befriending another of his idols, John Lee Hooker. This admiration was a long-term affair as when Burdon was a “blues-obsessed college student” (Burdon, 2001: 53) he had a sweatshirt made which said ‘John Lee Hooker for President’. Of particular interest is Burdon telling of John Lee Hooker performing in Newcastle for the first time a couple of years later. This coincided with The Animals just beginning to get noticed locally, and the Geordie five piece were invited to jam in honour of John Lee Hooker’s birthday. Burdon goes on to stress the extent of their friendship:

I felt very protective of Hooker as fans continually asked him to sign his name, and he was embarrassed by both a stutter and by being barely able to write. I actually forged his autograph several times to help him out. John Lee and I hit it off wonderfully, and we hooked up again in New York on the Animals’ first American tour. At that time he asked me to stay with him at his home in Detroit, which I did as soon as there was a break in the tour. We spent three days together listening to music in the clubs and just talking. He told me we had a bond thicker than white or black because of where we were born - him from Clarksdale, Mississippi, and me from Newcastle, a gritty, working-class city he always said could have been situated right in the deep American South (Burdon, 2001: 53).
I think the comparison in Burdon’s mind for Newcastle being ‘like’ the American South was because of its inhabitants’ uncompromising working-class attitude. From Burdon’s perspective it would also seem that Newcastle was (at the time) as culturally isolated as many black communities in red-neck areas.

Burdon continues by relating that Hooker wasn’t looking forward to returning to Newcastle during his second British tour, as the area and in particular the Animal’s main haunt, the Club-A-Go-Go, were specifically nerve-wracking for the veteran bluesman. With a new UK hit Hooker’s tour was a huge success, with venues filled to capacity, but as Burdon states, Newcastle was particularly looking forward to the performance:

> By the time he got to his gig at the Club-A-Go-Go, the place had almost eight hundred people packed in it, and Hooker had to be escorted by his handlers - among them Peter Grant and me - through the rowdy crowd to get onstage. Not a tall man, Hooker felt threatened during the ordeal, but felt fine once the show began: The Geordie reaction was incredible (Burdon, 2001: 55).

Still on the topic of John Lee Hooker, Burdon revels in the profound affect Newcastle actually had on the visitor. According to Burdon, Hooker had called Newcastle ‘rough’ and the Club-A-Go-Go was apparently particularly unsettling to him due to altercations inside and outside, with local youth carrying knives being one observation, and Hooker had gained the impression from others that this wasn’t a one-off type of behaviour and was scared to return. I do think that Burdon is embellishing Newcastle as being rougher than it was at the time, as nobody else who frequented the club that I have spoken to has mentioned untoward violent behaviour of this magnitude. In his autobiography Burdon is seemingly aiming for the ‘tough upbringing’ slant, perhaps to make him feel closer to the street background of his heroes. “A bunch of Newcastle Brown-swilling teens had a Detroit ghetto-born John Lee Hooker looking for the exits - Newcastle, Mississippi, indeed!” (Burdon, 2001: 55).

Burdon goes on to explain how the American black experience had always been a source of fascination for him, black women being among the most alluring aspects. He even developed an early reputation for having a lot of black friends, unthinkable in Newcastle at this time. These were:
displaced Africans in Newcastle, two of whom were members of the first band I was in, the Pagans. I saw what freedom meant to these exiles, and it engendered an even deeper interest in the African experience in America, resulting in a reputation that preceded me to New York. When the Animals set foot in America for the first time, there was graffiti on the wall of our hotel proclaiming ‘Eric Burdon is a nigger lover’. Well, yeah he is, I thought. And fuck you for not understanding that you should be too.

Burdon relishes his role as ‘lover’ of black people, with numerous mentions along the way in his book. Since I am interested in Newcastle, I think this next anecdote best sums up his particular, often obsessive, bond with the music. As a young teen, Burdon gained a guest spot with ‘Mighty Joe Young’s Jazzmen’:

One such evening, a music reporter for the local *Evening Chronicle* was in the club. I made the local press, got my first write-up, and was both amazed and disturbed by what he wrote. He called me Eric ‘Lungs’ Burdon and said me singing in front of a jazz band was proof of the ‘White Negro’. A kinder word has never been written about me (Burdon, 2001: 150).

Other members of the 60’s blues scene that I interviewed were not so forthcoming about the allure of all things black. Indeed, those younger than Burdon and other people of his era found that they were influenced by the white blues players of the decade and not the originators, the type of which had influenced Burdon, and people like Eric Clapton. Maurice, 63, recounts the day he travelled to Manchester to see Alexis Korner and came back a convert:

I can remember the day in 1962 when Alexis Korner came to play and he totally changed my view on music with his R&B. I made a point of listening to this music from then on, and got into Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf, but to be honest, I liked the later stuff. The artists looked like me, came from England, so I think I could subconsciously relate more on that level. I originally thought that blues was invented by Alexis Korner and John Mayall and only later through them did I start listening to anything authentic.
Ronnie, 64, disputes the theory that white people can’t fully relate to the blues: ‘Up in Newcastle there was a lot of white working class disillusionment, which meant we could relate to this music, and make it our own. Jimmy Reed for example was flabbergasted when he came over to Newcastle as to how popular he was amongst young white kids.’

This infatuation with ‘blackness’ continues to be the case today, as evidenced within the local hip-hop scene. For many white youth the body can be transformed into a type of corporeal canvas for ethnic experimentation (Nayak, 2003a). Nayak suggests that this was shown in a number of embodied acts evident within his fieldwork, including dress, hairstyles, posture, body piercing and walking with a pronounced ‘bounce’. Dress sense, as related last chapter, involved dressing in loose baggy clothes that drew upon the culture of hip-hop and basketball. “For many the body is a site upon which global fashions and hybrid haircuts could most effectively be displayed” (ibid: 318). Basketball was seen to provide a masculine arena for the negotiation of white ethnicity in these circles; however, music, fashion and dance offer more inclusive points of identification for girls, young women and less sporting males (ibid). There is a realisation that globalisation can create new synthetic youth spaces. For white youth appropriating black culture:

It is ‘fluid, porous, something you ‘live out’ and ‘do’. ‘Doing’ ethnicity in this manner is therefore a means of escaping the restricted enclosure of whiteness through a radical multicultural patchwork of blending and inter-mixture … It is through an engagement with a globally imagined blackness, then, that certain Wannabes came to understand and transcend the meaning of whiteness in their social lives (ibid).

Relating to the music seems to be of the utmost importance for the white youth of Newcastle, albeit by often socially imagined means. Dan, 16: ‘I listen to something if it is good, but a lot of the hip-hop I find good is sometimes something I can relate to’. ‘Dismal’, 19:

I began of course as a fan of the music...when I heard NWA. I got myself into the music more and more each day, buying new records and getting to know hip-hoppers round the area. That was a few years back and shit and we’ve started to write our own raps about our hip-hop culture in Newcastle and whatever the fuck else we could relate to the whole hip-hop culture with, ya know, the weed smoking the survival in shitty areas. The pain I express in my raps and the pleasure of my life experiences are
true to me but I just express them via hip-hop. What we see on TV, hear on CD that’s when we are indulging in hip-hop pleasurably - like when I listen to my NWA or whatever...and I do that often cos it’s something I enjoy - but for me hip-hop is more than listening to them thugs and shit. It’s also about how I handle my life like I’m gonna be the best I can be and make money and whatever cos hip-hop was about all them boys way back producing sounds cos that’s what they were good at, and tryna make money to get themselves out of whatever shit they were into.

The ‘everyday struggle’ of life is something that seems to glue respondents to the often painful storytelling elements in rap, and of course the same can be applied to blues music. I encountered various examples of respondents stating that the ‘hard knock life’ was the thing that they could most relate to within rap music (I will go into greater depth with these comparisons when I look at how hip-hop culture is used as a social class issue to defer any notions of colour/cultural differentiation). ‘Mayhem’, 21 is another who professes to relate to the music with life experience. This respondent has searched for refuge within the music, and it is a medium by which to vent his anger, pain and frustration:

I love music, that’s all I can put it down to; I cannot imagine life without it. If I was raised in different circumstances I certainly don’t think I would be able to relate to the lyrics, however I wasn’t, so I relate to a lot of the artists I listen to. To me, music is my soul. It makes me happy, sad, excited, and passionate. It helps me show emotion, which I can’t do too well without music. With some artists, I relate to everything that has happened. I know she’s female, but I feel as though Ms. Dynamite is my mentor, she seems to have experienced the same struggle, like having lost siblings, being brought up in a lower economically developed family, feeling as though your mother hates you, arguing everyday, fighting on your estate, leaving home. We didn’t have enough money for a lot of food, my Mam would be working everyday and at that age, I shouldn’t have been alone - I couldn’t cook [laughs]. Also, lyrics with drugs, my Dad threatened to kill me as a toddler and he was playing my Mam, so she left him. She soon after became infatuated with a down and out alcoholic drug dealer. Life was bad from then. There are certain tracks that do have the power to make me cry. I personally don’t think any one human can make me cry as they have the power to. When some artists elaborate on their lives, I feel for them enough to lose tears for them. Hip-hop is a culture; you could say a religion in some case. Hip-hop is a way of
In some cases, if you’re into hip-hop, you have experienced some kind of struggle. I don’t want to segregate, but because of this, it’s like having your own sub-community. You don’t have to speak to them, but you know they are somewhat like you. You know you’re not alone.

This feeling of somebody else ‘experiencing’ similar things in life to these respondents help them bond significantly to the music, even if it has been created in an entirely different country and environment. More life-relating-to-music stories were found in my interviews. ‘Stretton’, 18, says: ‘My background’s the same old, single mother struggling on benefits and all that, although I’ve always tried to get money from car washing right up to selling anything ... they call me and my friend the Trotters! My life definitely helps me relate to hip-hop more than it otherwise would’. However strong this bond seems, one must be weary of respondents embellishing links that do not actually exist, just to appear more ‘real’. As another of my fieldwork chapters shows, authenticity is of paramount importance to white youth when claiming cultural territory that they know didn’t originate within the same colour, creed, or country as themselves.

Emotionally strong imagined connections and a lifestyle related to rap music, which have encouraged participation, are clearly evident from the previous responses. This thread continued within the dialogue of many of the other fieldwork respondents. ‘Mistarick’, 32, stresses: ‘I don't feel I had a choice getting involved, it’s something I just had to do. Once I was exposed to the music things seemed to fall into place, it was almost organic’. There is always choice in music consumption, but the impression this respondent gives is that hip-hop culture quickly became so deeply ingrained in his nature that when he was hooked it was impossible for him to stop. This implies that it is more than a musical style, but rather a state of mind, a complete lifestyle package. Eddie, 28, passionately states his ability to relate and the bond he feels for hip-hop. When faced with the notion that white people perhaps can’t relate to a music that was developed by working class African-American people, he responds vehemently:

I think it’s bollocks, take slavery for example, it wasn’t my generation that imposed that on millions of Africans, I learnt that in school so I can relate to their anger just as much as them. Also I’m from a poor white family who have struggled all their life and now have my own poor white family who will probably struggle for the rest of
my days, I feel oppressed so why wouldn’t I relate to that aspect of hip-hop music? Also where I come from, originally Derby, there's elements of racism; I’ve even been the victim of racism myself. There’s problems with drugs and guns and knifes in my city, as there is in this city, and every other city for that matter. So yeah I totally disagree with that statement, I’m too intelligent to listen to music I can’t understand or relate to. People listen to music for all different reasons, since being involved in the hip-hop scene up here I have noticed a lot of fans are students and have a better background than me, so they may be relating to the fuck the system type message that hip-hop brings, me personally I’ve already said I relate to the problematic side of society that’s reflected in the music.

Tony, 26, backs up this view, but in a more succinct manner: ‘There’s underclass white people who go through the exact same experiences as the black people who started the music.’ The notion of *exact* replicability in relation to personal or even collective experience is obviously refutable. A white youth in Newcastle cannot possibly share the exact same lifestyle experiences, or appreciate the same levels of oppression that have befallen African-Americans. There is a significant degree of emphasis here on social class, with colour being dismissed in equal measure, so white respondents are able to relate better without the thorny issue of race troubling apparently clear lines of shared experience, a topic which I will turn to later. Sport is another way of avoiding race issues, as it is unquestionably a phenomenon which appears to transcend racial boundaries, in today’s tolerant day and age especially – with races of all types performing in a variety of sports without the ‘colour lines’ of old.

David, 32: ‘Well, I’ve always been into things like hip-hop and basketball. I was more into basketball than football. All of those things have been dominated by black people so I’ve always looked up to them.’

Essentially, long distance bonding ensures that imagined lines of affinity are struck between the respondents’ own lives and the music’s ability to convey oppression and ‘true to life’ tales of social struggle. Geographical limits and structural boundaries are therefore surpassed and overcome by an emotional attachment and close identification with black American culture.
CHAPTER 9

DENYING THE IMPORTANCE OF RACE

Attempts by white youth to play down the symbolic significance of appropriating black styles conceal “the often deliberate and self-conscious motivations” that lie behind such actions (Jones, 1988: 143). To deny that race is a contentious issue, and in fact to go as far as to deny it as a tangible concept in contemporary society, allows for an easier assimilation of black style for these young people. To act as if colour is no longer a valid definition is not for the ‘greater good’, or from some sense of inherent moral duty, but rather a somewhat calculated ploy to enable an easier and more concrete white appropriation to take place. As a result, colour lines are (deliberately) blurred to such an extent that Les Back’s (1996) concept of ‘new ethnicities’ is evoked. A form of globalised social identity, free from the constrictions of being ‘English’ or, in the case of my fieldwork, being a ‘Geordie’, is therefore presented. Hebdige (1987) has compared this reconfiguration of white ethnicity to a “phantom history of race relations” (44-5) in which the subtle traces of multi-culture are silently inscribed, over time.

Throughout my fieldwork, I found that a denial of the importance or relevance of race was a common trend between various responses, and was a very prevalent theme throughout. Fundamentally, this is to enable the white appropriation of black music to be kept ‘open’ and is also used to validate white membership. The disassociation with race-related issues was achieved primarily via a three-pronged tactic: the difference between the US and the UK in terms of race acceptance and black music assimilation was highlighted; the denial of ‘whiteness’ as a valid or worthwhile concept because of its potentially divisive nature was emphasised; and the idea of an often romanticised notion of social class solidarity with black America was seen as key. The contentious nature of all things race-related means that they are abandoned as a result. Denying the importance of race therefore leaves symbols of black culture wide-open for white appropriation (Back, 1996).
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE US AND UK HIP-HOP SCENES

My respondents were generally enlightened about the black history of hip-hop, and afforded it a degree of credibility, but also revelled in their independence from these same roots. Although being sympathetic overall to hip-hop’s black origins, my respondents went to great pains to acknowledge their pride in the UK hip-hop scene, emphasising its ethnically blurred nature. Drawing attention to how accepting Britain is, in terms of race relations, in contrast to America’s greater emphasis on ethnic divisions (especially apparent within its hip-hop output), allows for the easier validation of white participation in this country.

By stressing the perceived ignorance of American culture, in many ways positioning it as an oppositional ‘other’, my respondents have drawn attention to a more ‘natural’, down to earth, less contentious form of participation inherent within the UK. James, 22: ‘I think colour isn’t as much an issue over here as it is in the US, people I know out in the US say it’s always been a bone of contention there’; Nicole, 18: ‘Colour is far less important in the UK scene than in the US scene, take Jehst, Taskforce, Braintax [popular UK rap artists], for example, they’re all white. I think UK artists are very different to American ones, right down to the lyrical style of the artists as a whole, and I think the UK scene has far less emphasis on image and colour’; Rob, 18: ‘A big difference between the UK and US scene is that the UK scene has a more mixed race feel, the US scene is dominated by blacks’; ‘Roofio’, 16: ‘In the UK there are lots of white and black rappers doing stuff together. It’s a lot more open here than in the States’. ‘Aems’, 23:

I wouldn’t say colour is an issue up here, I wouldn’t say colour is an issue in the UK at all. I’ve never seen any of that crap. Britain’s multicultural anyway, and this is reflected in our rap output. Everyone, within hip-hop anyway, gets on with it and like respects each other. It’s that way especially in Newcastle, there’s no beef in Newcastle whatsoever. I don’t think colour’s an issue in British hip-hop, in hip-hop elsewhere it can be. Look at the amount of fuss that kicked off in America when Eminem came out, look at the fuss that was made, every article in the press was like ‘the first good white rapper’. There was like a big kafuffle going on. You read things where certain rappers in America were going ‘what’s he doing? You can’t let him rap, he’s white’ kind of thing. This is because America has been so dominated by the
black artists in hip-hop, which is fair enough; it came from them kind of thing. On the other hand I don’t know of or encounter anything to do with colour within the UK hip-hop community, especially up here in Newcastle. No-one plays the race card at all, everyone’s happy to just be doing the music, getting up there fucking spitting lyrics, whether you’re black, Asian, white whatever. The way it should be. America is blatantly colour-centric and Britain on the other hand is pretty much one of the most integrated countries around. Colour doesn’t matter to the average intelligent British person.

The above respondents voice their pride in the more inclusive nature they perceive to exist within the UK’s rap scene, and its ‘open door’ policy in terms of colour. The underlying fact that white rap artists in America have a certain stigma still attached to them, even post-Eminem, is one of the predominant factors for a distance in association. However, this ‘them’ and ‘us’ policy is clearly a disposable one, in the sense that the connection to America is made when it is useful for white appropriation and denied when it is not. Thus, when it comes to America’s divisive racial politics, a clear distinction between the two countries is drawn.

The colour divide between both countries is further exemplified by rap music producer James, 34, via his own independent experiences:

When I visited the States, I found a way clearer divide over there. So it took a lot longer to establish a connection, especially because of the type of rappers I was around. It took people a lot longer to feel comfortable with me and trust me, because the racism over there is a lot stronger. A lot of people in America have never had a close relationship with a white person, the difference with England is that you can go into any urban environment and there are always poor white families, and there’s always a poor white kid that will hang out with the poor black kids, but America’s not like that. There are places I’ve been to where I was the only white person around. In America it’s a lot harder to win people’s trust and admiration as a white person in hip-hop.

James’s focus is on the perceived closer association between black and white people in the UK than that which exists within the US, most likely occurring because of the UK’s smaller geographical size and lower proportion of ethnic minorities; meaning that different cultures
are more likely to mix. The fact that the UK is a more tolerant, ethnically friendly nation is also alluded to here.

There was a common assumption throughout my interviews that the US nation generally, and the US hip-hop scene more specifically, are ‘racist’, and that conversely, the UK scene is much more accommodating, which is true to some extent. The US has vast, sprawling, single race ghettos, whilst in the UK; even the most predominantly black areas are still multi-racial to some degree, as also mentioned by James. Thus, black people in the UK hip-hop scene have a much closer relationship and affinity with their white counterparts than that which occurs in the American scene. As the UK scene is predominantly white, and black British artists work with white British artists regularly, being a white participant within UK hip-hop clearly does not have the same stigma attached to it compared to the situation which endures across the Atlantic. Another factor conducive to this closer relationship occurring is that black British artists, just like their white counterparts, are all part of the same hip-hop chain; they are both following a trend that started in black America. African-American artists still feel that rap is their music and continue to claim cultural ownership over it, and as a result hostility levels towards white artists are higher there because of this fact.

Several respondents dwelt upon the differing historical connotations surrounding race in the two countries, many citing America’s background of slavery as being a logical reason for the continuing strained race relations there. Ewan, 33: ‘Slavery really ingrained racism into the American psyche, I think. I mean, I know Brits were selling slaves back in the day too, but we haven't had centuries of blacks being in the fields and really getting stuck into a ‘them’ and ‘us’ thing on a day to day level like they have’; Emma, 28: ‘I think we're less segregated. You have to just look at American history. Black communities have struggled for equality for I don’t know how long. Resentment here is less basically’; James, 22: ‘Black Americans have a history of being repressed; white America has always had it in for them. That sort of negative intensity just never happened here; we’ve always been more open-minded than the Yanks’. Klaire, 34, continues this view point:

I believe Britain is just less segregated than the US. The scene here developed slightly later; it’s always been a mixed crowd. Also in American history they had the whole slavery thing, the British history of immigration is very different. Black people were invited here as labourers and to be bus inspectors, things like that, to fill the work
force after the War. That’s why there’s less emphasis on colour in this country. People applied to work here, but they were dragged to America.

Stephen, 30, echoes the above sentiments:

In the UK there’s no ground rules, there’s no rules saying you have to be black to be hip-hop. You don’t have to have a cultural qualification, a so-called ‘ghetto pass’. It’s integrated; there are no real ghettos here on the scale of the States. In America there are more stereotypes of what a person is meant to be like, its way more segregated. There’s still an underlying feeling that a white man can’t understand ‘their’ music and culture over there. In America, because of the echoes of slavery white men are hated more by black men than they are in the UK, so white men aren’t as accepted in hip-hop in America as they are here. It’s way more multicultural here. The history of race relations isn’t such a factor here in the UK as it is over there. The Ku Klux Klan compared to someone like the BNP is like a whole different ball game, we are way more accepting of black people here.

By drawing attention to the divergent nature of America and Britain’s race history, my respondents are reinforcing the notion that the restrictions on white participation in black music are different between the two countries as a result. As Britain is relatively bereft of racial oppression compared to America, this is used as a springboard to validate white inclusiveness in home-grown black culture. There is therefore a common perception that less taboos surround or less restrictions prevent white participation within the UK as opposed to the US.

It is not just the so-called ‘hip-hop generation’ that draw the distinction between the UK and the US in order to validate white participation. The blues enthusiasts whom I interviewed also did the same. Bill, 55:

In 1960s America black people originally had their music held back from the masses, it wasn’t played, and it was kept down by the white people. Luckily in England we didn’t have that sort of thing. I’m fairly sure that in the very early 60s the records that were charting here weren’t in the *Billboard* top 100 chart, in America they were just in the black music chart only. Those minority charts were never played in American...
high schools, they were too busy with The Beach Boys and things like that. They cottoned on a lot later. In the UK we were probably fortunate that we heard very very good black music very early on from the 1950s with ska and things like that. Black music was a music form that I was brought up on, the trouble for Americans my age was they, at their school discos and clubs, would never hear the stuff we did. They didn’t get the chance to hear it. We’ve all seen relatively modern black and white film of you know the ‘white only’ toilets, or the white entrance to the swimming pool.

Steve, 57:

America, where all of this originated, was the most resistant to embracing black music initially. You never had a problem in Britain; we didn’t have a problem in embracing black music. America had more trouble assimilating black music than Britain did. America has and probably always will have a bigger race problem than Britain, its just more race orientated there, there’s a noticeable disparity. I think British people as a nation assimilate things better than Americans; we were far quicker to embrace black music. Over there colour issues were still holding back black music even until the 1960s; they were overtly racial labelling things ‘race records’. I would say that social class issues in this country have always been bigger than racial ones, unlike America. The UK and US have two schools of thought, two different ideologies. British people have always been more tolerant and easy going and that permeates into music.

Both Bill and Steve draw attention to the progressive nature of British racial politics during the 1960s. A picture is painted of Britain as being optimistic, tolerant, free and open to change, with America depicted as overly regulated, cynical, ignorant, closed minded and opposed to change. The image given of America is of an extremely repressed, racist nation, with the romanticised notion of Britain as being historically very liberal being shown as an alternative. The perception given is that Britain was assimilating black music into its popular culture from the 1950s onwards, distinct from the situation across the Atlantic, enabling, and indeed vindicating, white British participation within the blues as a result.

‘Stig’, 28, also defines the US as being a racially ignorant nation whilst simultaneously drawing attention to the different emphasis on class between both countries:
There are definitely racial pigeon holes created by the US in general. In the UK there are only really a few idiots who are following the US, or trying to create what they think hip-hop, in a stereotypical way, should be that are concerned with the colour thing. Everyone I know and respect in this country takes an individual artist and person on their own merit. It seems to be more of a struggle in the US; I mean they have ghettos for one, I think the UK is a lot more accommodating. Colour doesn’t have any relevance to skills or viability but the media uses it as a selling point regardless. To me I always see it more as a class thing. The fact is that, in England, certainly these days, class is a much more viable concept than race. Your race here is very unlikely to determine your class, unless you look at the upper echelons of society, but the majority of UK society is not a racial issue. I think in America the economic situation is massively different. In America, there is a definite correlation between race and class, in the UK that correlation is no where near as present.

Again, an image is raised of the UK as being accommodating and an embellished notion of the UK as being able to seamlessly navigate past notions of colour is provided. ‘Stig’ also sees class as being the biggest marker of identity in the UK, irrespective of race, whilst noting that the situation in the US renders race and class as being unfairly intertwined. Using class in this way, namely that of it being a valid and just concept within the UK, as opposed to the perceived unfairness of colour, not only makes the UK seem more racially liberal but also allows greater importance to be placed on class-based associations, in particular those between the white working-class in Newcastle and the black working-class in America. Thus, if class is seen as the accepted marker of social identity in the UK, it is easier to facilitate a connection or bond through this medium to supposed parallel forms across the Atlantic.

DENIAL OF COLOUR AS BEING AN ISSUE

As I have shown already, a common trend throughout my fieldwork was for great emphasis to be placed on the lack of credibility of skin pigmentation; in fact, there was a unified refusal to acknowledge or agree with the very notion of ‘race’. ‘Racial’ differentiation was considered utterly irrelevant and meaningless in the main. A desire to ignore ‘race’ as a valid concept in this way is directly related to the findings in Les Back’s (1996) study. ‘Whiteness’
was in effect being denied by the use of this tactic, a more ethnically ambiguous concept taking its place instead. ‘Roofio’, 16: ‘Colour can be an issue to the ignorant, but I don’t think it matters at all. There’s no reason why rap can’t be for everyone, being able to relate is colour-blind’; Rob, 18: ‘Being white is nothing at all, it’s just a skin colour to me personally. I’m white, not proud of it, but never ashamed of it as it’s just a colour. There’s no such thing as acting ‘black’.

Black connections are kept open by a complete disassociation with all things race-related. English and Whiteness are rejected for a deliberate policy of infusing black cultural symbols onto white, local identities. Young whites are therefore searching for a notion of social identity free of the ideological underpinning of a radicalised definition of Englishness, with blackness being used as a temporary solution (Nayak, 2003a). ‘Fez’, 25: ‘Hip-hop belongs to anyone who embraces and feels the music; I feel more for this culture than I could ever feel for this country. Hip-hop is the voice of a generation; you can’t hold something that big to just one race’.

‘Stig’, 28, relates that hip-hop culture has transgressed its origins and initial boundaries, and as a result, can no longer be defined as merely black music:

Some people want to stamp an identity on rap and say its black music and that’s their prerogative, but to me, music can’t be defined by gender, by race, by anything. To me, music is about self-expression. Something drew me to this music at 10, whether it was the rebelliousness that I saw of NWA, or the party side, from De La Soul. There was something about this music, maybe it was just the syncopation of the beats, and there was something that drew me to it from that. Now if people want to say that’s because I wanted to be black, then more fool them, because at the time black culture was still trying to be accepted in a lot of places. I subscribed to something way before it was media friendly, before the media wanted anything to do with it. To this day I am still holding strong, I respect its roots, where it came from and what it stands for, but to me its gone way beyond those origins. It’s like saying cricket was started by English people. Yeah, but English people are shit at cricket! It doesn’t mean anything. At the end of the day, hip-hop is an entity in itself now. In my eyes it’s open to any age, race and gender. If somebody wants to restrict the type of music they listen to on the basis
of how they perceive themselves, then more pity them. They’re going to lose out on a lot more than anybody else is.

As shown above, there was a distinct feeling apparent within my fieldwork that hip-hop culture was considered too ‘big’ to be positioned within the confines of one race, and as a result, something approaching ‘new ethnicities’ can be created via a mutual love of hip-hop.

Ewan, 33:

Maybe hip-hop was black at one stage, but not now. I didn't adopt it, it wasn't alien to me. If hip-hop is about the frustrations of youth and rebellion then race isn't relevant. White people can have injustices too. Why can't white people be coloured? If it’s about having fun and dancing, or wordplay and rhythm, then black folk never had a cachet on those things. As my world gets globalised and black people aren't a novelty in my tower block and I can download rap all day, my aesthetics and my racial identity get a bit blurred in the digi-ether, so to speak. I think race issues are a bit of a hang-over from when things weren't as blurred. For me, it's a case of wishing that we could all get over it already and get into the music. I do accept that a lot of what I value in the music comes from a spirit of the blues and urban discontent that is especially acute if you are black in America, but this isn’t the most important thing anymore.

Mike, 28:

Regardless of what ethnic origin invented or founded something, that product, invention, or genre of music, should be free for all to enjoy and make use of wherever it is you hail from, and whatever skin colour you are. I fully respect hip-hops roots, and originally it was black music, but why is it still labelled black music? It instantly subliminally states it is that race’s genre. Same with the way any other racial or religious terminology is used to label a genre, it’s wrong. The genre has moved on, become worldwide, and surely even the true hip-hop heads from back in Kool Herc’s days would be enjoying the fact that this is happening, and should welcome with open arms other parts of the world getting involved and progressing with the genre. I think music is worldwide, whatever the genre.
‘Stig’, 28:

A common love of hip-hop massively blurs the lines between white and black to the point where I don’t think there really are lines. I wouldn’t say anybody’s trying to be black, it’s impossible unless you actually are. You’ve also gotta understand there’s a lot of black people who don’t really understand hip-hop, so they subscribe to the same ideology as a white person who doesn’t understand it. I honestly can’t be defined by simple terms. What the fuck does being white mean? I identify say with your average black hip-hop head [fan] much more than I do with my white Geordie working class neighbours. Having a similar outlook on life and music, or having similar humour, attitude and personality, means much more than some irrelevant colour thing. Race is only an issue to ignorant people. Race doesn’t matter at all. Hip-hop started as a party music, to dance to, it didn’t matter what race you are. Hip-hop is about self expression, at any level. You can be the poorest man in the world; you can choose to express yourself through hip-hop. It’s all about self expression, whether it’s through rapping and words, break-dancing and movement, graffiti and paintings. Its all about self expression and creativity. That’s hip-hop.

According to the above respondents, hip-hop itself thus becomes the dominant marker of social identity, rather than any race-based notions. ‘Understanding’ hip-hop seemingly takes precedence over skin colour, the international cross-fertilisation of local culture serving to create a new collective identity. By stressing how the force of hip-hop’s globalisation has overcome its earlier restrictions further serves to help erode any nuance of black ownership. A cursory nod is given to its roots, but contemporary hip-hop is seen as colour-blind, enabling an easier white appropriation as a result.

Skill within the music is also seen to be of paramount importance, overriding mere racial limitations as a result. David, 19: ‘I can’t to this day get behind the fact that some ignorant people find black people sell a story better than white people and vice versa, it's never been a race factor with me, I’ll like an artist because of how he uses words and nothing else. It’s the ability in which people express themselves in the art that genuine people appreciate, never the colour’; Eddie, 28: ‘Race doesn’t matter to me, so why should it to anyone else? If a white man can rap better than a black man then why shouldn’t he be allowed to do so? I’d rather listen to one good white MC than ten shit black ones, it’s just like basket ball, white men can
jump you know! [laughs]; ‘Aems’, 23: ‘Hip-hop has nothing to do with skin colour at all. If you can rap, you can rap. And if you can DJ, you can DJ. That’s what it comes down to. Colour doesn’t matter to the average intelligent British person’; Taylor, 22: ‘It doesn’t really matter about colour; it’s more about skill, above and beyond that. Ok, my skin colour’s white in shade but that’s all that’s different, there’s nothing deeper to it than that’. All of these respondents see race as a superficial concept, one which deflects attention away from the ‘real’ marker of hip-hop credibility, that of technical ability. By embracing a defining characteristic bereft of any racial connotations again manages to keep white membership open and valid in this way. Just as there is a disassociation away from America’s racial politics, attention is again averted away from colour issues by embracing the universal notion of skill also.

The attitude within the blues is much the same as it is within hip-hop, with a disdain for colour boundaries being prevalent. Blues music is seen as being able to “cross boundaries and cultures with relative ease” (Brunning, 2002: 11). Robert Cray, a contemporary American blues guitarist and singer, who is black, denies any notion of a racial issue being relevant: “anybody can sing the blues; you don’t have to be black. I wasn’t born in the South and I didn’t pick cotton; I like to sing this music because it’s about real life situations” (cited Brunning, 2002: 10). Blues enthusiast, Bill, 55, stresses that knowledge is a more viable marker of authenticity than colour:

Music comes from inside, colour just doesn’t have any relevance. No matter where you are, or what kind of lifestyle you lead, people can still relate to black music. There are a lot of black people who would like to believe that all white people can’t associate to black music that came from those hard times. I think that nowadays though, the boot is very much on the other foot, we’ve got access to so much information, and if you want to read about the history of black music, you can read about it. There are now probably more white people who know more about the history of black music than black people. At times I think black people hide behind the fact that they are black, this is ‘their’ music even though they often don’t know anything about it. It’s a snobbery thing, like them saying ‘this is our music you can’t like it’. ‘Well hang on; do you know where this music started’? I mean, if you mentioned Robert Johnson for example, you could fill ten chairs, half with black half with white, and asked ‘who was Robert Johnson and what happened to him’? And I would say out
of the five black faces you’d get three who might know a little about Robert Johnson
and two who knew nothing about him. You’d get exactly the same out of the white
people. The only people who would know about him were the people interested in
music. It’s the music not the colour of the skin that matters.

Ronnie, 64, just like the above respondent, sees the music as the key attractive concept within
the blues, at the same time denying that other, perhaps harder to justify, influences were ever
a dominant factor:

In the 60’s it was just about the music, I mean what was the culture? The thought of
that didn’t even occur to us. We knew we weren’t black Americans but it didn’t make
any difference, it was the music that mattered, not any culture. Maybe subconsciously
you could identify with being oppressed and all this, but it was really just the music.
These days kids are trying to identify more fully than we did, trying to make more
attempts to associate. I can’t understand why people do that. It seems more purist.

Interestingly, Ronnie sees the blues as a more wholesome platform for white participation as
opposed to contemporary examples in hip-hop. He points to the more militant ‘rule-book’
concerning hip-hop participation, and insinuates that hip-hop fans have an over-zealous,
overly stringent, attitude to black association. However, the often used reason for
participation existing because of the music, and music alone, was also found within my hip-
hop fan respondents. David, 28: ‘Hip-hop is obviously originally a black culture and music,
that’s something we all know and appreciate, but its not about that anymore, I think its just
about the music. It’s just about the culture as a whole, not the colour. I think it all changed
when Eminem came through’; Emma, 28: ‘Everyone can relate to love and pain through their
life experiences. All of this goes above and beyond colour. The music unites us all, as
everybody can relate to emotion’; Klaire, 34: ‘I think it’s the evolution of society and the
music itself. I don’t think any one of us were like ‘ahhh we listen to black music’. Its just
music we like, and it’s the music that is the key’. Focusing attention on a non-race based
association, such as the appeal of the music sonically, and that alone, again allows white
participation to be seen as natural and with integrity. When issues of association go above
and beyond the music, such as associations based on clothes, language, and imagery, white
participants open themselves up to accusations of being unscrupulous in nature, like that of a
‘wigger’.
As race is the main barrier preventing a full association between white fan and black artist, its very worth is questioned and its existence as a valid concept is dismissed. ‘Whiteness’ is shunned, replaced by a globalised, ethnically ambiguous identity. The local is fused with the global, white ‘Geordieness’ is mixed with Afro-American sensibilities, and racial difference is replaced by an identity shaped by hip-hop. Hip-hop is now seen as too ‘big’ to be defined as the black music it once was, the innovation and creation of early rap music is still acknowledged, but is at the same time passed off as being out-dated.

**IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CLASS**

“Social class is of marked and continuing salience in youth culture” (Nayak, 2006: 813). As I have shown, ‘whiteness’ is a concept that is firmly rejected by all respondents involved. To be categorised within racial boundaries serves to cut off the opportunity to forge black-based identities, as mentioned. Since colour is denied as being an issue, my respondents chose to mainly focus instead on somewhat improbable class-based ‘equivalent’ modes of oppression, to form parallel links with their black counterparts both in the UK and across the Atlantic. If black styles are to be appropriated, then identity formation must be closely related to the style that is to be appropriated. This is achieved by class-based notions of solidarity. Virtually all of my respondents were working-class, and admitted to feeling an affinity for working-class African-Americans, with a misplaced sense of empathy being prevalent as a result. The often used ideology was that social class was more of an issue than race, which carefully avoids drawing attention to potentially divisive colour issues and places the focus on parallel forms of class instead. Despite societal conditions varying hugely, and the inherent barriers this brings, Geordie youth still enabled themselves to relate American tales of urban strife to their own working-class existence.

The claims that depict this class-based affiliation can be seen to be merely romanticised notions of a ‘special’ relationship with the American ghetto life. Social class affiliation therefore, along with denial of ‘whiteness’, and a disassociation with America’s strained racial dynamics, is yet another route into hip-hop consumption. Class was used as a vehicle for my respondents to show and emphasise how they ‘understood’ and related, in effect positioning themselves as the symbolic embodiment of black hip-hop sensibility in the city.
Matt, 16: ‘I hate posh people to be honest. I hate hearing about those suburban Yanks listening to rap music, how the hell can they relate to what the rappers are saying?’ It seems that Matt has clearly not thought of relating this question to himself, as nobody raised within the North East can fully relate to the views expressed from inner city America either, where social conditions are entirely non-comparable.

Many of my respondents stressed the Newcastle area’s inherent ability to allow people to relate to the hardships detailed within black (both rap and the blues) music. Issues surrounding social class were exaggerated to the detriment of any divisive racial connotations. Lee, 28: ‘There are underclass white people in this area who go through the exact same experiences as black people in the ghettos of America. Unemployment issues, housing issues, broken families and crime, you name it’; Stephen, 30: ‘If you’re from a poor background like me, you understand what its like to be in poverty, spending time on the streets and how the police and Government treat ya. I think people from that background in different countries can relate in essence’; Paul, 24: ‘I think that Geordie hip-hop draws its inspiration from oppression, depression and comedy. I would say this area has all of these in abundance at one time or another. We’ve always had it tough up here, and I think we can relate to hard-luck stories more as a result’; ‘Stig’, 28: ‘I do think the fact that there is a huge focus on the lyrics in rap will mean it attaches itself to certain demographics quicker and longer. If you are living with a struggle, and you have a house music track that is just something to dance to, you can’t really get the same back as you would from a track with someone telling you they went through exactly the same experience’; Ronnie, 64: ‘There’s plenty white working-class disillusioned as well. You either relate to the music or you don’t, black people don’t have any exclusive ownership of the blues, not now anyway’.

Clearly, there is a perceived bond, and emotional attachment, between the Geordie working-class and the African-American working-class. Bleak personal perspectives of working-class life are used as a spring-board to relate to the music emanating out of black America, making white local appropriation appear more authentic as a result. There is a distinct element in these responses concerning the justification of the ability to be able to relate. Neil, 20, continues:

Colour isn’t an issue, it’s all about skill, and you rhyme about what comes from your heart. I admit that black people have been through a struggle, like come though
slavery and stuff, with white people suppressing them and continuing to do so, but they’re not the only ones that have experienced hardships. With white people you don’t know what someone’s gone through in the early stages of their life. Sometimes people come through pain in their life and they can express that through their lyrics, so it doesn’t necessarily mean that just because somebody’s black that they’re gonna be more authentic. I mean I’ve personally had it rough, I can relate to most of the drama I hear on a rap record.

‘Aems’, 23:

Rap generally, you know proper rap, not this fucking 50 Cent commercial crap, is about ‘I live in a shit place, I have no money, and I need to make money somehow’. It came from the underclass kind of thing in New York and like it’s the same thing as here. Not many of these kids here tonight are rich by any means. Some people on the scene are just as poor as what you hear about in the American raps. Newcastle poor is like ‘I haven’t got a house, I’ve got somewhere to kip, but I haven’t got me own house’. There are a fair few kids here tonight that are homeless. I was homeless only two weeks ago.

Emma, 28:

It’s obvious that poorer classes would be associated with rap music. Music is about expression and freedom of speech and the poorer people out of the whole of society feel like they need to voice themselves the most. To be honest, music without emotion isn’t real, and music without an emotional attachment for a listener isn’t as enjoyable as music that does have one. I mean, when you look at it, who wants to hear a tune about how bloody fantastic life is? I’d say that the lower the class and the worse the area you live in the more you’ll like the music as you’ll be more likely to relate and empathise.

As mentioned, there is a direct attempt here to assume the mantle of being the very essence of black hip-hop sensibility within Newcastle. Or, in other words, to assume ‘blackness’ in the absence of ‘blackness’. To be the ‘have not’, within hip-hop culture, is seen as desirable, and
so working-class or underclass credentials are amplified, forming class-based associations as a result. ‘Mayhem’ 21:

If you are a victim of poverty, you will instantly gather a fan base, no matter how small, because you've got something to say. I believe that if you are from a middle-class background, you are protected from the world, when you have money you don’t experience real problems. It pisses me off that some people like to live in a fantasy world, believing they can relate when they can't. People do tend to think that if you're not black then you're not from a misled youth. These assumptions are just bullshit, and are nothing more than racism. If I was living in a more comfortable suburban area I wouldn’t know so much about the music or understand about the struggles. I interpret it in a different way because I’ve lived it. I wouldn’t know about the different struggles people experience if I had always been comfortable, or if I’d been hidden from the truth.

David, 19:

A lot of people living comfortably may only be involved in hip-hop because it’s the cool thing to do or they are attracted to the story. They pretend they’re part of that life just for fun. In my opinion hip-hop is all about life experiences and the ability to relate properly. I was a little toe-rag myself when I was younger and I suppose I can relate to the environment rappers talk about. I’ve seen a lot of lows myself in life. With me having no father, being in foster care, having a mother who was severely depressed, changing schools all the time, it was kinda disruptive. So in aspects of rappers talking about stuff they’ve been through, I can relate. I think that to enjoy hip-hop you’ve got to appreciate a real story and relate to it, like feel the energy. I think people living a perfectly comfortable life can still relate somewhat, they just won’t take the story to heart, and it’ll hit the head maybe the same way it’ll hit someone like me in the heart.

‘Dismal’, 19:

The area I was brought up in was a nasty place and that made me a survivor cos that’s what you have to do in a rough area like that, with so many haters and no money and fuck all to do. I just feel like hip-hop represents in many artists a struggle and
survival, so me having been through all that shit in those early days I can relate to the struggle and the pain that so many hip-hop artists talk about and I just feel that pain and struggle are a part of my hip-hop involvement. The music and raps we write are a reflection of our mentality and thoughts and you can’t just paint a pretty picture cos that’s false.

All of the above respondents infer that they have lived the so-called ‘hip-hop’ life, characterised by overcoming a struggle in the face of adversity. In effect they are presenting a glamorised struggle of the ‘common-man’. As Nayak (2006) related, young people understand the affective politics of class. It is tacitly understood and deeply internalised, and in this instance is used to forge a better relationship with parallel forms of class in America. Race-related issues are therefore consciously avoided or abandoned by drawing attention to a contrived notion of social class solidarity, leaving symbols of black culture open to be plundered. Alongside the disassociation with America’s racial mine-field, and the denial of ‘whiteness’ as a valid concept, social class connections help to prevent white involvement in black music being seen as taboo, dishonest, deliberate and self-conscious or anything other than normal, natural and legitimate.
McLeod (1999) argues that the concept of authenticity lies at the nexus of key cultural symbols that exist within hip-hop. Indeed, Hess (2005) suggests that authenticity is rooted in African-American rhetoric; its emphasis is on staying true to oneself having grown out of black rhetorical traditions such as testifying and bearing witness, in which the authority to speak is achieved through claims to knowledge gained through life experience. Irrespective of location, authenticity in hip-hop is a commonly invoked concept. “Within the world of music generally and rap music specifically, authenticity or ‘realness’ is a prime concern...in fact, realness is such a commodity that to be found lacking is, in a real sense, to lose not only your chance of success but also the success you have already gained” (Molden, 2005: 187). Once successful, rap artists are under considerable pressure to remain real.

Sciabarra (2003) provides a working definition of ‘real’ in rap music when he notes that rap artists have always prided themselves on ‘keeping it real’ by telling stories that reflect the truth about peoples’ lives, and in particular, their own. This marks a shift away from a sort of communal ‘real’ to an extremely personal one. The requirement is not necessarily for the artist to represent the trials and tribulations of ‘people’s lives’ (in the broad sense) but rather to represent the truth about their own intensely individual personal experience (in the narrow sense) (Molden, 2005). In rap music, however, few personas are deemed as acceptable enough to be labelled as ‘real’, so the very meaning of ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ is still a significantly subjective ideal. The blueprint seems to be to ‘live what you rap about’, and as the demands of commercial hip-hop fans increasingly become that of ostentation and machismo, and have done since the early 1990s, rap artists are increasingly under pressure to fit the character they have created. Curiously, rap artists are then placed in the somewhat paradoxical situation of having to act out being real. “Ironically, then, while being ‘real’ is supposed to be about matching your own personality, in the end it doubles back on itself. To be ‘real’ is more about fitting a specific idea or ideal held by the audience. It is not really tied to the individual in any way other than how that individual conforms to the expectations for ‘realness’ in a given arena” (Molden, 2005: 189).
The concept of fitting a specific ideal, and conforming to the public perceptions of ‘realness’, is displayed in the examples of Tupac and Eminem, both whom had to live up to an expectation created by their rap personas. Tupac indeed once stated ‘I never had a police record, until I had a record out’. His character ‘Bishop’ from the film *Juice* (released in 1992) was a heartless, sociopathic killer, and Tupac under due influence from the film’s popularity, chose to change his public persona as a result. The relatively poor sales of his politically charged (in the vein of Public Enemy and KRS-One) debut ‘2Pacalypse Now’ (1991), which spawned no top ten hit singles, also contributed to his drastic change in his second album, ‘Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z’ (1993), which saw Tupac’s new ‘thug life’ persona come to the fore. Political sensibilities were predominantly replaced by raps about killing, marijuana, women and alcohol. It was also during this period that Tupac began getting arrested; his offences ranged from shooting at two off-duty Atlanta police officers, to assault on two movie directors, to rape. Eminem, after graduating from his cartoonish personality in his first album ‘The Slim Shady LP’ (1999), took on darker, more gratuitous matters in ‘The Marshall Mathers LP’ (2000). During this period he also obtained a criminal record, being arrested for assault and possession of an illegal fire arm. As Yousman (2003) indicates, in his analysis of the white use of black popular culture, such as ‘gangsta’ rap: “whether or not the images represent the life experience of most blacks is immaterial. What is most important is not authenticity, but the appearance of authenticity”. (Yousman, 2003: 378). Watts (1992) labels this form of authenticity as a spectacle, when the enhanced appearance of an image becomes more significant in popular culture than the reality which originally may have given birth to it. Molden (2005) sees the concept of ‘real’ as being more about credibility than actual reality itself: “the result here is that, according to contemporary popular culture, one cannot be credible without being rude, hateful, mean-spirited, or any number of impolite things” (ibid: 192).

Because of rampant commercialisation in the 1990s, and hip-hop’s dramatic ascendancy to cultural trend-setter, rap artists have found themselves in a contradictory situation; namely being ‘inside’ a mainstream culture that they had, in part, defined themselves as being against. The co-option of all things hip-hop by large multi-national companies has jeopardised the genre’s ‘realness’, it has diluted its purity with the threat of assimilation (Weheliye, 2001). “By selling millions of albums to white teens and appearing on MTV, hip-hop artists (and their fans) have had to struggle to maintain a ‘pure’ identity. They preserved this identity by invoking the concept of authenticity to draw clearly demarcated boundaries
around their culture” (McLeod, 1999: 136). McLeod goes on to define authenticity in social-psychological, racial, political-economic, gender-sexual, social location and cultural terms: being true to oneself vs. following mass trends, being ‘authentically black’, supporting the underground vs. mainstream, promoting hyper-masculine behaviour, hard vs. soft, identifying with ‘the street’ vs. the suburbs, and understanding the traditions and history of hip-hop culture.

**INDIVIDUALITY**

One definition of hip-hop authenticity is ‘staying true’ to oneself. This definition is one of the most popular within the genre because it is inclusive of all fans and artists from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, therefore being a popular one for white youth from a white outpost such as Newcastle to draw upon whilst being involved in hip-hop. This approach highlights the valorisation of individualism and the demonization of conformity (McLeod, 1999). Essentially, it boils down to not conforming to the media-generated representations of youth-culture movements. This individualism is played against the negative symbols of ‘the masses’ or ‘mass trends’ and instead aligned with ‘staying true to yourself’ and ‘representing who you are’. As Hess shows in his look at white hip-hop authenticity: “being true to yourself and to your lived experiences can eclipse notions of hip-hop as explicitly black-owned” (Hess, 2005: 373).

Various notions of individual authenticity were raised throughout my fieldwork, undoubtedly to erase any colour-based connotations existing within the art-form. ‘Bonzo’, 24: ‘I act how I act, it comes naturally, if I act ‘hip-hop’, although it’s a generalisation, then it’s because I am ‘hip-hop’ not because I’m trying to be. For me I never choose to be anything apart from myself, I won’t live an identity crisis’; Dave, 26: ‘Authenticity in hip-hop culture is arrived at through being yourself’. ‘Stig’, 28, defends his individuality:

> Hip hop authenticity is reached by not bothering to attain it, everyone’s reality is different. For me, hip-hop is no different to any other art-form; it’s about self-expression so fuck what the next person thinks. If you interview someone else they
will say by ‘keeping it real’ or by ‘staying true’, what to? The only thing I know in my life is me, that’s all I can stay true to.

‘Stig’ is clearly disparaging about the ‘keeping it real’ ideology, but by defending his own individual stance, and by making it clear that he doesn’t care for an outside perspective, he is ironically invoking the same form of authenticity that he detracts, that of self-representation or ‘keeping it real’. He has derided the title, but has ultimately embraced the concept.

‘Dismal’, 19, draws distinction between his inherent individuality and the mass trends followed elsewhere:

The authenticity I have is in being real and not succumbing to hip-hop ideals, unless they are real to you, then that’s cool. So if I bought this Roca Wear jacket I have on just because I know it’s part of Jay Z’s corporation, and he’s the biggest guy in hip-hop, well that would just be me tryna be part of something that is hip-hop on a superficial level. Whereas, if I buy my Roca Wear jacket just because the colours are funky and the fit is good then I’m doing it within my true self. I find myself naturally blending in to the hip-hop culture. I have never tried to prove myself authentic. If people try to test me about how real I am I just let it blow over cos at the end of the day it’s those testers who are probably being brainwashed into doing shit which they think is hip-hop. Seeking it out cos they want to be cool.

‘Dismal’ uses the analogy of a jacket that bears the logo of ‘Roca Wear’, an organisation owned by rapper, and hip-hop mogul, Jay-Z. He claims to have picked it for the colours and the fit alone and not for anything more superficial than that. He denies that he has been swayed by the actual brand itself, as to do this would indeed be following mass trends. This appears to be some kind of attempt to be able to follow mass-trends, but with a ‘justifiable’ excuse to go alongside it. Commercial consumption is thus being tempered with notions of individuality. It wouldn’t be a sweeping generalisation to question whether the jacket would be worn if it didn’t have that particular label name and connection. Eddie, 28, further eulogises his particular brand of individualism: ‘Everyone has their own take on authenticity; I don’t care about anybody else’s take on it apart from my own. The music I make is authentic to me and that’s all that matters. I like to think my identity is based on life experiences past and present, hip-hops just a part of it, although an increasingly big one’. The
denial of anybody else mattering is often used within hip-hop, and certainly commonly
invoked within the respondents I interviewed for my research, however it would appear to be
nothing more than lip-service. Getting ‘props’, or praise, is as much a part of the culture as
staking claims to individuality, therefore in reference to Eddie, his music (which I heard at a
local club) reveals much of himself, but at the same time is situated in a light which is
deemed acceptable by the scene. The lyrical invocation of the ‘harsh reality’ of Geordie life,
swipes at the police and the Government, and sycophantic praise of the local hip-hop scene
etc. are all often used topics that display little difference to any other local rapper’s lives as
represented in their lyrics. It is a case of showing what they want to show the audience, as I
doubt that every local rapper has the exact same political view point for example, which
makes me suspect that there is a common uniformity within the music masquerading as
individuality.

‘Stig’, 28, contrary to his earlier stand of rampant individuality, under due questioning,
begins to weigh-up how individual he truly is: ‘The individuality thing had always been a
problem for me. I don’t think you can be truly individual if you try and associate yourself
with a genre, or group, so I struggle to keep one foot in hip-hop and the rest of me saying
‘fuck everyone I’m a do me’. I hate rules and people trying to put on me their idea of what rap
should be’. ‘Stig’ is now questioning how truly individual he can be by aligning himself to an
appearance/behavioural based genre such as hip-hop. Notions of self-expression and knowing
himself are now replaced by a deep-rooted fear of losing his individuality by trying to fit in.
This is perhaps the most honest response I received whilst tackling notions of authenticity, as
‘Stig’ was the only respondent who admitted to the genre potentially defining the individual
rather than the reverse being true. ‘Stig’ dresses in the expected apparel (extremely loose fit
jeans, expensive trainers, hooded top or ‘hoody’), uses many ‘rap-isms’ in his music in a
linguistic sense, and, more importantly, even admits to having a hip-hop attitude, a ‘clown’
persona specifically designed for his music:

I’m a get real open with you now [laughs] there are times when I’m low, when I do sit
and get paranoid about whether I’ve just convinced myself that this is actually who I
am, but then I know if I’m being honest with myself that I’m a complex person.
People are 360 degrees. It’s just that I chose that part of my character as the main
make up of my music persona.
‘Stig’ stops short of admitting the use of a fake persona; by indicating that the one he elects to bring out in his music is still him, but only a portion of his true self nonetheless. This can be related back to my point that the artist or fan chooses to show what they want to be shown to their ‘audience’, be it observers at a gig, or onlookers in the street. This certainly questions the validity of ‘keeping it real’ within hip-hop, and, as stated earlier, reflects more a conformity to the concept of realness, rather than being a truly individual experience.

**KNOWLEDGE**

Newcastle’s local hip-hop scene facilitates a highly particularised series of responses to ‘black’ characteristics of the hip-hop style, which Bennett (1999b) calls “blackness in the absence of blackness” (ibid: 99). “In the absence of an established black population in Newcastle this group, by virtue of its comprehensive knowledge of African-American rap music and hip-hop culture, aspires to become the symbolic embodiment of the black hip-hop sensibility in the city” (ibid: 21). There is a sense of intrigue surrounding the educative process involved in hip-hop culture. The historical conditions and social procedures produced within the culture are of interest to fans, indeed hip-hop’s identity formation is more deeply rooted in the sound of the music than many other rock-related fan cultures are. “The degree to which a rap (or more generally, hip-hop) fan will defend the authenticity, originality, and sophistication of her/his favourite rap style/genre/artist/album/song is virtually unparalleled in my experience” (Krims, 2000: 3). Most of my respondents went to great pains to prove their knowledge-based authenticity, from length of participation, to size of music collection, to intensity of involvement. Awareness of ‘back in the day’, directed towards appreciation of the originators and innovators of rap, and to having an insider’s knowledge of more than just the latest commercial MTV acts, was deemed of paramount importance for proving one’s hip-hop credibility. “For one to be able to make a claim of authenticity, one has to know the culture from which hip-hop came” (McLeod, 1999: 144). By proving an innate knowledge of hip-hop, a fan, or artist can become part of a lineage of authenticity and, by association, become regarded as authentic. This is one of the main reasons that an MC will pay homage to his/her heroes, and one of the reasons why a fan will name-drop as much as they can when the opportunity arises. ‘Truth’, 22: ‘I am an authentic hip-hop fan because I respect it, acknowledge it, and understand it’; ‘Roofio’, 16: ‘If you have the knowledge about hip-hop
and it is your life then it comes across in the way you act’; David, 28: ‘For me, authenticity is about the knowledge and understanding of all the aspects of hip-hop. I find within all different areas of hip-hop that there’s always like one little part that I might be interested in’. Rob 18:

The whole culture means a lot, hip-hop is what I love, and I want to have a deep understanding of its roots and everything about it. The culture helps you relate to the music and views within it, dress, history, events, people, slang, a whole bunch of shit, to me its just interesting to be involved with it and have an understanding…You gotta have the knowledge to relate though, knowledge is power. What you know, who you are, and the greater your experiences and knowledge of hip-hop and its culture the more you’ll be recognised for being able to relate, hold conversations with meaning and show people your own views and that shit too.

Dan, 17, continues in much the same vein, except he also demands active involvement: ‘Hip-hop, the four elements so to speak, DJ’ing, MC’ing, breakin’, graff, well if you don’t do any of them then what are you contributing to hip-hop? If you just like the music and think graff is cool, for example, then you’re just a tourist. You are not living the hip-hop life’. This ideology of knowledge contrasts sharply with the concept of personal authenticity and individuality. I therefore ask rhetorically, if the respondents claim not to be concerned about what others think, then why the desire to showcase their understanding of the culture? Why the need to prove their musical credentials if their authenticity is reached by not bothering to attain it and by being oneself? If the framework of individuality was employed and adhered to, music would be enjoyed for music’s sake, instead of proving authenticity by myopically focusing on its origins. Additionally, if these respondents were as quick to be as knowledgeable as they claim, then one would anticipate a respect of potential cultural limitations, or a defence of hip-hop’s inherent ‘blackness’. It would seem clear that only what is suitable for white appropriation to be defended, is actually what is defended. Claims of authenticity, when analysed in this way, have seemingly become kitsch. Through their overuse, they parody the dictum of being ‘true to thyself’ and most certainly are contradictory in stance.
HIP-HOP AS A NATURAL LIFESTYLE

Rap’s appeal is because of its ability to evoke and produce certain emotions within its (white) listeners. Indeed, the music can directly express the respondent’s feelings. It has the ability to move the body, both physically and emotionally, and to make the lyrics refer to their own situation (Jones, 1988). Hip-hop is relevant to the lived experience both real and imagined of white youth (Neal, 2002). Adam, 21: ‘Rap music connects on many levels. I think people are drawn to the way hip-hop expresses itself. A rap vocal is poetic, but typically it’s from everyday life. People are also drawn to the language itself; it’s a language we want to be part of. Hip-hop is life music. Hip-hop is my culture. It is the foundation on which my frame of reference is built’; ‘Fez’, 25: ‘Hip-hop’s a lifestyle; it isn’t just some music shit. You don’t just listen to hip-hop, you can dress and act hip-hop. It’s definitely a way of life’; Johnny, 33: ‘It’s a certain way you live your life, a certain attitude’. Rap music has therefore become the soundtrack for the respondent’s everyday lives, affording young people the opportunity to cultivate the genre into a locally specific vehicle for expression. The concept of rap music and hip-hop culture being a way of life is another grasp at claiming authenticity. If being an individual and true to oneself is one aspect of authenticity, and having an encyclopaedic knowledge of hip-hop culture is another, then actually living the ‘hip-hop life’ is the third. All three are mutually exclusive and contrast sharply, as I have stated: one cannot be individual and yet pander to pre-conceived notions of insider knowledge. It is obvious that living a lifestyle involving hip-hop would contradict this individuality further.

Various respondents insinuated they were the embodiment of hip-hop itself: ‘I believe I am in a hip-hop mentality. I can’t switch it off as it’s just me’, ‘Mayhem’, 21. Tom, 21:

Hip-hop is definitely something I live, but not out of choice. It’s like, even when I breathe every now and again I notice I’m breathing my own hip-hop tune. So I understand the phrase now, about living and breathing hip-hop. When I talk in conversation sometimes it’s like I’m rapping, not because I act like it, cos it’s just what’s in me. Hip-hop is in me!

This extreme display of involvement is somehow verging on self-displacement. Tom questions the fact he even has an option in his extreme participation, both breathing and
talking in a rhythmic-like fashion. To denounce hip-hop as choice, as if it is something one is born with, is starkly in contrast to any notion of individual freedom. Nothing is ‘realer’ than breathing, as this is what keeps one alive, and so this analogy is a telling one. Both respondents have mentioned aspects of the body, a ‘mentality’ on the one-hand, and ‘living and breathing’ on the other. This analogy of hip-hop being some form of natural ‘life-blood’ is backed up by other respondents. ‘Bonzo’, 24: ‘I act how I act, it comes naturally. If I do act hip-hop then maybe it’s because I am hip-hop not because I’m trying to be’; Lee, 26: ‘This is not a 9-5 thing you’re married to this from the get go. If you’re a real ‘head’ [fan] you have a role to play until the final curtain draws’; ‘Stig, 28: ‘I don’t wake up thinking ‘let’s be hip-hop today’, it’s more subtle than that, more natural’; Dean, 23: ‘It’s been around since I was born, like TV, like air, like my family…its mine. Cos I grew up listening to it, I am authentic’; David, 28: Hip-hop is an every day thing really, it’s not something that you can switch on and off like a light switch, it’s just there’. Again, the assertion is made that there is not a choice to be made, that it ‘is how it is’, and the respondents are doing what simply comes naturally. They are quick to condemn so-called contrived notions of the commercial hip-hop fan, but are unable to see the irony in a lifestyle connection with a genre conceived in The Bronx, by African-Americans in the 1970s, that has resisted most of the notions of white assimilation that blues, jazz and rhythm and blues failed to do.

What is curious, is that the same people who claimed to be ‘living’ hip-hop, as a natural state, were the same people who deemed ‘acting hip-hop’ as somewhat unscrupulous and fake, therefore denouncing themselves of any ‘act’. The two were seen to contrast in extreme ways. Tom, 21:

I think you can act it, but I really don’t like going out of the way to act if you know what I mean. If it’s a really big part of your life then there’s no act, it just is that way. Most people who act hip-hop in my experience are the people who aren’t heavily involved in it. I think authenticity is all about whether you’re copying a style or using your own to blend into the hip-hop culture. If you go around dressed as a hip-hop guy, then obviously you won’t look the part unless your mind is tuned into hip-hop. A lot of people are stupid and they just kinda fall into the trap of image as they think just cos someone looks cool then they must actually be cool, which is not always the case.
More examples of criticising ‘acting hip-hop’ abounded in my research. Dan, 17: ‘You can act hip-hop and when you get people trying to, you can spot them out and about, like some rich kid talking about council estates’; Rich, 20: ‘I see people who try too hard to fit in do so by wearing the clothes, talking the lingo, fitting in to a media view of hip-hop. My participation is more subtle, not as in your face, more natural’; Eddie, 28: ‘I don’t act hip-hop, only when I’m on the mic and even then it’s not an act, it’s real. But yes, some heads [fans] do use hip-hop to pose’; Klaire, 34:

People stereotype by going ‘yo’ and move their hands and all that stuff to try and act hip-hop. I think being fake is if you try and emulate something deliberately. If it’s natural, and you’re surrounded by certain people, certain music, you do it without meaning to. If you deliberately change the way you speak and the way that you walk, that’s being contrived and fake.

‘Acting’ hip-hop is therefore seen as contrasting with a subtle, more natural way of ‘living’ it. Commercial approaches are seen as an act, people who ‘act the part’ are seen as walking stereotypes and as being contrived in the extreme, whereas claiming to be the embodiment of hip-hop is seen as underground, viable, unaffected and real. Adhering to a set of principles is seen as ‘keeping it real’, discounting the fact that following a set protocol is doing quite the reverse. The above respondents refer to the ignorance of people not from the scene, to the ‘plastic’ fans and try-hards. Hip-hopers are alike other subculturalists, as I have mentioned, they are resolutely territorial, and routinely refer to their experiences against the ‘townys’ or other ‘oppositional’ outsiders with their perceived ignorance. A preconception exists that others outside the scene have an inherent ignorance, which leads to romanticised notions of solidarity within the scene itself. Hip-hopers are also continually referring to a destructive outsider element, which are not authentic in any way, in order to prove their own authenticity. ‘Stig’, 28: ‘I think a real hip-hop head is someone whose life has been hugely influenced by hip-hop, but not in the wrong way. Someone who has dedicated a lot of their time to it and respects it for what it is. An idiot tryna rock [wear] fake diamonds, who robs you for your phone, whilst bumping [playing] 50 Cent isn’t a true hip-hop head’; Eddie, 28: ‘Someone who just listens to 50 Cent and all that crap would not be deemed a proper hip-hop head to me, more like a pop fan’; Rich, 20: ‘Hip-hop has changed - it used to stand for something and address issues and now it’s 90 percent entertainment, that’s what the ‘wiggers’ go for now’; Danyo, 20: ‘I try to be myself and not fall into becoming a walking stereotype. If you can’t be
yourself and you listen to and change yourself because of what everyone else says then you aren’t a true fan’; Matt, 26:

I hate the term ‘wigger’, I was called it once going back years and years here from mates who hate hip-hop/rap music and were just taking the piss. But now I see kids in town, the ones who might not have had exposure to UK stuff and only hear Eminem and 50 Cent and they dress like they live in The Bronx and it’s bloody hilarious to see. These are kids who are listening to ‘gangsta’ rap stuff but it’s all from a safe distance. I kid you not, I see kids with the knotted hankies on their heads!

Keith, 25, questions the intelligence of the archetypal commercial fan, again citing the often-used ‘50 Cent fan’ example, and explains lyrical quality as the reason for his defection to the more arguably authentic underground:

What surprises me about someone who likes commercial rap, is like people will say ‘I like Eminem’ and ‘I like 50 Cent’ and I’m just amazed that they can listen to Eminem and then listen to 50 Cent and not see a massive drop in lyrical quality, like when I listen to Eminem I want to hear something of that standard by someone else, which is why I went underground to get it.

The derision of these ‘fake’ fans is less about the protection of the purity of the culture, and more about making the respondents themselves seem more authentic. The ‘oppositional’ other is shown in rather an idealised way, the complete antithesis to how these so-called ‘true’ fans position themselves. ‘Stig’, 28 makes an admission of this: ‘Everyone wants to be accepted and the best way of doing that is by showing you are more valid than the next person. Then that makes them the faker so therefore you are ‘real’.

I have thus found, from my fieldwork, that the triple signifiers of individuality, knowledge and lifestyle constitute the experience of authenticity for the average avid hip-hop fan based in Newcastle. Individuality and reliance on life experience draws attention away from colour based notions of hip-hop being black owned, enabling a smoother appropriation. In-depth knowledge of the art-form enables white youth in Newcastle to stake their claim as the symbolic embodiment of ‘blackness’, which is distinctly lacking in Newcastle, its position being filled as a result. Finally, hip-hop being represented as a ‘natural’ lifestyle makes any
participation seem effortless, ‘from within’ and wholesome. I was unable to find any inherent issues relating to attaining a certain level of authenticity, as one of my research questions asked, because nobody within the scene saw themselves as being anything other than ‘real’, or certainly this is all that they would admit to. As authenticity is primarily a self-determined concept within hip-hop, the only person with merit that afforded the respondent such status, or was permitted to, was the respondent them self. Any criticisms levelled at white appropriation were brushed off as being made about an ‘oppositional’ other, a ‘wigger’, who was deemed very much on the outside looking in, and not representative of the ‘real’. Seemingly unable to understand, or certainly accept, any irony existing within this stance, the ‘wigger’ was derided as being everything that the respondent was not, commercial, a ‘try-hard’, without awareness, fake, contrived, and, finally, unreal.
CHAPTER 11
CONCLUSION

I began this study by arguing that there had been an insignificant amount of research centring upon ‘white’ responses to rap and hip-hop within popular music studies, despite the genre being one of the most globally successful musical forms of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This marked cultural phenomenon has been, up until now, thoroughly overlooked within academia, and I have attempted to readdress the imbalance created by the neglecting of white participation. What little work that has been published concerning my general area of study has been unsatisfactory at best and this critique was elaborated upon when I considered the only other specific piece of academic work similar to my own, that of Andy Bennett’s study of rap and hip-hop in Newcastle (1999b), and discussed its shortcomings, namely its highly truncated nature and lack of substantive data, despite all of its claims.

Chapter 2 was concerned with at first a contemporary and then a historical look at white involvement in black culture. The ‘wigger’ phenomenon was analysed, namely those who are seen as wanting to ‘be’ black; this has often been shaped by the infusion of a commodified form of black culture into white only areas. Rap being used as a vehicle for vicarious thrill-seeking and a deliberately inflicted sense of rebellion, where the ‘other’ is glorified and desired, albeit at a safe distance, and as an answer to self-imposed alienation from suburban norms and normalities, were all dissected within this chapter. Historical appropriations of black music were looked at next, starting with Norman Mailer’s diagnosis of the ‘white negro’ in the late 1950s, moving on to the white involvement within ska and reggae of the 1960s and 1970s, past the deceit created by the universally despised Vanilla Ice within hip-hop in the 1980s, and reaching the 1990s up until the present day’s more carefully chosen, less offensive participation.

From the knowledge that I have derived from my extensive literature review, by looking at key contributions taken from academics and journalists alike, white appropriations are viewed as both harmless (Rux, 2003 and Boyd, 2003) and as a hindrance (Rose, 1994 and Tate, 2003) in equal measures, dependent on the commentator involved. In fact, as I revealed, the exclusivity of hip-hop as an African-American art-form and its ability to claim black identity have been cast in doubt by certain academics (Gilroy, 1993 and Bennett, 2001), with
the white and Puerto-Rican involvement in hip-hop’s inception seen by many as having been omitted from so-called official accounts of its history (Mitchell, 1998, Negus, 1996 and Flores 1994, 2000), coupled with an argument against ‘ethnic absolutism’. In addition, the subsequent dilution of its black political sentiment (Gilory, 1994), white entrepreneurial participation, and the continued consumption of the culture by white youth on a global level, reshaping its context via process of ‘cultural reterritorialisation’ (Lull, 1995), further enhance that claim.

In chapter 3 I turned my attention to defining hip-hop culture and rap music, whilst also debating rap’s plus-points and limitations as a sonic form. This was followed by a historical look at rap’s development from Bronx street music of the mid-1970s, to its first appearance on record in 1979, to early 1980s innovations of sampling in order to create new sonic forms out of a myriad of old sources, through to the beginnings of rap’s commercialisation in the mid-1980s via such luminaries as Run-DMC. The story continued with the black political era of the late 1980s, the emergence of ‘gangsta’ rap, and the rampant commercialisation of the art-form through the 1990s up until today. I also argued that stylistically, rap music can be seen to stand entrenched between the modern and the postmodern, postmodern in the sense that it uses fragmented sonic sampling and collaging subverts and cannibalises traditional music forms whilst blurring stylistic boundaries and distorting modernist notions of authorship, coupled with a coherent and sharp form of self-expression and socio-political articulation associated with authenticity and steeped in modernism, leading to rap being truly hybrid in composition.

Chapter 4 traced the antecedents of hip-hop and rap, starting with the African ‘griots’ (a bard or storyteller), to the onset of slavery and the resulting displacement into the western world, African phrases and music forms morphing into what would later be labelled black ‘spirituals’ and the ‘blues’ in North America. The call and response tradition, utilised in the blues, as in African-American work songs, chants and hollers, derived from West African culture and would later be found in rap music also. Further African-American vocal trends such as ‘the dozens’, ‘jive’, ‘toasts’ and ‘signifying’, with a primary focus on boasting and asserting social status verbally, have been developed and incorporated into the music of such luminaries as Bo Diddley right up to their current context within rap. I revealed that Jazz, with its emphasis on personal expression and individual articulation, is also influential upon rap’s development, as are the black poets from the 1960s.
Perhaps the sharpest linear progression stems from the 1950s jive-talking ‘personality jocks’ of the Southern United States, who broadcast on bebop and R&B stations, whose sounds were then picked up by radios in the Jamaican tenement yards, followed by an appropriation of these rhythms to form ska music. I showed that ska showcased such aspects as ‘grudge songs’ which preceded ‘battle raps’ in hip-hop culture. The lyrical style of the ‘personality jocks’ also directly influenced reggae toasting (separate and distinct from African-American toast rhymes), and eventually American R&B sounds were overlaid with this Jamaican patois, forming Jamaican ‘deejay’ music. This was sharply followed by ‘dub’ music, where the original instruments were mixed out in favour of the drum and bass. Both ‘deejaying’ and ‘dub’ combined to form Jamaican sound-system culture, which was then transplanted abroad via immigration, most specifically to the Bronx urban regions of New York, to form the basis of rap, starting with Jamaican born DJ Kool Herc.

I looked at my location of study, Newcastle Upon Tyne, in Chapter 5, and provided an analysis of economic decline, both in a general UK context, and a more specific local context. Both lines of analysis highlighted the decline in heavy manufacturing, the loss of full-time male employment, and the rise of female employment, in more flexible, ‘feminised’ patterns of work. Newcastle, as I revealed, is a city still struggling with its post-industrial status, with its traditional industries of mining, ship-building and heavy engineering being a thing of the past; the first two industries being defunct and the last barely contributing to the contemporary economy. The shift from this traditional industrial base has had an influence on not only patterns of employment and unemployment levels but also on the cultural worlds of young people, and I showed that these were enacted via ‘localist’, survivalist’ and ‘globalist’ responses (Nayak, 2003a), my focus being on the latter, the engagement with globally created youth identities influenced by ‘blackness’ to escape geographical and cultural limits and limitations.

At the start of this thesis I posed several research questions which I now will attempt to answer here, underpinned by the findings from my fieldwork, which was conducted from chapter 7 onwards.

1) What is the relationship between social conditions in Newcastle and the likelihood of being a ‘white’ hip-hop fan?
The isolated nature of Newcastle’s geographical location, with its lack of cultural diversity and sense of detachment, has actually helped to foster an involvement in hip-hop for a certain section of white youth, as they seek to break through boundaries of cultural isolation by engaging in an idealised form of global blackness autonomous of major black insider influence. Being distanced from the major cities of the UK has historically helped to shape a regional culture noted for its solidarity and strength and this is to be noted in the introverted loyal band of hip-hop followers who utilise a sense of historical ‘regional particularism’ but apply it through a contemporary sense of globalised black cultural flows. So in other words, the bond derived through regional solidarity is applied to not being ‘Geordie’ per se, as has been the usual case in the area, but to being the ‘Geordie hip-hop scene’. I have argued that far from there being ‘Real Geordie’ (characterised by hard drinking, commercial dance music, football fandom and a combative attitude) and ‘B Boyz’ (characterised by ethnic tolerance, hip-hop, baggy clothes) distinct elements, as Nayak (2003a) found, there is substantial cross-over between the two. The lines are blurred as elements are taken from both camps, forming a hybridised culture, with pride in the local environment being balanced against a desire to spread culturally outside its immediacy. Nayak (ibid) also argued that this form of globalised perspective is a new phenomenon, but as I reasoned, multicultural spaces have been created in this way since the 1960s, local youth linking tough working class sensibilities with a direct participation within the blues, and latterly, hip-hop.

Newcastle is often perceived as being a ‘country’ within a country, an ‘outpost’ of sorts, with many Geordies using this ideology to enhance insular local solidarity. Isolation is seen as ‘good’, and the fact it has allowed a Geordie hip-hop scene to develop, steeped in ‘realism’, undiluted by other surrounding areas, and very resolutely regional in content, is viewed as a positive thing. Being undisturbed in this way, and residing in a locality bereft of multi-ethnicity, allows individual and collective takes on black culture to occur, unthreatened by a locally proximate blackness. The North East was seen by my respondents as being an area that promotes and appreciates minority music because of an ability to relate, due to the alienation caused by this detachment, and the sense of the area being given a ‘raw-deal’ as a result of its geographical location. There is a real sense of an emotionally strong imagined connection between the hardships of being white and working-class in a relatively isolated area such as Newcastle, and being black and working-class in the industrial landscape of the American North. Thus, imagined lines of affinity are struck between the respondents’ own predicaments and the ‘true to life’ tales of social struggle displayed within the music.
I argued that there is a romanticised notion of exact replicability between working-class in the white North East of England and working-class in the black areas of the North East in America. There were many responses claiming that people in Newcastle go through the ‘exact same’ experiences as black people across the Atlantic, which are obviously refutable in terms of the different levels of severity and oppression experienced in both areas. Colour barriers are dismissed in favour of an emphasis on social class, class being used in this way to facilitate a symbiotic connection to supposed parallel or equivalent forms in America, to enable association. Class-based notions of solidarity therefore relate the consumer closer to that which is being consumed, Geordie youth enabling themselves to relate American inner-city tales of urban strife to their own working-class situation. The ‘have-nots’ mentality ultimately allows these local youth to assume the mantle of becoming the symbolic embodiment of black hip-hop sensibility in the city, authenticating and legitimising their participation as a result.

In terms of hip-hop, the scene is blamed for ‘not looking beyond the postcode’, and being introverted and ‘cliquey’, individuals wishing to remain distinct and separate from other scenes outside of the locality, taking from globalised flows in order to influence certain things within the scene, but not utilising these flows to promote the actual scene itself. This finding is again contrary to what Nayak (2003a) discovered, who reasoned that ‘B Boyz’ were solely interested in promoting globalist ideologies. I argue that it is more a case of specific globalist elements being selected and then being filtered down to the site of the local, as I mentioned, forming an amalgamation of ‘Real Geordies’ and ‘B Boyz’. The scene that I studied has a real sense of fear, displayed by certain members, of embracing anything outside of the locality, ‘down South’ often been viewed as a by-word for deceit and dis-honesty, further enhancing notions of insular solidarity and exclusivity.

2) What is ‘whiteness’ and how does this socially ascribed/ ‘ethnic’ category reflect itself within Newcastle’s hip-hop culture?

‘Whiteness’ or ‘being white’ was not a concept that was easily recognised or afforded much time by my respondents, colour being seen as a non-issue instead. The white youth of Newcastle go to great lengths to play down the symbolic significance of appropriating black styles, denying the importance of ‘whiteness’ as a valid or meaningful construct in contemporary society. As I found, this is to enable a smoother, easier and more concrete
white appropriation to take place or be kept ‘open’, without the taboo area of colour
disrupting this. In the place of ‘whiteness’ arrives a more ethnically ambiguous, globalised
construct, Englishness and whiteness being replaced by an identity that is equal parts Geordie
and black. As I mentioned in the main body of the thesis, denial of colour in this way allows
a social identity to be reached which is free of the ideological underpinning of a restrictive
structural white identity. Social identities are seen as based on a common love of hip-hop
instead, with the digital age unlocking the ability to create blurred racial personas, whilst
overcoming old restrictions, with ‘race’ being seen as a superficial, outdated concept
predating globalisation. Emphasis was placed on identification based on universal dynamics
free of racial connotations, including shared humour, attitude, personality, technical ability or
‘skill’, and knowledge of hip-hop. Racial difference is thus replaced by an identity forged by
the little nuances inherent within hip-hop.

Alongside this denial of ‘whiteness’, local youth have highlighted the radically divergent
situations in the US and UK in terms of race acceptance, race history and black music
assimilation. Emphasis is placed upon Britain as being a racially tolerant landscape,
contrasted against America’s focus on ethnic divisions, which goes towards a validation of
white participation within this country. America is deliberately positioned as an oppositional
‘other’, which in turn makes white participation in Britain seem less contentious, less taboo
and more natural as a result. The stigmatism surrounding white hip-hop in America is one of
the main reasons for this distancing (although bonds are again formed between the two when
appropriate), and local youth do not want to be ‘tarnished’ by association. Social class is seen
as being the true marker of identity in the UK, irrespective of race, whereas race and class are
seen as being unfairly fused in America. As a result of positioning class as a valid and just
concept, and colour as being unfair, more credence can be given to class-based notions of
association, and more distance can be given to patterns of colour as a result.

3) What are the collective factors that encourage and promote white hip-hop participation in
Newcastle?

I detailed the variety of dynamics behind the engagement of local white youth in a black hip-
hop culture, which is seemingly alien to their own. I found that the media, first and foremost,
is of the utmost importance. The scene is based on inspirations drawn from the mass-media,
as without this there wouldn’t be a point of contact for enactment with these alien forms of
culture. Radio, publications and the Internet (‘virtual communities’) are all consumed to bring this seemingly distant form of ‘blackness’ to the immediate white environment, to form a transnational perspective. Unlike some who have negotiated post-industrial change through a fervent politics of the local (such as an outward affiliation with Newcastle United F.C and bragging about alcohol consumption and sexual conquests in a desperate attempt to cling on to a macho, territorialist, working-class, industrial-based past), there are others who embrace the globalisation of culture and its progress through new media technologies in order to escape the relative shackles of their immediate environment.

The glamorous escapism that rap provides allows primarily adolescent youth of the locality to escape otherwise bleak, mundane lives though the mystery, fascination and voyeuristic fantasy provided by the music. ‘Glamour’, incorporating often fabricated lyrics of money, violence, women, cars and jewellery is the immediate attraction for many in the initial points of participation, the emphasis being based on aesthetics as opposed to depth and meaning, which appeal to burgeoning masculine identities. It is no coincidence that as the participant grows older, and the longer the length of participation continues, the less likely they are to be influenced by this form of rap.

Hip-hop can also act as a transmitter of oppositional values and a provider of liberating pleasure for white youth in Newcastle. An irresistible engagement has been found with the air of rebellion displayed in the music, and the oppositional values inherent within rap have been employed against the more common form of the local ‘towny’ culture. Hip-hop culture enables local youth to be different to the ‘norm’, and for cultural affiliation to be worn as a badge of exclusivity. Locality, nationhood and whiteness are disregarded (Nayak 2003a) for an exhibition of dissimilarity. I found that there was an unyielding desire to be the ‘minority’ of the city, or to exhibit ‘blackness’ in the absence of ‘blackness’, which came under intense scrutiny from other local youth. The pursuit of a desirable, otherwise unknown and dangerous quantity has spurred on white involvement and continued participation, which has been flown in the face of the perceived ignorance of cultural ‘oppositional’ outsiders. One respondent related that the more people berated his music the more he wanted to engage with it and rebel. Identification and disaffection fed upon derision.

Hip-hop presents the purest form of rebellion wrapped up in the easiest to consume format, perfect for the sensibilities of white Geordie youth, who are enabled to behave as an
oppressed group, without actually being one. The uncompromising masculinity inherent within the music and culture are particularly attractive to adolescent young men, seeking to establish and legitimise a contemporary male identity. A connection with this form of counter culture, prevailing against the norms of society, helps to indulge notions of disillusionment and provoke rebellious sensibilities with the local environment. The music’s attitude can be used as a form of vicarious thrill-seeking, with Geordie youth very much on the outside looking in, seeing lurid fantasies enacted within rap’s lyrics. ‘Gangsta rap’, in particular, provides an element of rage to this cultural consumption, and offers an air of radical difference and a vast array of uncompromising attitudes to be plundered.

Dress is another factor that promotes white hip-hop participation within Newcastle. A transnational dress code is a highly desirable commodity, enabling local youth to show an outward affiliation to their chosen subculture. I found that there was a direct link between the attitude displayed and the style worn, with an embracement of blackness, in an aesthetic sense, being used to combat societal norms and an imposed definition of being ‘white’. Thus, dressing different to the ‘norm’ is a major factor in participation. Dress sense can also be used to validate membership, while ‘wearing the right gear’ offers a marker of authenticity. Further authenticity can be gleaned by utilising style as an often contrived expression of ‘individuality’.

Rap’s unique sonic output is another major reason for an engagement with the music. In particular, its ability to fuse old and new via sampling in terms of instrumentation, and its edgy, lyrical approach, which displays an array of emotions and images, helps to draw white local youth in. Initial participation, as mentioned, usually begins at the point of engagement with commercially successful forms of rap music, as these have the farthest reaching, widest immediate appeal, which can then act as a doorway to a deeper participation existing as participation continues. Involvement with more obscure artists and cultural tools eventually develops more or less without exception. As time passes, the original reason for consumption, the aforementioned commercial forms of music, are rubbished (often as ‘fake’ and as music for ‘wiggers’), as participation becomes ever more specific.
4) Just how important is authenticity within hip-hop?

Authenticity is seen to be of paramount importance to white youth when staking a claim to cultural territory that they are painfully aware didn’t originate within the same colour, creed or country as those in which they have been raised. Individuality or ‘staying true’ to oneself is an often used indice of authenticity, as it is an all-inclusive concept which incorporates various socio-economic and racial backgrounds. Individualism is contrasted against ‘mass trends’ that are found in commercial consumerism within hip-hop, whilst at the same time it relates back to lived experiences which subvert notions of hip-hop as being black owned. However, as I found, there is a common uniformity underlying any notion of individuality, and instead of being an autonomous form of expression, there is a definite commonality between these self-representations, for example in terms of what is acceptable lyrically and behaviourally, and what is not. The genre is more definitive of the individual rather than the individual being definitive of the genre.

The educative process involved in hip-hop, the ability to display an encyclopaedic knowledge within and about the culture, is also necessary for authenticity. I found that this incorporates many facets, from length of participation, to size of music collection, to the intensity of involvement. Of particular importance was knowledge surrounding the origins of the art-form, involving knowing in-depth amounts of detail about its innovators. There was an expectation that more than just a cursory glance was given to the fine detail, and that more than just the latest commercial MTV acts were known. By proving that they have an intimate knowledge of hip-hop, the anti-consumer consumer can thus stake a claim for a place in a lineage of authenticity, and as a result become regarded as authentic in tandem with this. As I argued, the desire for authenticity through knowledge is at odds with the individualism approach to being authentic which promotes the view that people should not bother to deliberately seek out authenticity but instead simply be oneself at all times. Music is thus being enjoyed beyond just perfunctory, surface-level aesthetics, and a form of musical snobbery has developed around this as a result, making claims of authenticity more a peculiar cultural parody than a tangible social accomplishment.

Rap music forming the back-bone of someone’s life is another grasp at authenticity. ‘Acting’ hip-hop, or being the so-called ‘natural’ embodiment of the art-form, is seen as sharply contrasting with a contrived, fake element of ‘try-hards’ and ‘wiggers’. The commercial hip-
hop fan is seen as being a ‘plastic’ walking stereotype, whereas the underground, self-proclaimed authentic group of people in the scene are viewed (by themselves) as real, wholesome, unaffected and wholly viable. They constantly position themselves against this oppositional ‘other’ in order to validate their own inherent authenticity, in an often idealised way. It was revealed to me by one respondent that the best way to be accepted is to prove that you are more valid than the next individual, thus claiming authenticity by selfish means.

5) Is there a longitudinal connection between the reasons of involvement in black music over the last four decades in Newcastle?

There were some significant correlations between the local sensibilities and cultural affiliations of the 1960s blues scene and the contemporary hip-hop scene of now and recent years. The ‘ease’ of the music to create and perform was one, with blues participants, on a limited budget, able to learn the simple 12 bar structure quickly. The same applies to rap, where the primary basis for sonic output is already pre-recoded pieces of music that are reworked. One respondent in particular saw that blues, punk and rap all follow in a ‘garage band’ format and informed me that all are stripped-down, immediate and accessible ‘catch-the-ball-and-get-running’ forms of minority music.

Both musical forms appeal to the macho, working-class, sensibilities of the Geordie male, with the blues possessing a bare, uncompromising, stripped-down element both stylistically and sonically, and the rap music output favoured by certain sections of local youth also having an ‘earthy’, gritty, minimalist quality (distinct from the ‘over-produced’ and commercial forms of rap preferred by local youth who favour the ‘glitzy’ night clubs of the city). Both are ‘anti-establishment’ music forms, embracing the ‘other’ and isolating the ‘norm’, allowing a rampant sense of black machismo to be transferred onto burgeoning local masculinities. Both have aided youthful local rebellion, and have provided an avenue through which to escape geographical and social boundaries. The poor standing of Newcastle compared to other, more prosperous, English cities has also provided the youth of the 1960s through to today with a sense of empathy (through a sense of the ‘hard knock life’ of their American counterparts), emotionally identifying with tales of economic hardship and social deprivation, often in an idealised and romanticised way. In the same way that black communities in America have been culturally isolated by racism, there is an argument that
Geordies themselves have fallen victim to ‘regionalism’, local white working-class disillusionment being seen as an equivalent to black social inequality across the Atlantic.

The importance of a culture of socialising and social bonding can not be underestimated in both forms, the ‘Club-A-Go-Go’ in the 1960s having immense influence on local youth’s involvement and participation in blues at the time (as the place to be), and the clubs and bars of the locality today helping to generate local interest (through things such as ‘freestyle’ tournaments) and allow particular hip-hop crews to bond and form relations. The traditional drinking and social culture from its industrialised past and strong local solidarity due to its isolated location have aided participation in both. One informant described it as ‘unforgivingly Geordie’ in its ‘local spirit’ because of its mining roots. In both, due in part to the comparative small size of Newcastle, there has always been a small introverted scene, which in the 1960s Egan (2001) described as ‘incestuous’ because of the same small pool of people forming different bands, which is similar to the small band of male enthusiasts who assume the mantle of representing hip-hop culture in the locality today.

The media have influenced both, shown by the information derived from Melody Maker and NME in the 1960s, right up to contemporary forms of communication such as blogs on websites. This created the ability to learn, engage in and consume black culture. The media have made the necessity for a black community to act a cultural reference guide a moot point in Newcastle, with inspiration being drawn from sources that can transcend a culturally desolate environment. In terms of both, initial participation usually begins through an engagement with the commercial or ‘known’ side of the culture, before the fan is introduced to a more discerning underground music. Many blues fans of the area had only initially heard Eric Clapton or John Mayall, but they then went on to read sleeve notes, and from that point got into artists such as Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. The same can be said in terms of hip-hop, where an artist like 2pac or The Notorious B.I.G would be the initial attraction, before an artist like Rakim or KRS-One was found further down the line.

Both types of music provide an ‘exclusive’ club, music different to the ‘norms’ of the locality. The blues and rap have helped to provide the answer to a desire for difference, an antithesis to the 1960s culture of pop music and the contemporary culture of dance and techno music. An underground language, complete with oppositional symbols, has historically spoken to the rebellious sensibilities of white youth. Jones (1988) has described
these as paradigms of resistance. Also applicable to both has been the expression of the sense of self that both the blues and rap have engendered. Local youth have deliberately turned to a fully acknowledged use of black American music that has spoken to their own sensibilities, the blues with its emphasis on the black American experience of migration from rural South to industrialised North, and rap with its focus on the urban experience of the inner city ghetto.

Perhaps the biggest difference has been in the availability of places to perform, abundant in the 1960s, but largely redundant today. In the 1960s there were an array of venues for youth to play live music in, indeed an expectation of this, contrasted sharply to the dire lack of places open to underground enthusiasts of hip-hop. In the local scene of today, Newcastle continues to cater towards ‘urban’, commercial nights, further edging out local enthusiasts who want to participate in ‘open mics’ that constitute the basis of the struggling scene. There is a glaring disparity between now, and the halcyon days of the past.

Also different has been the extent to which levels of participation go. One of my blues respondents claimed that the white youth of today are attempting to relate more fully than was the case in the past, association today being applied in a more pedantic, militant, purist manner. Blues participation, by contrast to contemporary examples in hip-hop, was seen as being more wholesome and less contrived. Hip-hop youth were accused of being over zealous in nature and overtly stringent in association, taking participation beyond that which was deemed as necessary.

6) Within the hip-hop culture among the youth of Newcastle, do the afrodiasporic roots and culture of the music (as well as local influences) serve to construct new collective identities and possible ‘new ethnicities’?

As Back (1996) found in his study of South London, in his book *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture*, there was a rejection of the conformity and rigidity of English culture and ‘Englishness’, this being replaced by appropriated forms of blackness instead. Back found that the overlap created by these two divergent forms of culture has resulted in a ‘new ethnicity’, or hybrid culture, which cannot be classified as black, or white, instead infusing the two into a racially ambiguous mix. This is in equal parts local, multinational and transcultural. It is the result of musical forms from the African diaspora becoming embedded in new, alien, sites and infusing with the indigenous culture. His ‘new ethnicity’ is
characterised by an unwillingness and disregard for the concept of ‘race’, which results in an easier appropriation of black cultural resources.

Unlike Back’s study, mine was conducted in an area outside of any notable black influence, or cultural presence. I believe that the direct influence of the media itself is substantive enough to create these ‘new ethnicities’ on a par with the ones detailed by Back. The Newcastle area is not immune from international cross-fertilisation and multicultural influence, and this is displayed by the result of overlapping Afro-disaporic and Geordie cultures. Hip-hop culture has mixed with local culture to construct a new ‘glocal’ (Robertson, 1995) identity, free from the industrialised restrictions of ‘old’ Newcastle, and instead has created a globally hybrid culture, as close to black culture as it is to Geordie culture. Global multiculture has thus been allowed to flourish through a dual engagement with the ‘local’, culture in its very essence being seen as a fluid, interchangeable and unrestricted concept as opposed to a rigid, structurally determined entity. Identities are based on hip-hop, albeit within a profoundly localised context that reflects region, accent, and background, which is thoroughly ‘retrofitted’ into a localised relevance (Schwatz, 1999). Thus, the afrodiasporic roots and culture of hip-hop have been mixed with a myriad of local influences (or white localism) to construct ‘new ethnicities’ and a culturally hybridised ethnic group, Newcastle’s specific location being fused with wider, industrialised cultural processes. American culture has served to open up the limitations of cultural space in the post-industrial landscape of Newcastle, with globalisation affecting style of dress, general demeanour and language used, serving to displace outdated notions of ‘whiteness’ with the allure of black culture, refashioning ethnicities beyond the spatial limits of the local.

Analytically, my detailed study of white appropriations of black music and culture in the North East of England has, I believe, enhanced understanding surrounding the need to embrace an outwardly alien culture within a restrictive structural environment, whilst also looking more generally at notions of identity, citizenship, lifestyle and consumption in terms of the white experience. I have tried to raise the threshold for the cultural analysis of ‘black’/’white’ ethnic interrelations. In my view, future sociological studies should address the unique roles that the global and the local both play in shaping contemporary ‘white’ identities. Attention should be given to the power of ‘new ethnicities’, and their ability to transcend immediate social restrictions, provide a sense of symbolic empowerment and enable cultural creativity to develop in innovative and challenging ways.


Bo Diddley. 1959. “Say Man”. On Go Bo Diddley. MCA.


APPENDIX

Selected Interviewee Biographies

I interviewed many people, but the most in-depth accounts were given by the respondents below. As you will see in the thesis, these three names crop up time and time again, and so I have presented further biographic information to allow for a greater readers insight. They are also the 3 most accomplished out of all of my respondents.

Ronnie, 64

Ronnie Barker is the joint lead vocalist for The Junco Partners. Formed in 1964, The Juncos took over from The Animals as the house-band at the famous Club-A-Go-Go and Downbeat Clubs in Newcastle, both owned by The Animals manager (and later Jimi Hendrix’s joint manager) Mike Jeffrey. The band experienced instant popularity all over the North of England, also playing frequently at the Mayfair and Majestic Ballroom in Newcastle, Sunderland's Bay Hotel amongst others as well as venturing to Carlisle, Sheffield and all points between sometimes playing twice a day. Six years on the national rock club and college circuit followed, allowing them to support The Who, Rod Stewart, Jethro Tull, Jimi Hendrix, John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers and many more. They also toured as a backing band to Blues giants Howlin’ Wolf and Freddie King in 1969. Incidentally The Juncos appear in a book on Howlin’ Wolf (Segrest, J. (2005) Moanin' at Midnight: The Life and Times of Howlin' Wolf New York: Thunder's Mouth Press). The band made single and album releases (for example in 1965 they put out a cover version of Jerry Ragavoy’s “As Long As I Have You” backed by a version of an old prison work song popularised by Leadbelly, “Take This Hammer”, the latter of which got into the top 40 UK chart). Several break ups and reformations took place over the years, with Barker getting back with The Juncos full-time in the mid ‘80s and is still with them to this day.
Stig, 28

Stig A.K.A. Stig Of The Dump left Newcastle (after having taken things as far as he could) to move to London in 2005, to pursue his dream of music stardom. He quickly immersed himself in the (“8 Mile” style) freestyle battles that were being organised by the Jump Off organisation, and became a YouTube sensation. Around this time he also put out his first EP as, after arriving in London, he found himself homeless and in order to raise some money he decided to make a 13 track release in just seven days, using free recording and pressing up facilities from a friend to do so. It became a critical underground success. Rumours of Stig working with Robbie Williams followed (after Williams had contacted him via his Myspace page) but the collaboration never came to fruition. Since then, Stig this year has won the E.O.W (End of the Weak) World MC Final, beating rappers from the Czech Republic, France, Uganda, Germany and the US. He has also recently released his debut full length album “Mood Swings” through the Lewis Recordings independent imprint.

Steve, 57

Is my Dad, and most notably famous for his tenure with the North East’s biggest band of the 1970s, Pyramid (as the drummer). They followed what The Animals, and The Junco Partners had done a decade previously, by dominating the local working men’s clubs and nightclubs in the region. Their popularity, like the Juncos, was tied primarily to the North, but this didn’t prevent Pyramid from making an appearance on New Faces in 1974, where comedian Arthur Askey was one of the guest judges, and was impressed by the comedy bands performance. A tour of Germany was also to follow, as well as continued local dominance until the band split in the late 70s. Steve later worked with Ronnie Barker from The Juncos in another big local band called Backshift for several years. Allen Mechen, the front man from Pyramid, has forged a very successful career as an actor and a comedian (well known for playing Terry, the driver, in the Tudor Crisps adverts from the early 90s, as well as from his appearances in “Auf Wiedersehen Pet”, “Byker Grove”, “Brookside”, “Spender”, and Catherine Cooksons, “The Gambling Man”).